All Peace Operations Are Political: A Case for Designer Missions and the Next UN Reform

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In mandating, funding and (for the most part) managing its peace missions, the United Nations maintains a distinction between peacekeeping operations and special political missions. Five useful editions of the Annual Review of Global Peace Operations have treated peace operations as largely synonymous with peacekeeping, defining them as in-country operations that are authorized by a multilateral body, that are multinational in their composition, that have a substantial military or police component, and that are deployed in support of a peace process or conflict management objective. Yet not every peace operation deployed with a conflict management objective need have a substantial uniformed component. And every military peacekeeping operation is inherently political, doomed to stagnation or ultimate failure in the absence of an effective political process.

Within the UN today, organizational divisions and relationships, funding arrangements and mechanisms for mandating and accountability are dysfunctional for the rational planning and evolution of peace operations. An undue linear approach to peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding, and thinking which is boxed into separate concepts and precedents for peacekeeping, special political and peacebuilding missions and offices, do not adequately correspond to the diverse needs of countries in conflict or transition. They can result in the imposition of inappropriate templates, rather than operations being designed in accordance with the country-specific context. Increasingly the large, multidimensional peacekeeping mission has become the norm and there are resistances to departing from its template. Insufficient consideration is given to the possibility of lighter – and cheaper – options. It is time for a fundamental review and reform, the centerpiece of which should be the merger of the departments responsible and common funding arrangements.

UNMIN: A DESIGNER MISSION

To illustrate the potential of lighter missions – and emphasize the need for flexibility in designing
them – I turn to my own experience planning and leading the special political mission in Nepal, UNMIN (United Nations Mission in Nepal). The mission qualified for inclusion in the Annual Review of Global Peace Operations, as well as in this volume, on the basis of its military component. But whether or not a military component of 186 unarmed serving and retired military officers deployed as “arms monitors” to monitor two armies totaling over 100,000 combatants qualifies as “substantial,” it was an unusual - indeed a unique - mission for the UN. Overall, UNMIN was sufficiently unusual for me to be told with some exasperation at headquarters, in the course of mission planning, that “we don’t want designer missions: we do template missions.” In fact, Nepal offers a case study in the need to be flexible in tailoring a peace operation to the particular context, and in the ability of a relatively light mission to make a contribution to peace process implementation no less successful than that of many far larger operations. The need for such flexibility is part of the case for major changes in UN arrangements for the management, funding and oversight of peace operations.

That the UN was able to play a substantial role in support of Nepal’s peace process was, first and foremost, the result of low-key political engagement undertaken by the Department of Political Affairs from 2003, after Secretary-General Kofi Annan had publicly offered good offices to seek to end an increasingly bloody armed conflict between Maoist insurgents and the state. The UN’s in-country involvement with the conflict deepened when, in April 2005, the government of King Gyanendra sought to defuse international condemnation of both conflict-related abuses and its violations of democratic rights by accepting the establishment in Nepal of an Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR-Nepal). Engagement with the parliamentary parties, then excluded from government, with the Maoist leadership, and with civil society, which had lobbied for the UN’s human rights role, fortified the conviction of all these actors that the UN should assist in implementing the peace process which would follow once their alliance had succeeded in bringing down the king’s government.

Several factors ensured that Nepal was not a candidate for the peacekeeping template. The UN’s key role emerged from the agreement between the parliamentary parties and the Maoists that the armies which had fought the war would be restricted to barracks (for what was then still very much the Royal Nepalese Army) and cantonments (for the Maoist army) during the election of a constituent assembly which would afford an opportunity for the Maoists’ republican and federalist agenda. This agreement, which became the basis of the extraordinary people’s movement that ousted King Gyanendra from power in April 2006, provided for the restricted armies to be placed under international supervision. In subsequent negotiations, the Maoists were required to agree, as a condition for joining the interim legislature and government, to storage of their weapons under UN surveillance and monitoring. The UN would maintain around-the-clock surveillance at eight weapons storage areas (including one where an equivalent number of Nepalese Army weapons were stored) and monitor 28 Maoist army cantonment sites and the hundreds of barracks and installations of the Nepalese Army.

