Journal of Strategic Studies

The United Nations and the Use of Force: Between Promise and Peril

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Published online: 08 Oct 2014.

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The United Nations and the Use of Force: Between Promise and Peril

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When, in *An Agenda for Peace* of June 1992, Boutros Boutros-Ghali set out his vision for a revitalised UN after the Cold War, he offered a definition of UN 'peacekeeping' in which the insertion of one innocent-sounding word appeared to herald a new era. 'Peace-keeping', the UN secretary general probingly stated, 'is the deployment of a UN presence in the field, *hitherto* with the consent of all the parties concerned'.[1] Catching the attention of UN officials, academics and governments at the time, the reference to 'hitherto' was deemed highly significant. It seemed to imply that the tried and tested principles of UN peacekeeping – its reliance on the principles of consent, impartiality and minimum use of force except in self-defence – might now, in the post-Cold War era, give way to a more expansive role for UN military forces, one that would likely involve taking the initiative in the use of force.

The idea that UN peacekeeping might evolve in new and more ambitious ways reflected the optimism of the times – an optimism reflecting in part the very real achievements that UN peacekeeping had stacked up over the previous four years, most notably in Namibia but also in Central America. More generally, *An Agenda for Peace* captured a widespread sense that with the end of the Cold War an 'opportunity [had] been regained to achieve the great objectives of the Charter'.[2] UN peacekeeping, it was widely felt, offered the most promising of areas in which Member States could build on established practices and, in doing so, help carve out a more central role for the UN in the field of peace and security.

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[1] *An Agenda for Peace*, Report of the Secretary-General, A/47/277, 17 June 1992, paragraph 20 (emphasis added).
[2] Ibid., paragraph 3.

There was, however, a further reason for revisiting the established principles of peacekeeping. By mid-1992, it was already becoming clear that the changing context and scope of post-Cold War peacekeeping – specifically the focus towards *internal or intra-state* conflict, and the assumption of new and multiple tasks by peacekeepers – were not only placing the UN machinery for peacekeeping under growing strain but was presenting peacekeepers with far more complex challenges than what had become the norm in more 'traditional' operations. The full complexity of these challenges would become painfully evident over the next three years. Indeed, by early 1995, the mood had changed dramatically and as the UN prepared to mark its fiftieth anniversary its peacekeeping activities were seen to be in a state of acute crisis.

Reeling from the impact of events in Somalia, Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, the secretary general decided to issue a *Supplement to An Agenda for Peace*.[3] The *Supplement* – intellectually more coherent and rigorous than its parent document – struck a sober and self-consciously 'realistic' tone. It drew attention, in ways that the original document had not, to the very different challenges facing peace-keepers deployed in the context of an ongoing civil war from those charged with patrolling and monitoring ceasefire lines along interna-tional borders. In particular, the secretary general now expressed scep-ticism about developing traditional peacekeeping in more robust directions. 'Nothing is more dangerous for a peacekeeping operation', it observed, 'than to ask it to use force when its existing composition, armament, logistic support and deployment deny it the capacity to do so'.[4] Crucially, it added, the attempt to combine peacekeeping with elements of enforcement in one and the same operation had proved deeply problematic. The reason for this was that 'the logic of peace-keeping flow[ed] from political and military premises that are quite distinct from those of enforcement; and the dynamics of the latter are incompatible with the political process that peacekeeping is intended to facilitate'.[5] The *Supplement* was less of a call for a return to 'classical peacekeeping' than a demand for greater honesty and clarity about the limits of peacekeeping in civil war situations where Member States were prepared to will the ends but not the means.

Although all of this, undoubtedly, needed restating, it also, inevita-bly, left tensions unaddressed and other questions unanswered. For one, it appeared to assume that there was always a 'political process' in place for peacekeepers to facilitate. Yet, as several of the cases presented in this special issue show, that is very far from being the case. Indeed, the

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[3]*Supplement to An Agenda for Peace*, A/50/60, 3 January 1995.
[4]Ibid., paragraph 35.
[5]Ibid.

central dilemma facing UN peacekeepers in Bosnia until the summer of 1995 was precisely the absence of a meaningful 'political process' that could provide the mission with strategic direction. The resulting paralysis provided part of the background to the horrific and defining climax to the crisis of UN peacekeeping, some seven months after the *Supplement* was presented: the fall of the UN 'safe area' of Srebrenica in eastern Bosnia.

