

SHINING A LIGHT: UN PEACE OPERATIONS IN A HOSTILE WORLD

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ABSTRACT: This paper attempts to establish that modern UN peacekeeping operations, however flawed, are instrumental to ending conflicts and physical suffering amidst humanitarian crises and can serve as a basis for lasting settlements between warring factions, as well as stepping stones for national development. It begins by exposing the criticisms levelled at these operations in the past decade, particularly by US scholars and commentators, who presented them as obstacles to narrow, more violent and theoretically more effective solutions to disputes, but also demonstrates that a positive shift in American stance towards the UN could occur in the incoming Obama administration. It continues by asserting that UN peacekeepers enter operating theatres where Western armies refuse to tread or are called upon to mitigate the disaster left behind when an exit is made in haste, often after such powers conclude that the situation is intolerable and that a solution is not fundamental to their national interests. The conclusion states that UN peacekeeping operations are not a panacea, but constitute a viable solution to crises until governments can establish better ways to co-ordinate their actions.

KEYWORDS: conflicts, Human Rights, peacekeeping, United Nations, United States.

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INTRODUCTION

The theme for this paper arose from an indignation at the simplistic and dangerously naive view of the United Nations and its peacekeeping operations both in American academia and media, particularly in light of the recent Israeli bombing of UN operations in Gaza. Consider this passage from an editorial written by Charles Krauthammer in the *Washington Post* on 9 January 2009:

The U.N. mandated disarmament of Hezbollah is a well-known farce. Not only have foreign forces not stopped Hezbollah's massive rearmament, their very presence makes it impossible for Israel to take any preventive military action, lest it accidentally hit a blue-helmeted Belgian crossing guard.

The "international community" is now pushing very hard for a Gaza replay of that charade. Does anyone imagine that international monitors will risk their lives to prevent weapons smuggling? To arrest terrorists? To engage in shootouts with rocket-launching teams attacking Israeli civilians across the Gaza border?

Of course not. Weapons will continue to be smuggled. Deeper and more secure fortifications will be built for the next round. Mosques, schools and hospitals will again be used for weapons storage and terrorist safe havens. Do you think French "peacekeepers" are going to raid them?

Leaving aside the extraordinary assumptions Krauthammer makes, one can safely include him amongst those with 'little sense of the alphabet soup of international regimes that help keep them safe and prosperous' (Hachigian 2009).

A HORDE OF CRITICS

Indeed, the United States's mostly fractious relationship with the United Nations is the result of the combination of an old mistrust towards an organization that refuses to kowtow before American imperial hubris and an exquisitely home-grown variety of naïveté towards a world far beyond its shores that it cannot fully understand.

In its ignorant arrogance it fails to comprehend that diplomacy and discussions can be fruitful ways of avoiding conflicts or settling disputes, that there can exist a league of nations (whose first incarnation it nurtured and then despised) with peace as its fundamental objective. Instead it believes that its interlocutors can only negotiate, or rather capitulate, if they are mindful of what the consequences of disagreement with American interests can bring to them. This is better known as coercion.

There are two ways in which the US has historically approached the UN. One has seen it seek the organization's imprimatur to justify its acts of aggression against its enemies of the day and back away when its strategy fails. The other occurs when it rushes alone into battle and then pleads for UN intervention to help mitigate the disastrous effects of its military might. It is not surprising that it understands the best solution to humanitarian crises to reside in 'fighting evil, not merely relieving the suffering of victims' (Anderson 2004, 69). The horde of critics of the UN and its peacekeeping missions can be found across its domestic political spectrum and inhabits a manicheistic world where trying to negotiate a solution is a waste of time, where the United Nations is not more than a glorified debate club whose 'mandarins fail to grasp that men with guns do not respect men with nothing but flapping gums' (Boot 2000, 144).

In their view, peacekeeping is imbued with values that obstruct clear-cut military victories or, as defined by the UN, a way to help countries torn by conflict create conditions for sustainable peace with tasks that normally include promoting human security, confidence-building measures, power-sharing arrangements, electoral support, strengthening the rule of law, and economic and social development (DPKO 2008).

