

Reforming the United Nations' Peace and Security Pillar

Tanja Bernstein

Reform is a perennial issue at the United Nations. While Secretary-General (SG) António Guterres has been no different than his predecessors in trying to push reform initiatives through the UN membership, his proposals are being viewed as far more encompassing, covering a wide spectrum of the UN's work. Guterres has tied all of his proposals to his vision of making the UN better at preventing the occurrence or reoccurrence of conflict. Whether or not the reforms - if implemented - will have any impact on the efficacy of the organization and its ability to prevent conflict may take years to assess. What effect they may have in the field is also uncertain. But it is widely acknowledged that reform is needed. This Policy Briefing focuses on the two dimensions of the SG's reform proposals for the peace and security pillar: the review of the peace and security architecture and management reform.

Background

Secretary-General António Guterres took office in January 2017 – when the list of crises was seemingly getting longer and the relevance of multilateral organizations was being called into question. He recognized that the United Nations needed to reform not only to meet today's global challenges but to counter mounting criticism of a costly and inefficient bureaucracy (especially from the new US administration). Thus, Guterres initiated a flurry of reforms (some of which were built on proposals he had inherited)¹ which have now been presented to member states over the past few months. The broad strokes of his overall reform plan presented to date follow five parallel streams: (1) renewed focus on prevention and sustaining peace; (2) a new *UN Office of Counter-Terrorism*; (3) reform of the UN development system; (4) restructuring of the peace and security architecture; and (5) management reform.² The last two streams, which are the focus of this Policy Briefing, have the most direct and far-reaching consequences for the design and conduct of UN peace operations.

Peace and Security Architecture Reform

Shortly after taking office, Guterres established an internal review team tasked to examine the peace and security architecture. Based on the team's recommendations, on 11 September he shared his proposals with member states, followed by his formal report on 13 October, outlining the general principals of his reform proposals for this pillar. Therein he recommends to establish:³

- 1** A *Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs* (DPPA), which would combine the strategic, political and operational responsibilities of the *Department of Political Affairs* (DPA) and the peacebuilding responsibilities of the *Peacebuilding Support Office* (PBSO). DPPA would prioritize and direct capacities and resources to the prevention of conflict, mediation, conflict resolution and peacebuilding. It would provide political direction, management and support for regional offices, special envoys and offices in support of political processes.

¹ See for example: https://www.un.org/pga/70/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2016/01/NUPI_Report_2_16_Stamnes_Osland.pdf.

² Arthur Boutellis and Alexandrea Novosseloff, *Road to a Better UN? Peace Operations and the Reform Agenda*, International Peace Institute, November 2017, p. 1.

³ UN General Assembly, *Restructuring of the United Nations Peace and Security Pillar – Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. A/72/525, October 13, 2017.