The record of UN peacekeeping between 1992 and 1995 led, not surprisingly, to a temporary retrenchment of UN field operations. The Rwanda genocide and the Srebrenica massacre also, however, fed a strong sentiment of 'never again' and a concomitant determination to learn lessons with a view to strengthening the UN's capacity for peacekeeping.[6] Over the following years, attempts to distil those lessons were made in a series of reports and doctrinal statements prepared by the Secretariat as well as by individual member states. One lesson, above all, appeared to enjoy broad support, at least as far as the general principle was concerned: UN peacekeepers would henceforth need to prepare for, and be ready to engage in, more 'robust' or 'muscular' peacekeeping. Since UN peacekeeping picked up again, beginning with the Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) in October 1999, this emphasis on 'robustness' – and along with it a greater readiness to use force – has remained in place.

This special issue is concerned with the concerns and questions raised by experience of employing UN forces in a more robust capacity since the late 1990s.[7]

From ONUC to Gangs of Port-au-Prince

Quite clearly, the concept and practice of peacekeeping have and continue to evolve – a process examined in some detail by James Sloan in these pages.[8] Though it is possible to identify certain broad historical shifts that have informed this evolution – not least the passing of the Cold War – perceptions of a linear and progressive maturation do not

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[6]See in particular, 'The Fall of Srebrenica', A/54/549, 15 November 1999; Report of the Independent Inquiry in UN actions During the Rwanda Genocide ('The Carlson Report', 16 December 1999, S/1999/1257; Report of the Panel on UN Peace Operations ('Brahimi Panel Report'), S/2000/809, 21 August 2000.

[7]The special issue forms part of wider research programme on the use of force in peacekeeping operations, conducted by the Conflict, Security & Development Research Group at King's College London. The project is animated by the question of how to understand the role of armed force, or the threat thereof, in peace operations and the conditions that have enabled its effective use in key cases.

[8]James Sloan, 'The Evolution of the Use of Force in Peacekeeping', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37/5 (Oct. 2014), 674–702.

stand up to closer scrutiny. Indeed, one unfortunate consequence of the optimism that pervaded early discussions about the future of UN peace-keeping was the failure to explore, in any systematic fashion, the experiences of UN forces in earlier operations. In particular, no thought was given to the many questions, both conceptual and practical, raised by the UN operation in Congo (ONUC) in the early 1960s.[9] Yet, as Alan Doss makes clear in these pages, ONUC 'encountered many of the controversies and confusions that have complicated and confounded the efforts of subsequent peacekeeping missions':

> …conflicting agendas among the members of the Security Council; ambivalent and sometimes hostile relationships with host govern-ments; caveats on the use of national contingents; tensions between military and political actors; poor communications between the field and headquarters; and the adverse attentions of the international media when things go wrong.[10]

But perhaps the most fundamental lesson from ONUC's experience – one from which many if not all of the 'controversies and confusions' listed above in some way derived – was that attempting to remain above the political fray when deployed into a fluid and unsettled internal conflict is likely to prove extremely difficult for any UN peacekeeping force, all the more so if that force is authorised to, and engages in, coercive military action. Both Hammarskjöld and the Security Council initially insisted that ONUC would 'not be a party to or in any way intervene in or be used to influence the outcome of any internal conflict, constitutional or otherwise'.[11] In practice, this proved quite impossible.

Where does this leave the question of the use of force in contempor-ary UN operations, the majority of which are deployed in civil war-like situations? And what lessons, if any, can we draw from the record since the late 1990s?

In discussing the role of military force in UN operations – whether one is examining the historical record or assessing the prospect for more 'robust' contemporary operations – it is helpful to distinguish between two sets of constraints. The first of these may be described as *resource*

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[9]*An Agenda for Peace* made no reference to ONUC whatsoever, though, interestingly, the *Supplement* did, albeit it briefly.

[10]Alan Doss, 'In the Footsteps of Dr Bunche: the Congo, UN Peacekeeping and the Use of Force', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37/5 (Oct 2014), 711. For another thoughtful assess-ment of ONUC's enduring relevance to understanding the challenges of peacekeeping, see Alan James, 'The Congo Controversies', *International Peacekeeping* 1/1 (Spring 1994), 44–58.