The Nepalese parties were adamant that they did not want these functions to be carried out by armed peacekeepers: when they formalized their request, it was for monitoring of the arms and armies by “qualified civilian personnel.” The pride the Nepalese Army and establishment took in Nepal’s long-standing participation in UN peacekeeping was reflected in reluctance to become a recipient of blue helmets. The Maoist leadership had developed some confidence in UN impartiality, but in its ranks suspicion of military interventions was rife. India had only reluctantly come to accept the need for any UN role, and initially hoped that Nepal could be kept away from the Security Council. Delhi certainly did not want to see a UN peacekeeping force in a neighboring country with which it has an open border.

At UN Headquarters, some felt that the role requested could only be properly performed by armed peacekeepers in substantial numbers, and certainly by serving military personnel, not by retired officers, as the request for qualified civilians implied. This was supported by pragmatic considerations. Outside the UN, retired military and police officers have been deployed to carry out military or quasi-military monitoring tasks – for example, in the Nuba Mountains of Sudan, Sri Lanka and Aceh. However, the UN itself had no precedent and no system for such recruitment. Eventually the parties were persuaded to agree to accept a mix of active
only vague definitions in the CPA of processes by which the Interim Government would address their future: the “integration and rehabilitation” of Maoist combatants and the “democratization” of the Nepalese Army. We would have preferred to include technical assistance to resolving these security sector issues in the mandate and staffing of the mission, and were told that such UN assistance would be required eventually; it was mainly Nepal’s deference to Indian wishes that precluded a request for any such UN role.

UNMIN IN PRACTICE

The achievements in the period for which UNMIN was conceived and planned, through to the holding of the constituent assembly election, were considerable. Within the Joint Monitoring Coordination Committee (JMCC), skillfully chaired by UNMIN’s Chief Arms Monitor, initially frosty dealings between senior officers of the two armies thawed into cooperation. Not a shot was fired between the two armies, and there was not a single known case of weapons being removed from the storage containers. The relationships forged within the JMCC enabled UNMIN to intervene to defuse situations that threatened the political process or could derail the election.

The Election Commission, which happily proved to be both highly competent and of unimpeachable integrity, successfully navigated two election postponements and overcame the considerable technical and logistical challenges it faced for the April 2008 poll. Campaigning was peaceful in
most constituencies, although Maoist cadres used or threatened violence to intimidate and obstruct other parties in some areas. Still, there could be no doubt that the unexpected emergence of the Maoists as the largest party, winning 38 per cent of seats with 30 per cent of the vote, represented a vote for change and a rebuff to the old parties, although certainly not an unqualified endorsement of Maoist ideology.

The Constituent Assembly had unprecedented representation of hitherto marginalized social groups and nearly one-third women members, and its first vote saw Nepal accomplish its peaceful transition to a republic. The extent of UNMIN’s contribution to this success is hard to assess but few Nepalis have suggested that the transition could have been accomplished without the UN.

In accordance with the expectations of the Security Council, UNMIN was radically downsized once its electoral mandate had been discharged, although successive governments requested the continuation of its monitoring of arms and armed personnel. But the peace process was incomplete. Two armies remained in separate existence, increasingly impatient at restrictions that had been intended as short-term measures pending interim government decisions regarding integration and rehabilitation of Maoist combatants and democratization of the Nepalese Army. The shock of the election result saw the end of cooperation among the major parties, which could not be achieved either by a Maoist-led coalition or by a coalition without the Maoists which replaced it.

In an increasingly partisan debate, the alleged weakness of UNMIN’s monitoring came to be publicly criticized by the political parties who had sought only a light monitoring role in the first place, and who shared responsibility for the failure to resolve the issue of the future of the combatants and the consequent tensions in the cantonments and barracks. Resolving the outstanding issues required a return to cooperation among all major parties, which remained unlikely without third party facilitation which, in relation to the future of the combatants in particular, the UN was best placed to provide. But deference of Nepali political leaders and of Security Council members to Indian opposition to a larger UN role stood in the way of an appropriate reconfiguration of UNMIN’s mandate and resources.

LESSONS FROM UNMIN

The principal lesson to be derived from the experience of UNMIN should be an obvious one: missions should not be expected to conform to any template, but should be designed according to the particularities of their context, with space to innovate. This was facilitated in relation to Nepal by the fact that the planning of the mission emerged out of a sustained political engagement and prior in-country presence, with continuity of personnel and departmental responsibility.

