THE NEW HORIZON INITIATIVE
UNITED NATIONS PEACEKEEPING FOR THE 21ST CENTURY.

UNITED NATIONS PEACEKEEPING HAS EVOLVED SIGNIFICANTLY AS A TOOL OF INTERNATIONAL CRISIS RESPONSE SINCE FIRST INTRODUCED IN 1948. HERE RICHARD GOWAN, A LEAD AUTHOR OF THE CENTRE OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION’S “BUILDING ON BRAHIMI” THINK-PIECE, TALKS IN AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW TO SIGNAL ABOUT THE NEW HORIZON INITIATIVE AND THE FUTURE DIRECTION OF UN PEACEKEEPING.

PEACEKEEPING REFORM PROGRAMMES
Initially Peacekeeping was used as a means of maintaining ceasefires and stabilising situations on the ground, providing the breathing space for the political resolution of the conflict by peaceful means. The early missions consisted of lightly armed forces or, in some case, unarmed military observers with simple monitoring, reporting and confidence-building roles. ONUC (the UN Operation in the Congo, July 1960 – June 1964), was the first large-scale peacekeeping mission, with a military strength of about 20,000 at its peak. Its mandate was also expanded from the monitoring/reporting format to include maintaining the territorial integrity and political independence of the Congo, preventing the occurrence of civil war and securing the removal of all mercenaries and all foreign military, paramilitary and advisory personnel not under the United Nations Command.

The end of the Cold War dramatically changed the strategic context in which the UN functions. Peacekeeping started to shift from the traditional missions of monitoring and reporting to much more complex multidimensional peacebuilding undertakings. With the new world consensus, the UN were no longer satisfied with just the cessation of violence and now sought to facilitate the implementation of comprehensive peace agreements and assist in laying the foundations for sustainable peace. As the nature of conflicts changed over the years so did the UN response. UN Peacekeeping, originally developed as a means of dealing with inter-State conflict, was increasingly being applied to intra-State conflicts and civil wars. Although the military inputs remained the essential spine of most peacekeeping operations, the medium to long term peacebuilding aspect came to the fore and with it many new actors were deployed.

There was a rapid increase in the number of peacekeeping operations after the Cold War ended, the United Nations authorised 20 new missions between 1989 and 1994, increasing the numbers of peacekeepers seven-fold. In the new world
order, expectations of UN Peacekeeping increased beyond the capacity to deliver. A combination of a lack of vision, weak mandates from the Security Council and the unwillingness of some troop contributing countries to place their troops in danger resulted in the disasters in the Former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Somalia. These Missions were established when the guns were still firing and where there was no peace to keep. The criticism that followed these failures damaged the reputation of UN Peacekeeping and forced the International Community to rethink the purpose and methodology of International UN sponsored peacekeeping. When looking at these events one must remember that these failures by the International Community resulted in tens of thousands of innocent civilian fatalities.

Shaken by the failures of the 1990s and with a surge in demand for peacekeeping missions, the UN commenced a review of its peacekeeping policies and operations. In 2000 the Secretary General appointed ‘The Panel On United Nations Peace Operations’ to assess the shortcomings of the existing
International consensus in favour of UN peacekeeping was shaped by crises in the Congo, Sudan and elsewhere – the basic drivers for UN operations. It was an effort to impose some order on the discussions, which weren’t very well-coordinated, and the New Horizon Initiative was one of the lead authors of this comprehensive report can you elaborate on the key factors that initiated this latest review of peacekeeping?

There was a sense of panic about the state of peacekeeping at the United Nations in early 2009. In 2008, UN troops had performed very poorly in the face of a rebel offensive in the Democratic Republic of Congo which drove 200,000 civilians to flight. At the same time, the outgoing Bush administration was pushing the UN to take on peacekeeping responsibilities in the Congo and Côte d’Ivoire – where it’s still ongoing. There are cases – such as Sierra Leone – where it’s still too early to give the UN a final grade, but the situation would be far worse if peacekeepers hadn’t been deployed.

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While this CIC piece had some real progress developing that agenda early on: the Security Council improved its mechanisms for communicating with troop contributors, for example. But it’s been hard to make more radical reforms to peacekeeping because of continuing financial pressures and unresolved tensions between the main Western and non-Western powers over who should decide UN policies in an era of global change.

The New Partnership Agenda non-paper of July 2009 says that the 2000 Lakhdar Brahimi report ‘helped make peacekeeping stronger, more effective and comparatively cost efficient.’ Do you think that peacekeeping operations subsequent to the Brahimi report can really be considered a success?