[11]Doss, 'In the Footsteps of Dr Bunche', 707.

constraints. The second has to do with the *clarity of political and strategic purpose* under which the forces operate.

Resource constraints cover all those factors that impede the ability of the UN as an intergovernmental body to generate, mount and sustain military forces in the field. This is not merely a question of funds and force generation but also, crucially, about the enabling systems and arrangements – from command, control and effective communications to intelligence and logistic support – that allow different national contingents to operate as a, more-or-less, cohesive force. Obstacles in the way of achieving such integration have long bedevilled UN peacekeeping operations, as evidenced most acutely by the near collapse of the then newly established peacekeeping mission in Sierra Leone in May 2000, following a minor challenge by local forces. An internal mission sent by the UN secretariat to investigate events found a litany of problems: poor standard of many of the military units deployed; 'critical deficiencies' in communications, transport, intelligence and, above all, the absence of unity of command caused, in part, by the frequent refusal of contingent commanders to accept orders through the UN chain of command.[12] Anyone familiar with the history of UN peacekeeping will recognise these challenges, though, as Doss' discussion of MONUC shows, they pose a far more serious threat to military effectiveness when the operational setting is volatile and fluid.

In theory, resource constraints of the kind identified above can be addressed, and it is true that serious efforts have been made since the late 1990s to mitigate, if not overcome, them. Within individual missions, as the UN operations in Haiti in 2005–07 show (and which are examined by James Cockayne in these pages), focused efforts to overcome deficiencies and resource constraints can and have made a major impact on the ground. In the fascinating case of Haiti, the mission's Joint Military Analysis Cell (JMAC) – in effect its intelligence branch – was able to develop actionable tactical and operational intelligence, which proved critical to destroying the 'gang structures' in Port-au-Prince. Although Cockayne concedes that the case of MINUSTAH is in some ways unique – and the record of JMACs elsewhere is more chequered – the example nonetheless shows that, in the right circumstances, a properly equipped UN force can undertake coercive operations with decisive effects at the operational and tactical level; that is, UN forces can be used to 'threaten, coerce, remove, suppress and destroy sources of instability'.[13]

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[12]'DPKO Assessment Mission to Sierra Leone, 31 May–8 June 2000' (Eisele Report), UN Document.
[13]James Cockayne, 'The Futility of Force? Strategic Lessons for Dealing with Unconventional Armed Groups from the UN's War on Haiti's Gangs', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37/5 (Oct. 2014), 737.

But this only begs the larger and, in the end, more critical question, namely, how the use of force can be made to serve *long-term* strategic objectives. As all of the contributions to this volume, in different ways, make clear, while resource constraints in UN operations require continuing attention, the more fundamental challenge revolves around the question of what precisely the use of force is meant to *achieve*. It is a question that can only be properly answered when there is clarity with regard to the political purpose and strategic direction of the mission itself. For a variety of reasons, many of them discussed in the articles that follow, such clarity has proved very hard to obtain for UN authorised missions.

In his contribution to this special issue, Thierry Tardy shows how France, drawing on its experience in Bosnia and Rwanda in the early 1990s, set about developing and championing the idea of 'peace restoration' operations, introducing the notion of 'active impartiality' as a means of conceptualising 'the "grey area" of peace operations, between peacekeeping and limited war'.[14] Since then, French doctrine has remained concerned with retaining freedom of manoeuvre, and its armed forces have prioritised short-term and 'robust' military action. As Tardy perceptively notes, however, much 'less attention has been paid to the ultimate purpose of the use of force, namely what is to be achieved through the recourse to force'.[15] Thus, 'while operations "Turquoise" [Rwanda], "Artemis", or "Licorne" [Côte d'Ivoire] may meet the French requirements as defined in the latest doctrinal papers, the extent to which these operations have been effective in supporting a broader political agenda remains an open question'.[16] The same question may well be asked of UN's robust use of force in Haiti in 2007. As Cockayne makes clear: 'operational success through the use of force led to only limited strategic payoffs in the larger state consolidation mission, with MINUSTAH struggling to integrate the use of force into a larger project for Haitian political and economic transformation'.[17]

Like Haiti, the offensive and robust use of force by the UN in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has also seen some tactical successes and local victories, including Bunia in 2003 and, more recently, the apparent defeat of M-23, a major rebel group in eastern DRC, in 2013. Still, viewed as whole, the record in the DRC remains decidedly mixed, underscoring the lesson that tactical success is no substitute for progress in addressing the underlying causes of violence.