While the electoral and civil affairs aspects of UNMIN were not dissimilar from those of other peace operations, the military function which came to be termed the “monitoring of arms and armies” broke new ground for the UN, and encountered initial resistance from those wary of its departure from models of traditional peacekeeping. Few in number, unarmed and in civilian dress, UNMIN’s arms monitors visibly lacked any enforcement capability, which is sometimes expected of blue helmets even when in fact they have no such mandate or capacity. The responsibility for respecting or breaching commitments could thus be seen to rest where it belonged: with the chain of command of the respective armies and their political masters, even if the latter would sometimes seek to transfer it to UNMIN. Contrary to the doctrine which argued that arms monitors should be serving officers, retired officers on civilian contracts made some of the best contributions to the mission, although recruitment and funding considerations resulted in this element being phased down and out after the use of serving or retired personnel had ceased to be an issue for the Nepalese parties. A mode of operation which had hitherto been a feature only of non-UN missions ought to be part of the UN’s toolbox, especially as it could mean lighter, faster and less expensive deployments.

UNMIN experienced, however, some of the UN system’s obstacles to rapid deployment. Build-up of the mission was hampered by the limited pre-commitment authority available to special political missions, and by the classic hurdles of recruitment and procurement procedures. It was only support in kind from Member States, most notably Norway and India, which enabled UNMIN’s team sites and weapons storage areas at the cantonments to be quickly established.
The handicap of being a special political mission, funded from the regular UN budget, rather than a peacekeeping mission funded by separate assessment, went beyond the limitation on pre-commitment authority. Ranking third in size and cost among special political missions to those in Iraq and Afghanistan, UNMIN appeared as a large operation — whereas alongside peacekeeping missions it would have appeared as a relatively light mission offering high value for money. The downward pressures on staffing and funding to be provided from the regular budget are inevitably acute, although UNMIN did win most of its battles for resources, including — with the Government of Nepal's support against the view of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions — its civil affairs staffing.

**ALL PEACE OPERATIONS ARE POLITICAL**

Nepal thus offers one example of the case for missions to be designed according to their context, and of the unhelpfulness of the distinction between peacekeeping and special political missions. To proceed from first principles rather than from current structures, it seems self-evident that peace operations should be designed according to the particularities of the peace process or conflict management objective they are to support, with maximum flexibility and scope for innovation. Since the needs of the situation will evolve, although not always in positive directions, the mission should be continuously reassessed and reconfigured as necessary. Functions which can achieve their objective in the short-term, which it is to be hoped will include the military contribution to stabilization, should not be unduly prolonged. Peacebuilding functions need to be planned in a realistic, longer time-frame. At all times the mission needs to be governed by a political strategy aiming to bring together all aspects of the international engagement to promote sustainable peace.

Thus if peacekeeping is defined by the need for a substantial military component, it represents a limited stage in support of a peace process or management of a conflict. However, peacebuilding functions, which have increasingly come to be carried out within multidimensional peacekeeping operations — such as security sector reform, police development and promotion of the rule of law — are inherently long-term, and their success is likely to be prejudiced if planned within the time horizon of the peacekeeping stage.

Peacemaking, or mediation, and peacebuilding, or development, have a much longer-term horizon. Implementation of even the best negotiated peace agreement requires continuous mediation among national actors, as well as regional and international diplomacy, throughout the peacekeeping stage and beyond, and peacekeeping will stagnate or fail if it is not accompanied by an active political strategy. Peacebuilding should begin as soon as the minimum degree of security exists, in order to contribute to sustainable peace. A political or mediating role is likely to remain essential for successful peacebuilding in fragile states beyond the requirement for peacekeeping.

Continuity of political strategy, flexible reconfiguration of the operational presence and long-term peacebuilding are not well served by current arrangements within the UN system. Initial mediation is the responsibility of the Department of Political Affairs (DPA). Once a country situation requires a UN peacekeeping presence, responsibility transitions to the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO). This implies a discontinuity in political oversight, and can result in marginalizing the political expertise hitherto built up within the Secretariat. It also carries the risk that the demands of managing large operations, often in crisis situations, result in an insufficient focus on political strategy, as well as disconnect from the UN's wider diplomatic engagements in the region and beyond.