“‘For all the problems with peacekeeping, I still think that the UN has done a remarkable job sustaining multiple operations in some pretty tough places since 2000. You can point to success stories like Liberia and Sierra Leone. There are cases – such as the Congo and Côte d’Ivoire – where it’s still too early to give the UN a final grade, but the situation would be far worse if peacekeepers hadn’t been deployed. There have been disappointments too. I don’t think anyone would argue that the joint UN-African Union force in Darfur has met the very high expectations placed on it. More generally, there’s a sense of unease about how long some UN operations have gone on for (over a decade in Congo) without any credible exit strategies emerging.’”

THE NEW HORIZON INITIATIVE

In 2009, continuing the reform process, the New Horizon Initiative was jointly launched by the Department Of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) and the Department Of Field Support (DFS). As part of this initiative, DPKO and DFS commissioned an external think-piece by the Centre of International Cooperation (CIC) – “Building on Brahimi: Peacekeeping in an era of Strategic Uncertainty” – to help stimulate discussion on the challenges and opportunities for UN Peacekeeping. While this CIC piece is an independent, external contribution to the process, it formed the basis of the New Partnership Agenda, a non-paper prepared by the DPKO and DFS. This New Partnership Agenda, in turn, influenced the Secretary General’s Report to the General Assembly in December 2009. In October 2010 the DPKO and the DFS submitted “The New Horizon Initiative: Progress Report No 1” to the Secretary General continuing the reform process.1

THE RICHARD GOWAN INTERVIEW

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Recently a senior UN military commander stated "it is contended that UN Peacekeeping, as a means of facilitating the maintenance of international peace and security as enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, in on 'life support.' The 'condition of the patient' has not improved in many recent deployments." Would it be fair to say that the peacekeeping framework that currently exists is in a crisis situation?  

"In 2008, just before the events in Congo grabbed the headlines, I wrote a piece arguing that peacekeeping was already in crisis. My main argument was pretty similar to that we then set out in our report to DPKO for the New Horizon project: the political consensus on the importance of peacekeeping was starting to disintegrate. A lot of people thought that I was being too pessimistic. Now there are more pessimists!

By contrast, I've consistently been surprised by the UN's ability to keep operations going in spite of multiple political and military set-backs. In many cases, UN missions struggle to provide minimal stability and security. But there have been recent cases – like Haiti in the wake of the 2010 earthquake or Côte d'Ivoire during the post-electoral violence in early 2011 – in which peacekeeping forces have managed to hold the line in periods of intense crisis. In the Ivorian case in particular the situation came very close to total collapse, but the UN finally pulled itself together and fought back. I know that "holding the line" may not sound very ambitious, but cases like this have convinced me that UN peacekeeping is a more effective security tool than it seems."

Since DPKO published its initial New Horizon report, it has been working on issues such as identifying major capability gaps and clarifying mechanisms for protecting civilians. How do you see these implementation processes evolving?  

"In terms of policy development, DPKO and DFS have been very busy over the last few years. DPKO has been pursuing the New Horizon agenda while DFS has developed a Global Field Support Strategy aimed at supporting missions better. Ban Ki-moon also initiated a major study of the UN's ability to recruit and deploy qualified civilian staff to fragile states. So there's been a lot of intellectual activity!

Translating all this activity into results has been more problematic, not least because of current resource constraints.

DPKO did a good job developing a "gaps list" of military assets that are missing from its operations for example, but it remains notoriously difficult to get member states to provide all the helicopters the UN needs. India has actually reduced the number of helicopters that it deploys in UN operations. There's a certain degree of frustration within DPKO that governments haven't responded more generously to its efforts. A particularly sensitive case is the US. The New Horizon project was launched just as the Obama administration was coming into office, and Obama's team signalled that they wanted to do more to help UN operations. DPKO officials even hoped that they might get some drones from the Pentagon. In reality, the US military commitment in Afghanistan – and, until this year, Iraq – has meant that the Americans haven't been able to offer that much help. Overall, I think that DPKO has a much clearer picture of its own weaknesses and requirements than it did at the start of 2009, but it still isn't sure how to resolve them."

Ten years ago on the publication of the Brahimi Report there were approximately 27,000 peacekeepers deployed; now there are over 116,000 deployed in 15 missions. In the current global economic climate and where military deployments are a major cost item for individual countries is this commitment to peacekeeping sustainable?  

