UN Peacekeeping Operations

How do you analyze the present situation of the UN peacekeeping operations?

Before answering this question, it is necessary to remind the readers that United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPK) as we know it today is a relatively recent phenomenon in international relations. If we exclude observation missions such as the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) established in Palestine in 1948 and the United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP) deployed in the Kashmir in 1949, UNPK dates from the Suez crisis of November 1956 with the creation of the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF). The setting up of this first peacekeeping mission was a pure improvisation (1) designed to replace collective security as envisaged in the Charter of the United Nations (Chapter VII). Cold war’s tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States blocked the Security Council preventing the use of the UN to solve international disputes.

To address the Suez crisis, then Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld, acting on a proposal from the Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Lester B. Pearson, had received authorization from the General Assembly to launch the new operation. Facing the threat of a British and French veto, Hammarskjöld had to adopt another strategy to deploy the UNEF contingent. He did it through the use of the “Uniting for Peace” resolution dating from the war in Korea. This highly controversial method allows the Council to authorize the deployment of troops without the approval of the Security Council. After difficult negotiations at the Secretariat, UNEF was finally authorized to be deployed in Egypt with its soldiers wearing for the first time the blue helmet.
Since UNEF in 1956, United Nations Peacekeeping is defined as “Field operations established by the United Nations, with the consent of the parties concerned, to help control and resolve conflicts between them, under United Nations common control, at the expense collectively of the member states, and with military and civilian personnel and equipment provided voluntarily by them, acting impartially between the parties and using force to the minimum extent necessary.” (Goulding 1993: 45). The three basic principles on which UNPK rest are 1) Consent of the parties, 2) Impartiality, and 3) Minimum use of force. This doctrinal basis, established by Dag Hammarskjöld in 1958 (UN General Assembly 1958), proved to be highly difficult to respect in future operations. It was already the case with the Opération des Nations Unies au Congo (ONUC) between 1960 and 1964 and during numerous post-Cold War missions like the use of force by UN troops in the Congo to stop the secession of the province of Katanga created a malaise and put the UN in a very difficult financial situation. This explains why the UN mounted so few operations after 1964.

This lack of ambition started to dissipate towards the end of the Cold War. In 1988, the UN sent a batch of observers between Iran and Iraq and the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the Blue Helmets who served between 1948 and 1988. In April 1990, the United Nations Transition Group in Namibia (UNTAG) was deployed and it helped this African nation to independence in less than a year. UNTAG still represents a complete success of a UN Peacekeeping mission. What UNTAG marked in the evolution of UNPK was the rise of complex multifunctional operations requiring the presence of several soldiers but also civilian staff and police officers. This created a trend by which the UN became involved in more and more difficult operations without proper preparation for its contingents. This in turn led to the “fiascoes” of the 1990’s in Bosnia, Rwanda and Somalia.

The fact that the UN was involved in fiascoes is hardly surprising given that it engaged in 36 operations between 1988 and 1998. Compared to the 13 operations of the Cold War, the number of new missions was impressive. The debacles of the early 1990’s led the UN and its Member States to slow down the creation of new missions between 1995 and 1999. The number of peacekeepers in the field also dropped dramatically.
The present situation stems from the direction taken by UN Peacekeeping missions at the end of the Cold War. Blue helmets and civilian staff and police continue to be deployed in complex and sometimes dangerous operations mostly in Africa. Often they replace a mission established by other international actors (European Union in the DRC for example or France in Mali). They can also work side by side with other actors (France in Rwanda in 1994 and in Côte d’Ivoire in 2011 or with the African Union in Darfur). One thing is certain the trend is to deploy UN personnel in large numbers (compared to the standards of Cold War missions ONUC excluded) and to accept complex mandates. The size of the new operations contributes (by law of averages) to the rise of misconducts and improper behavior by some uniformed and civilian personnel. Sexual abuse scandals and trafficking are some of the problems that have surfaced during the 2000’s. People at the Department of Peacekeeping Operation (DPKO) Secretariat in New York are trying to address this problem by producing documents supposed to give future peacekeepers a better training and make them aware of potential problems in the field.

Another central topic in UNPK at this time is the controversy surrounding the use of force by peacekeepers. Robust peacekeeping is debated since the Brahimi Report (United Nations 2000). Proponents of a more robust peacekeeping argue that Blue Helmets should use force to protect civilian populations in danger and to defend the mandate. Opponents for their part argue that UN troops are not equipped or trained forcefully with peace spoilers (Tardy 2011). The debate is not closed and proponents and opponents continue to discuss about the best solution to face the threats from spoilers and warlords in peacekeeping operations.

Another less salient topic concerns the lasting disengagement of Troop Contributing Countries like Canada, Denmark or Sweden from UNPK. Canada only for example uses the model of contributions in peacekeeping (20 June 2013).
example, for many years the model contributor, is nowadays (30 June 2013) placed on the 54th place of contributors. By comparison, in May 1995 Canada had 3,033 troops serving under the UN flag and it was at the 7th place in the list of contributors. Denmark and Sweden had 1,300 troops in 1995 and respectively 54 and 54 today. This situation reflects a paradox: the most capable countries in military are also those contributing less to the UN efforts. At the same time, poor countries like Bangladesh (8,000 troops), Ethiopia (6,500 troops) or Rwanda (4,700 troops) are supplying an important part of the Blue Helmets deployed around the world. As this problem is concerned, nothing indicates that the situation is about to change.