Much attention is currently focused on when the peacekeeping stage can end, and what follows. The fact that this may imply a transfer of lead department responsibility can distort the objective analysis of what is required. It is likely — and desirable — that the requirements shift away from the international security presence, while longer-term security sector, rule of law and other peacebuilding efforts should be sustained. A desire to end a peacekeeping presence can give rise to premature disengagement from such long-term tasks; conversely, a recognized need for the continuation of civilian activities carried out within a peacekeeping mission can unnecessarily prolong the retention of a military component.
A political lead and the continued integration of peacebuilding and development activities are likely to remain desirable beyond the presence of international security forces: the integrated peacebuilding mission in Sierra Leone demonstrates the value of this approach. The lesson most commonly drawn from the 2006 crisis in independent Timor-Leste, which exploded as a UN transition from a peacekeeping mission to a follow-on integrated office was about to take place, is the wrong one: the failure to foresee and attempt to avert the crisis was the consequence of inadequate political engagement, rather than of premature withdrawal of the military presence. The transition through different stages of the UN peace operation in Burundi has been bedeviled by arguments around the timing of the transfer of departmental responsibility which appear to have had little or nothing to do with the actual nature of the mission.

UN “peacekeeping” missions have come to include not only missions with civilian functions greatly exceeding their peacekeeping functions, but also missions where the peacekeeping function is carried out by another international actor or has come to an end. The peacekeeping framework was ill-equipped to plan and manage transitional administrations with full governmental responsibilities in Kosovo and East Timor. This year’s disaster in Haiti requires international security functions in the short-term, but the future UN role is not appropriately conceptualized and planned as a peacekeeping mission.

The different funding procedures for “peacekeeping operations” and “special political missions” create a distinction that does not correspond to country requirements. What constitutes a big special political mission, as in Nepal, would be a relatively small peacekeeping operation. It makes no sense to fund such missions out of the regular budget. As long ago as 1995, in the Supplement to an Agenda for Peace, Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali drew attention to the need to establish agreed procedures for the financing of “a class of field missions which are neither peacekeeping operations nor the kind of recurrent activity which is normally funded by the regular budget.”

When it comes to mandating and accountability arrangements for peace and security operations, the Security Council is the appropriate body to have oversight of those which require the deployment of international security forces. It is questionable, however, whether it is the appropriate body to have oversight of transitional administrations, reconstruction and state-building, or broader peacebuilding. Its relationship in this respect to the Peacebuilding Commission and the effectiveness of the latter are yet to be fully determined.

**THE NEXT UN REFORM**

The time has come for a fundamental review and modification of UN departmental structures, funding mechanisms and mandating and accountability arrangements, with the objective of creating a system able to ensure that field operations are designed, modified, funded and managed according to the mix of political, peacekeeping and peacebuilding functions required by each country context and its evolution.

The fundamental requirement for this to be achieved is the merger of the two departments currently responsible for running peacekeeping and political missions, namely DPKO and DPA. A single peace and security department should be charged with the political oversight and direction, as well as the operational management, of all peace operations deployed by the UN, regardless of whether they include uniformed personnel. The Peacebuilding Support Office should become part of the merged department, and specialized units such as the Mediation Support Unit, the Electoral Assistance Department and the Office for Rule of Law and Security Institutions should deliver their technical expertise to all peace operations on the same terms.

The establishment of the Department of Field Support (DFS) has been an important step towards recognizing that there are equal needs for support to field operations of diverse kinds, irrespective of current departmental management. The DFS Global Support Strategy, endorsed in July 2010 by Member States, offers a platform for more efficient and faster support for all peace operations, regardless of their size or designation. Member States should accept that all peace operations ought to be funded outside the regular budget of the Organization, as they are not intended to be recurrent expenses. Member States also need to consider what would be the most effective mechanisms for the Security
Thematic Essays
welcomed within the Secretariat or among Member States. But they would be real reforms, which would offer the prospect of UN peace operations better designed to meet the diverse challenges of peace-making, peacekeeping and peacebuilding that the international community is confronting today.

Council, the Peacebuilding Commission, and all those contributing funding and personnel, to provide support and maintain scrutiny of all peace operations, without undue duplication. These would not be easy reforms, and it would be foolish to think that they would be universally

Notes

1 Ian Martin was Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Nepal and head of UNMIN, February 2007-February 2009, and previously served in Nepal as Representative of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (May 2005-August 2006) and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General for support to Nepal’s peace process (August 2006-February 2007).