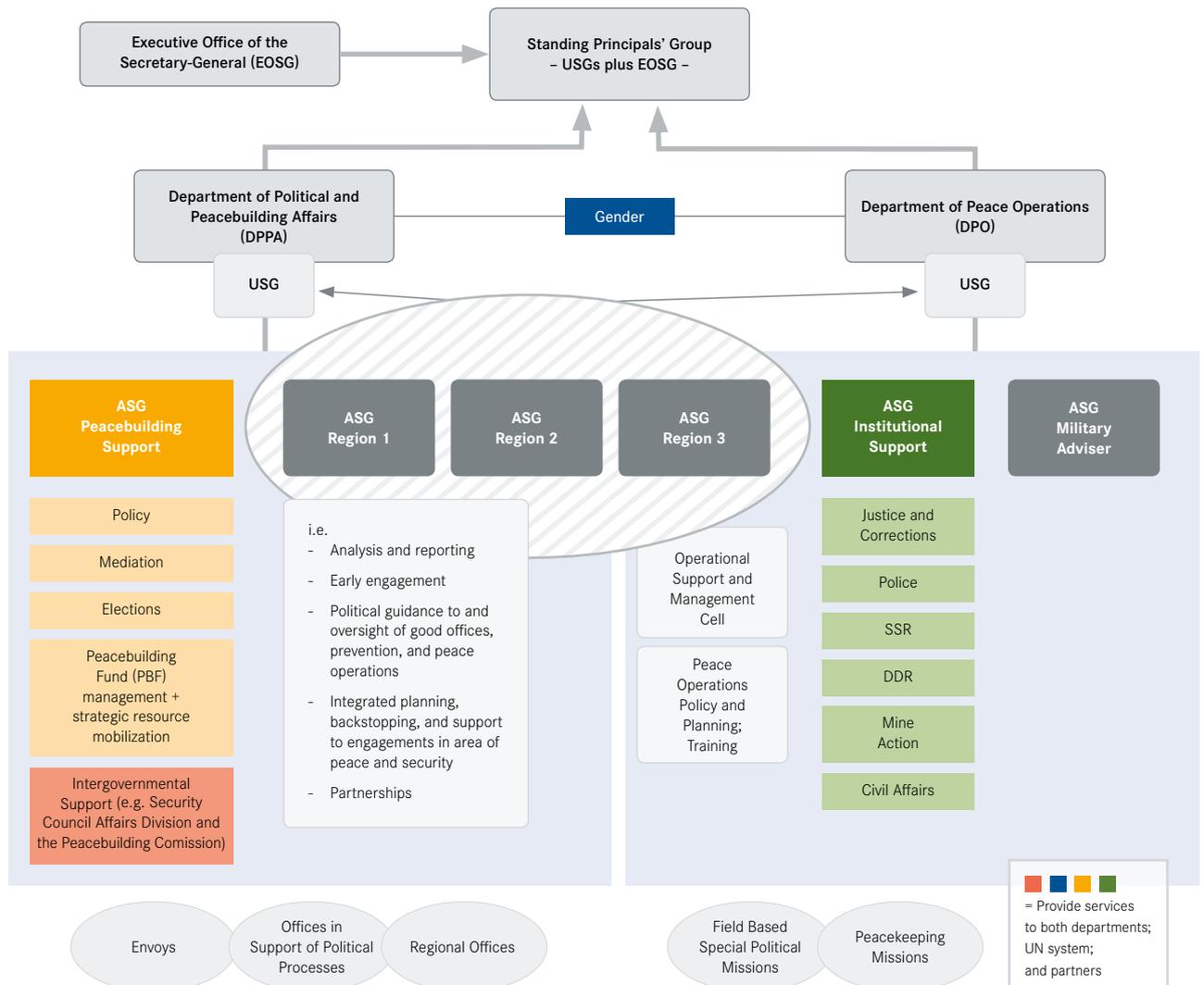
2 A *Department of Peace Operations* (DPO), which would combine the strategic, political and operational responsibilities of the *Department of Peacekeeping Operations* (DPKO) and the DPA to provide political direction, management and support for all peacekeeping and field-based special political missions mandated by the Security Council.

3 A single structure under three Assistant Secretaries-General (ASGs), who would be responsible for the day-to-day management of all political and operational peace and security activities in the regions under their purview. The ASGs would report to the Under Secretary-General (USG) of DPPA on non-mission issues and to the USG DPO on countries where there are field-based missions.

4 A *Standing Principals' Group* of the USGs of the two proposed departments under the chairmanship of the SG to ensure a “whole-of-pillar” approach.

The proposals have generally been welcomed by member states. If implemented as intended, they could strengthen the UN’s ability to provide higher quality analysis and strategy on conflict prevention, facilitate closer cooperation between the Security Council and the Peacebuilding Commission, remove duplication between some DPKO and DPA desks and improve mission transitions between DPA and DPKO.⁴

However, some in the UN Secretariat and the UN membership had hoped for bolder reforms. Critics have noted that Guterres does not chal-



⁴ See Sarah Cliffe, UN Peace and Security Reform: Cautious Steps in the Right Direction, Center on International Cooperation, 15 September, 2017, p.2.



challenge the control of the five permanent members of the Security Council over key departments and positions but slightly rearranges the departments headed by the two USGs. And a key financial aspect - the division between the budgets of special political missions and peacekeeping operations - remains untouched for political reasons. This budgetary division may complicate resource sharing, service provisions from one side to another, as well as transitions to and from peacekeeping and special political missions.

The three ASGs are supposed to create a single political-operational structure, which is meant to: remove duplication between DPA and DPKO desks; enable improved regional strategies under a single regional leadership; integrate different operational mandates and how the UN engages politically in a specific country/region; facilitate early warning; and ensure better transitions between mission and non-mission contexts as well as between special political missions and peacekeeping operations.⁵

How this ASG structure will work in practice together with the two departments remains to be seen. For example, in some countries, regional offices, peace operations and envoys may be active. While the ASG structure will help bring their respective strategies together, they would presumably have a dual reporting line to the USGs of DPPA and DPO. The issue of emerging crises or peacebuilding could also be challenging. DPO will have responsibilities related to preventing conflict in countries when a UN mission is deployed though this is also one of DPPA's responsibilities. On peacebuilding, a challenge may be that DPPA's peacebuilding support functions are separated from those of the then former *Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions* (OROLSI) in DPO, even though thematically (and operationally), they are quite linked.

The Standing Principals' Group - meant to ensure coordination, communication and coherence in the implementation of peace and security priorities - should theoretically mitigate some of these potential problems. And the intent to move peace operations "under one roof" and organize existing capacities and resources more rationally is

sensible. But in the end, the success of this model will rely mainly on personalities and leadership.