None of these general mandates are assertive enough to satisfy the critics, who prefer a more hands-on approach to nation building and development. 'After 1898... American forces remained behind to run such countries as the Philippines, Haiti and Cuba. U.S. rule was not democratic, but it gave those countries the most honest and efficient governments they have ever enjoyed' (Boot 2000, 148).

This is clearly anathema to the UN's mandate forbidding the intervention in the internal politics of any country unless the crime of genocide is committed, but the non-interventionist dogma was not responsible for the demise of support for UN operations in American politics. That came with the ill-fated United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM).

It was originally devised as a means of ensuring the supplies of humanitarian aid to the country and was initially provided with one Pakistani battalion (O'Neill 2002, 204). When that proved insufficient, the US decided to contribute a larger contingent:

The United States pushed an unwilling United Nations into a hugely ambitious nation-building mission. In its waning days the Bush administration assembled a U.S.-led coalition that intervened to ameliorate

the man-made famine in Somalia. From the very beginning, the United States intended to turn the mission over to a U.N. peacekeeping force. (Hillen 1998, 99)

This US-led mission failed to coordinate with the UN troops already present in Somalia and insisted on 'doing their own thing' (O'Neill 2002, 204), instead choosing to fight evil, as described earlier by Anderson, and pursuing Mohammed Aideed, a Somali warlord that had attacked UN aid convoys. The ensuing carnage was portrayed in the book *Black Hawk Down*, by Mark Bowden, and depicted in the film with homologous title.

In October 1993 eighteen American soldiers and more than 1,000 Somalis were killed in gun battles in the streets of Mogadishu, the result of a gross miscalculation of popular, and armed, support of Aideed among the city's inhabitants (Marten 2004, 30). The bodies of two US soldiers were tied to the militia's armed vehicles and dragged through the streets in a macabre victory lap. Graphic footage of the incident was broadcast on CNN and the indelible mark left on American public opinion sealed the fate of the operation.

Washington decided to pull its troops out of the country, leaving 'U.N. troops from other countries holding the bag, maintaining an indecisive presence and taking casualties of their own' (Betts 1994, 25).

It subsequently became fashionable among American politicians to 'bemoan the effectiveness of U.N. peacekeepers – despite the fact that the Bush and Clinton administrations were far more responsible than any other government for the U.N. effort', (Hillen 1998, 98) and 'the perception arose... that American soldiers were being killed far from home for no good reason'. (Marten 2004, 30) From that moment the US refrained from participating in missions where its national interests were not clearly at stake.

Rwanda was clearly not a country where American interests were in play. Between April and June 1994 an estimated 800,000 people were slaughtered after the death of Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana, a Hutu. Most of the dead were Tutsis. Most of the killers were Hutus.

The UN Security Council failed to reinforce the troops already on the ground and 'this reluctance to provide leadership to the rest of the international community has been singled out by most observers as the major cause of the U.N.'s failure to act' (Marte 2004, 32).

But the pattern of trumpeting a more forceful strategy and then cutting losses had emerged earlier, in the Krauthammer-derided United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). Created by the Security Council in 1978 to confirm Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, the mission later saw its refugee camps bombed by Israel time and again, unopposed by the US, its original sponsor. It is therefore not surprising that 'it was left to the contingents, drawn from a number of small, insignificant states, to deal with the aftermath' (O'Neill 2002, 204). Their motives are also questioned:

The various national contingents that make up U.N. peacekeeping operations - Bangladeshis, Bulgarians, Brazilians, and the like - are chosen not for martial prowess but because their governments are willing to send them, often for no better reason than a daily stipend. (Boot 2000, 145)

The use of the term 'martial prowess' harkens back to American bellicose desires and to a worldview that sees compromises as a fundamental weakness, not as a better alternative. In it there are only two possible stances, strength and cowardice.

It is to be expected that John Bolton, former US ambassador to the UN, entitled his book *Surrender Is Not an Option: Defending America at the United Nations and Abroad*. To negotiate, to seek a common ground, to compromise is perceived as a surrender of national interests to the higher cause of humanitarian interventions, which Bolton derided as 'a moveable feast of an idea that was the High Minded cause du jour' (2007, 207) during his tenure at the UN.