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[14]Thierry Tardy, 'The Reluctant Peacekeeper: France and the Use of Force in Peace Operations', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37/5 (Oct. 2014), 781.
[15]Ibid., 788.
[16]Ibid., 789.
[17]Cockayne, 'The Futility of Force', 738.

With respect to the role and utility of military force in UN peace operations, Doss' conclusion carries much wider significance:

> When the terms of engagement are clear and the right military capacities are in place, UN peacekeepers can use force effectively … Even so, the use of force – for protection or other aims – should always be framed as an enabling component of a political strategy not as an end in itself.[18]

To students of strategy reared on Clausewitz, these observations are likely to appear self-evident. The question they raise, however, is why, in *practice* UN peacekeepers have so often been forced to operate without a meaningful political strategy to guide and shape considerations regarding the use of force. The answer to that question tells us something about the inherent limitations of UN authorised peacekeeping operations.

The Security Council – consisting at any time of five permanent and ten non-permanent members – is the intergovernmental body that draws up the mandate and, in theory, provides political direction for UN peacekeeping forces. One of the chief reasons for the aforementioned optimism that animated early post-Cold War discussions about UN peacekeeping was precisely the hope (strongly nurtured by the unity displayed over the response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990) that the Council would no longer be paralysed by rivalry between its permanent members. It was an understandable hope: the importance of Council unity to the success of UN missions is indisputable, and several post-Cold War operations have plainly benefited from it, most notably Namibia (1989–90), Mozambique (1992–94) and Cambodia (1992–93). These cases, however, have proved exceptions to a pattern in which Council members have found it much easier to agree on a more limited set of objectives than on an overall political strategy aimed at addressing underlying causes and drivers of conflict. These more limited objectives have typically included support for humanitarian relief and, increasingly since 1999, the 'protection of civilians' caught up in armed conflict, the implications of which are so clearly spelled out in Doss' article on the DRC. While actions by UN peacekeepers in support of humanitarian objectives reflect a wider and welcome shift in normative climate after the Cold War, such actions have also tended to serve as a substitute for an effective political response to complex and deep-seated crises. In the context of ongoing and unresolved civil wars in particular, this tendency carries very real risks for

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[18]Doss, 'In the Footsteps of Dr. Bunche', 730.

UN peacekeepers and helps explain why translating security gains into strategic objectives has proved so difficult.

There is a further consideration here: leaving aside the inherent difficulties faced by the Council in drawing up 'clear and achievable mandates', the body is also, plainly, ill placed structurally and politically to engage continuously at the country level to exploit evolving challenges and opportunities. Meanwhile, the *in situ* special representative of the secretary general or force commander hardly has the authority to formulate strategy on the hoof, though this is at times precisely what happens.

Going further, it should be noted that the two sets of impediments identified above – that of resources and of political and strategic clarity – are, for the UN, intimately connected. Given the liberal origins of peacekeeping, the UN's institutional self-understanding as a peacemaker rather than war-fighter, and the sharp divisions that surround the notion and practice of 'robust peacekeeping' among UN member states, the mere talk of 'intelligence capabilities', 'tactical mobility', 'credible force' and other assets commonly found wanting in more muscular peace missions, brings to the fore *political* sensitivities that many troop-contributing countries, and members of the Security Council, rather play down.

For all this, the demand for UN peacekeeping, or for the use of force therein, does not appear to be waning. Hence the focus of this special issue – and the broader research programme of which it forms part – is on the role of the use of force in UN peacekeeping, the best practices from which we can learn and the structural and political constraints that must be considered in operations to come. Above all, how can one best ensure that tactical and operational level successes brought about through the 'robust' use of force are effectively exploited to achieve lasting political gains? The articles included here help answer these questions and hint at both the possibilities and important constraints affecting future practice.

Notes on Contributors

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