Management Reform

On 27 September 2017, Guterres released his report on management reform.⁶ Unlike the reform of the peace and security architecture, these proposals are bolder. The overarching objectives are to: decentralize decision-making; trust and empower managers; ensure greater accountability and transparency; reduce duplicative structures and overlapping mandates; increase support for the field; and reform the planning and budgetary processes. Specifically, they entail:

- 1 Streamlining and improving the planning and budgeting processes, including by moving from a biennial to an annual budget and broadening the scope of the commitment authority for 'unforeseen and extraordinary expenses'⁷ to respond rapidly to unanticipated events in the areas of human rights and development.
- 2 Delegating managerial authority to programme managers and demand greater accountability from them for mandate delivery, including by streamlining and simplifying human resources rules, processes and procedures with clear delegation of authority to managers, together with clear rules of accountability.
- 3 Changing the management and support structures to better support delivery of programmes and provide managers with quality assurance and strategic guidance. This includes eliminating duplicative internal controls by establishing a *Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance* (DMSPC) with a clear role as per its title and a *Department of Operational Support* (DOS) focused on operations, services, transactions and surge support.

The SG's proposals are strategically important and contain practical measures to address the problems of the UN's somewhat antiquated management structures, including by removing

⁵ See <https://inkstickmedia.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/UNDocsSept2017.pdf>.

⁶ UN General Assembly, *Shifting the Management Paradigm in the United Nations: Ensuring a Better Future for All - Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. A/72/492, September 27, 2017.

⁷ These refer to financial expenses not included in the regular budget as they are difficult to predict in advance.



duplicative internal controls, simplifying budget submissions, increasing the ability to adjust to evolving conditions and centralizing administrative transactions (such as procurement, staff contracting, engineering and logistics management).⁸

While the proposed reforms may help reduce existing duplication of efforts and overlapping mandates – such as between the *Department of Field Support* (DFS) and the *Department of Management* (DM), it does not develop specific “field-focused” policies. Thus, the reforms have been criticized as being largely centered on structures and processes in New York.⁹ The fact that the new DOS would support the delivery of mandates across the three pillars of the organization may make sense in terms of rationalization, but some field operations are concerned that the department would therefore also be less field-focused.¹⁰ It remains unclear how the two substantive/political departments (DDPA, DPO) and the two managerial ones (DMSPC and DOS) will work together in practice.

Looking forward

Guterres laid out an ambitious timeline for moving ahead with his reform agenda: getting “proof of consent” of member states this year, their formal approval throughout 2018 (based also on a detailed cost breakdown) and having a new system in place by January 2019. It remains to be seen if the broad initial support for the proposals will remain as other cost, structural, personnel and perhaps political implications emerge.

While Guterres had already outlined his vision for the UN during the SG campaign process,¹¹ what is lacking now is an overarching vision or narrative which brings together all of the reform processes. There are still many open questions: How will DPO, DPPA and the new management support structures work together? Where will some of the joint capacities like training and planning be located? How big should the regions

under the three ASGs be and how will the regions be divided? How will the peacebuilding functions link in to DPO? How will the Standing Principals’ Group work in practice? What incentives can be put in place for the proposals to work? What real effect will any of these reforms have on mandate delivery in the field?

The SG’s decision to have the USGs of DPKO, DPA, DM and DFS lead their respective change management processes under the overall direction of the Chef de Cabinet could prove difficult. It could be advisable to have the process supported by a select group of advisors who would be less directly affected by the changes to lead the process.

Regarding the UN membership, it could be useful for a coalition of member states from across the different regions to come together and help push the reforms through (rather than having a bargaining between groups of member states which could make the reform proposals worse). At the same time, member states should empower the SG to move forward, refraining from micromanaging each step of the process.

While there are critics to the reform, including those that say they do not go far enough or that they have “heard this all before,” the underlying notion that reforms are needed to make the UN more efficient and effective to respond to today’s threats is widely supported. And the reforms proposed by Guterres go in the right direction. What will be challenging for the bureaucrats on First Avenue in New York (and in capitals around the world) is to focus less on changing boxes in organigrams and more so on changing mind-sets of how business in the UN should be done.

Tanja Bernstein is a Senior Analyst at ZIF and previously worked for the United Nations in the Office of the Secretary-General.

⁸ Cliffe, pp. 2-4.

⁹ Boutellis and Novosseloff, p. 37.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 38.

¹¹ See: http://www.un.org/pga/70/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2016/01/4-April_Secretary-General-Election-Vision-Statement_Portugal-4-April-20161.pdf.