American unilateralism weighs the appearance of legitimacy as the only redeemable feature of working within international frameworks, but with caveats. 'Although it may sometimes make sense to seek the U.N.'s imprimatur for a mission, the organization should not be given operational control. Effective empires require strong proconsuls, not bureaucrats - Kitcheners, not Kouchners' (Boot 2000, 147).

To wage war, scorch the earth and intern innocent civilians, as Lord Kitchener did during the Boer War, is perceived as more 'effective' than creating civil and political structures and rebuilding a war-torn economy, as in Kosovo with the United Nations Interim Administration Mission (UNMIK) under Bernard Kouchner at the turn of the century. Yet these tasks are only undertaken by the UN to avoid fading into obscurity and to find 'a genuine role for itself in matters of war and war's aftermath in a world of a single superpower' (Anderson 2004, 59).

The US-led invasion of Iraq, begun in March 2003, was the ideal proving ground for the assertion that nation building is a task better suited to 'strong proconsuls' free from the UN's 'worse than useless' (Boot 2000, 143) interference. The destructive effects it has had are still present and will continue for a long time, even if some maintain that 'Bechtel and Halliburton, overcharges and all, may yet prove more important to Iraq than the U.N. Secretariat' (Anderson 2004, 73). As to how the Iraqi population feels towards its "liberators", the renowned shoe-throwing incident of December 2008 provides an ample insight.

One of the provisions contained in the Iraq Resolution of 2002, passed by the US Congress and vesting war-making powers in the Executive was that it should foster 'the emergence of a democratic government' (U.S. House 2002, 116 STAT. 1500) to replace the regime of Saddam Hussein.

It was one of the few to be completed and the UN was instrumental in its achievement. Secretary General Kofi Annan sent Lakhdar Brahimi as his special envoy to aid the American occupation forces in the composition of the provisional Iraqi Governing Council as well as in the organisation of national elections. Its operations were abruptly curtailed when a truck bomb killed fifteen of its staff and another seven civilians in August 2003.

The UN provided its expertise to a country that had disrespected and disregarded its resolutions in the months leading up to the invasion, sacrificing the lives of its staff in the process of helping to establish conditions for a sustainable peace. Yet the critics found that the 'unstable, inconstant, and unreliable' UN had 'lost its courage and its way, pulling out of Baghdad' (Anderson 2004, 59).

Somalia could once again set the stage for a clash of ideologies, of negotiation versus coercion amidst the emergence of piracy in the Gulf of Aden and the fragmentation of its already feeble political structure. The daggers have already been drawn and the critics warn that 'the members of the U.N. Security Council must remember that U.N. missions are not a substitute for genuine political will, effective diplomacy and a practical plan to end a conflict' (Keyser 2008).

Yet the incoming Obama administration is signalling a radical shift in the American attitude towards the UN. During confirmation hearings in January 2009, incoming Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that the US could not solve its most pressing problems on its and that the world could not solve them without America, adding that the best way to advance American interests in reducing global threats

would be to design and implement global solutions. 'This is isn't a philosophical point, this is our reality', said Secretary Clinton (Clinton 2009).

Incoming US Ambassador to the UN, Susan Rice, held a similar tone in her confirmation hearing, stating that the UN was an 'imperfect but indispensable vehicle' to address global problems, and that it presented a desirable 'third way' between doing nothing and acting alone (Rice 2009). Such a reversal of policy bodes well for future UN peacekeeping operations.

STANDING ALONE

The crises that spurred the deployment of UN peacekeeping operations became more complex over time. During the Cold War the majority of missions were purely military in scope and had the task of 'imposing a most basic, rigid form of order' (Dziedzic 1998, 8) that often included the standing down and separation of warring armies, such as the UN Truce Supervision Organisation established in 1948 after the Arab-Israeli war.