In your opinion, how will the situation likely evolve over the next five years?

It is always very difficult to predict how world politics will evolve. The trend initiated by the end of the Cold War will probably last for the next five years. The UN Member States, after the four year break of 1995-1999, seemed ready to embark on more ambitious and larger missions mostly in Africa. Since July 2000, almost all of them involve a complex multifunctional mandate with the deployment of large contingents. It is highly probable that the UN will try to avoid initiating new operations as it is already overburdened with the existing missions. With more than 100,000 personnel deployed on four continents, the Organization is probably close to its limits. We nevertheless cannot exclude an extension of its capacities. If everybody thought it had reached its limits with 75,000 troops deployed, other Member States may allow the UN to take on more responsibilities. It is them who will finance it and contribute in manpower.

As far as the problem of sexual abuses and other misconducts is concerned, it is on the DPKO’s agenda. But as long as the UN cannot trial the personnel lent by Member States, things will hardly change. The use of force and the enforcement of mandates by peacekeepers will probably remain the same. It would be surprising if UN troops use force against armed militias. At the same time, what is happening
Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where an “intervention brigade” has been by Resolution 2098 of 28 March 2013, may signify a change in the approach of spoilers. The UN seems ready to allow the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) to use force against those attacking civilians or peacekeeping troops (Gorur & Ker 2013; The Economist 2013). This new “robust” stance in the DRC does not indicate that the UN is generalizing this model. Members States are always reluctant to let the UN put of their soldiers at risk. This is one of the most enduring problems facing peace operations and it is not about to be settle soon.

Finally, the recent tendency to mix UN troops with other military personnel probably continue. “Hybridation” seems to be a pragmatic solution to face the of ambitious multifunctional operations. In Mali for example, the UN is now in of the country through the presence of the United Nations Multidimensional Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) but with French unit ready to intervene forcefully in case of emergency. The presence of UN troops legitimizes the presence foreign soldiers in Mali but France maintains a highly capable contingent to deploy troops if need be. This model is probably here to stay for the near future given the legitimacy that a UN operation brings to military interventions. It is interesting that as soon as 1966 political scientist Inis Claude underlined the legitimizing the UN as one of its functions in world politics (Claude 1966).

What are the structural long-term perspectives?

Given that UN Peacekeeping was born as an improvisation and that it was among other – maybe more effective – solutions, it developed and evolved slowly with very minor changes. In fact, UNPK evolved following the very well pattern of path-dependence (Hatton 2012). Specialists of Public Policies are familiar with this pattern as it affects most complex policies. Path-dependent process by which a policy or a practice becomes entrenched and very hard to (Bennett & Elman 2006; Mahoney 2000; Pierson 2000). UNPK took its form following the mandate of, Lester B. Pearson, At a First Secretary Gener
following the advice of Lester B. Pearson. At first, Secretary-General Hammarskjöld was skeptical about Pearson’s idea of a multinational ad hoc UN force. Other proposals were to use the British and French forces – already there – to set up a police force between Egypt and Israel. This was unacceptable by Egypt given that two countries were the aggressors. Some Americans wanted to create a permanent force able to respond rapidly to international crises. The least ambitious - and for a good reason – the most acceptable solution was Pearson’s model of troops provided by middle powers. Once launched this type of force became the model for all UN peacekeeping operations. ONUC proved that this model was not adapted to all types of conflicts. UNEF in Suez was deployed between two countries with disciplined armed forces. The situation in the Congo in 1960 was quite different. It was a civil war involving a secessionist movement in the province of Katanga. The UN nonetheless kept the same approach as in Suez with dramatic consequences.

So, once on its institutional path, UNPK became a well-established practice with Member States and personnel at the Secretariat in New York were familiar with it and became difficult to change it to adapt to new situations. The strongest effort came at the end of the Cold War when Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali published his Agenda for Peace in June 1992. His ambitious vision for the new UN Peace Operations was rapidly put in check in the Former Yugoslavia, in Somalia and in Rwanda. UNPK was to come back to a much more modest approach in the Second Edition of the Agenda for Peace in 1995 (Boutros-Ghali 1995). This episode demonstrated that the UN was structurally limited. It cannot do against the will of its Member States. This is why it should not anticipate important changes in the future. Peacekeeping will stay as a UN practice; Blue Helmets will be deployed when the UN Security Council (UNSC) accept to create new missions (the Chinese and Russian veto over Syria in 2012, as a reminder that the UNSC may sometimes disagree); and force will be used sparingly. UNPK is on a path that makes it rather stable. It would be surprising if there is an important change in its practice or in its situation as an institution of international relations. Member States will still rely on it to address violent conflicts and international society do not proposed more effective solution, UNPK will remain the only framework of ambition.
favorite mean of intervention.

Notes:

(1) The League of Nations mounted a few operations involving the deployment of their blue helmets, but they were serving under their own national flag. The best example being the deployment of British and French troops in Silesia between Germany and Poland in 1921.

References:


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