More modern operations have become a fusion of military missions and civilian responses with the goal of diminishing or ending suffering in societies torn apart by conflicts. These need a longer time-frame and 'may not be soluble within time spans shorter than generations' (Durch 1997, 161). They address the symptoms of crises and are not envisioned as regime-changing enterprises, which is why they are 'doomed to disappoint' (Boot 2000, 147) the critics that believe that 'the highest moral position has to be fighting evil, not merely relieving the suffering of victims' (Anderson 2004, 69).

The research carried out by Prof. Page Fortna at the Department of Political Science at Columbia University highlights the importance of peacekeeping operations by analyzing the history of its missions and the nature of the conflicts that have attracted them. Fortna finds that 'the U.N. tends to get involved in the most "serious" cases in terms of violence, gravity of threat, and several other indicators'. (Fortna 2003, 99) These cases include 'civil conflicts, not just wars between sovereign states, in areas of the world ranging from Cambodia to Somalia and Bosnia to Haiti, where the underlying level of intractable violence and political uncertainty was extraordinarily high' (Marten 2004, 26).

Fortna also analysed the effects of peacekeeping missions on their host countries, and one particular finding is surprising. 'The risk of war drops by almost 95 percent when such a [peacekeeping] mission is present relative to those which combatants are left to their own devices' (Fortna 2003, 108). In this light it becomes difficult to understand why, as in the words of former Secretary General Pérez de Cuellar, 'experts and realists, who are not always farsighted, have tended to regard the U.N.'s peacekeeping and peacemaking efforts rather patronizingly as something of a sideshow' (Pérez de Cuéllar 1997).

An operational angle is brought by James Dobbins. He served in the Clinton administration as Special Envoy for Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia and Kosovo and in the Bush administration as Special Envoy for Afghanistan. He found that the UN is, contrary to what was implied in the aforementioned criticisms, efficient and cost effective and that its reliance on mostly Third World countries for troop deployment is not detrimental, as suggested by Boot, but rather economical. Its 'costs per deployed soldier are a small fraction of any Western army' (Dobbins 2007, 2). In fact, 'the U.N. spends less in one year [on its peacekeeping missions] about what it costs the United States for one month's operation in Iraq' (Dobbins 2007, 3).

More significantly, UN operations are understood to be complementary, and not detrimental, to American interests as 'there are 18 other places where the United States probably will not have to intervene because UN troops are doing so at a tiny fraction of the cost of U.S. operations' (Dobbins 2007, 8).

A conclusion shared with Fortna is that the presence of UN troops positively affects the environment they occupy. Of the missions he surveyed, seven out of eight societies were left peaceful, six out of eight held stable elections and all corroborate the view that nation building can end conflicts and assure against their reemergence (Dobbins 2007, 7).

However successful these operations were and in spite of the fact that 'the United Nations has done a better job of learning from its mistakes... over the past fifteen years' (Dobbins 2007, 7), none of them can be said to bask in absolute glory or sink into abject failure. As in the words of Jane Holl Lute, Assistant Secretary-General for Peacebuilding Support, 'it's not perfect, it's not fault free, it can be uneven, uncertain at times, it can be late in coming and it can leave too early, but unmistakably, peacekeeping makes a circumstance better off than were it not there' (Lute 2006).

The degree of control exerted by the international community over the territory involved seems to be the most crucial aspect of the post-Cold War missions. Marten maintains that when that control is strong it is less likely that 'local actors opposed to liberal political change' can hinder attempts to 'establish more tolerant and democratic political systems on their territories' (Marten 2004, 18). One could place Rwanda and Somalia, discussed earlier, at one end of the curve and Timor-Leste and Eastern Slavonia at the other, with Haiti languishing in the middle.

Mandates play a large part in this inconsistency. They are the result of compromises in the political negotiations leading up to the deployment of an operation and may leave the soldiers and civilian staff on the ground 'not sure what it was they were supposed to be doing' (O'Neill 2002, 209). Ambassador Jacques-Paul Klein, former Under-Secretary General and Transition Administrator in East Slavonia, adds that they are 'vague... sometimes worded in a way that makes implementation difficult' (Klein 2003, 205) and that much of the success of the mission therefore lies in the interpretation of the mandate by the team on the ground.

If Klein's analysis is somewhat self-congratulatory it is because he commanded what is generally hailed as the most successful operation in the history of peacekeeping. The United Nations Transitional Administration in Eastern Slavonia (UNTAES) 'successfully oversaw the withdrawal of Serbian troops, and the cessation of the ethnic cleansing campaigns that had earlier terrorized the population' (Marten 2004, 39) in that sector of Croatia. Ambassador Peter Galbraith attributes the achievement to Klein's forceful administration and 'hard-nosed dealing with the Croatian government and local Serbian authorities' (Galbraith 2003, 210). Galbraith was the Head of Political Affairs at another positive, if not entirely successful, mission in Timor-Leste. There the United Nations Transitional Authority in East Timor (UNTAET) had as ultimate objective the establishment of an independent state, which was in fact achieved, after being deployed in 'response to a gaping administrative and security vacuum' (Goldstone 2004, 95).

The eastern half of the island of Timor was a Portuguese colony until 1975, when it was granted independence. It was almost immediately invaded by Indonesia and the occupation that followed was brutal, lasting for 24 years until an UN-mediated agreement between Indonesia and Portugal called for a popular referendum where 78% of the people voted for independence (Timor 2008).

UNTAET took control of a territory razed by the retaliation of the departing Indonesian forces, where 70% of the buildings and all government buildings were burned and where half of the population of 800,000 was composed of refugees (Goldstone 2004, 211). The mission was tasked with all the decisions involved in the creation of a new state, but paradoxically did not assume as dictatorial a role as UNTAES. Brazilian-born UN transitional administrator Sérgio Vieira de Mello, later killed in Baghdad, decided to involve the Timor-Lesteese to the fullest extent possible and never overruled the decisions made by the transitional government (*ibid*). Timor-Leste came into existence in May 2002 and UNTAET effectively accomplished its mandate. However, it 'was not allowed to use any money to use anything that would be left... or to finance healthcare or education... and took all of its equipment with it, including communication lines and power generators' (Marten 2004, 55) when it left.

Haiti occupies the frustrating halfway point between the examples cited earlier. Though it received a mission tasked with restoring peace and promoting a democratic government in 2004, the underlying problems remain in place to this day. The United States Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) has been 'limited in its potential effectiveness because it lacks both the authority and the capacity to move beyond peacekeeping/enforcement to adopt a broader mission' (MacLean 2008, 1). There is a fatigue within the international community in dealing with 'a country so consumed by intractable social problems, so stubbornly refusing to reform itself' (Marten 2004, 44).

General Augusto Heleno Ribeiro Pereira, former MINUSTAH military commander, told the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Brazilian House of Representatives that his main frustration was the absence of any development projects. He also stated that the immediate goal was to keep violence at tolerable levels. 'I received a lot of pressure to be more robust in the use of force, mainly from countries more interested in the area and whose peacekeeping activities differ from ours' (Pereira *apud* Bragon 2004). Brazilian press reports indicate he stated this as he pointed towards the names of the United States, Canada and France during a presentation (Bragon 2004).

While experts agree that the mission has so far achieved the goal of keeping armed groups from carrying out attacks (Diceanu 2006), the mission's mandate remains unfulfilled after a year where the country was beset by riots, a government collapse, five months of political impasse and four hurricanes in the space of less than

four weeks, 'which have inflicted upon this country and the Haitian people a level of unprecedented destruction', according to UN Special Envoy Hédi Annabi (Annabi *apud* Daudier 2009).

CONCLUSION

UN peacekeeping missions remain, despite their drawbacks, a viable solution to international and humanitarian crises. They stand criticized for blocking more forceful 'solutions', for being inefficient, for being too condescending amidst warring factions. Yet they also stand alone and operate with remarkable resilience in adverse environments where other forces have capitulated, function as effective agents for needed security and positive change and, most importantly, come to the aid of those destitute and at the mercy of violence, with the tragic exception of Rwanda.

To quote Sérgio Vieira de Mello, 'we should never underestimate the capacity of human beings to brutalize and dehumanize each other, but also, we should always have confidence in the ultimate ability of the collective human spirit to triumph over such brutality' (Mello *apud* McNamara 2004, 187).

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