"The main problem that the UN faces is not quantitative but qualitative. If making peacekeeping work was just a matter of keeping 100,000 personnel in the field, I think that the organisation could manage it indefinitely. There are still quite a few countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan that are ready to supply troops in quantities. The problem is that a lot of these troops are poorly equipped and under-motivated. In some cases UN contingents lack even quite basic communications equipment. Then there are shortages of specialist units and assets: while the "helicopter gap" is the best known example, there are also problems around engineers, field hospitals and so on."

Above: African Union troops in Darfur.
Right now, a lot of UN units lack the mobility, kit and firepower to make a significant impact. That’s a particular problem in Darfur, where there is an unusually high percentage of poorly-equipped African units deployed. Please don’t misunderstand me here: many of the troops are courageous and conscientious soldiers. But without the necessary resources to tackle a tough environment like Darfur, they will struggle.

DPKO officials would love to see more European units deploy within UN missions to help off-set these problems. They note that a lot of NATO troops are coming home from Afghanistan who could redeploy to Africa in blue helmets. It’s a nice idea, and Ireland has been actively arguing in Brussels for greater EU support to UN missions. The Nordic countries are interested too. But I don’t see large numbers of British or German troops going under UN command – there’s no real political impetus for it, and there are real questions about UN command systems and medical systems too.

Turning to the economic dimension, there’s certainly a push for greater austerity in peacekeeping. That’s mainly being driven by European powers, who pay 40% of the UN budget and are obviously struggling with the implications of the Eurozone crisis. This autumn there was a nasty debate between the U.S. and Europeans over the size of the UN force in Liberia, which Britain and France wanted to cut for cost reasons.

Debates like these make life unpredictable for DPKO. But I also think that there is a window of opportunity for DPKO – and Ban Ki-moon even more so – to argue that the financial crisis requires a strategic rethink of international crisis management. In the past, the UN has avoided doing really rigorous cost-benefit analyses of its operations, mainly for political reasons. But it now needs to do a much better job of showing where it is providing value for money. If it could provide that evidence, it would also be easier for it to pitch for greater commitments from Western militaries.”

Beyond peacekeeping, how has the UN addressed other mechanisms of conflict prevention and peacebuilding in recent years?

“It’s important to view the New Horizon project in the context of broader efforts to overhaul the UN’s conflict management toolkit, which reach beyond DPKO and DFS. It’s arguable that Ban Ki-moon – who was initially quite sceptical towards peacekeeping – has actually made greatest progress in improving the
still questions over how it relates to the UN Development Programme. Debates like this take up far too much of the UN’s time and energies.”

Where do you see the New Horizon Initiative in the short to medium term – say in 2014?

“There are three scenarios for UN peacekeeping in the medium term: (i) stagnation, (ii) slimming down and (iii) stepping up a gear.

In the “stagnation” scenario, the UN will continue with business as usual, deploying large-scale but relatively low-quality missions to stabilise fragile states, mostly in Africa. If this is the case I’d expect some big contributors to UN operations, most notably India, to disengage over time. That would mean that the burden of UN operations would fall ever more heavily on poorer and less militarily-capable states.

In the “slimming down” scenario, financial pressures will compel the UN to rely more heavily on light-weight political missions and reduce its peacekeeping footprint. I fear that budgetary issues will crowd out strategic concerns, and there won’t be a serious discussion of whether peacekeeping is or is not the right response to a crisis.

In the “stepping up” scenario, Western and non-Western governments would finally grapple with the problems identified in the New Horizon process and look for ways to make UN missions sharper, tougher and more effective. That might involve more Western units coming under UN command, but it could also mean militarily-effective non-Western countries like China and Brazil expanding their commitments to the UN.

If I had to bet on the future, I’d say that there’s a 40% chance of stagnation; 40% of slimming down and 20% of stepping up a gear. But we shouldn’t be entirely pessimistic. There are signs that the Brazilians, for example, see playing an expanding role in UN operations as a way to show that they are a responsible power.

To be honest, policy processes like the New Horizon Initiative play only a marginal role in affecting big powers’ decision-making on future military commitments. That said, I think that a lot of the work that has been done by DPKO and DFS in recent years shows that the UN Secretariat deserves the trust of the major troop contributors. Over the next few years, DPKO officials and Ban Ki-moon will have to lobby hard in major capitals (especially places like Beijing and Brasilia) to ensure that peacekeeping doesn’t drift into stagnation by default. That will be hard work, and may be overtaken by new crises that demand UN engagement. In the end it is real (and unforeseen) crises rather than policy debates that define what the UN has to do.”

Richard Gowan is the associate director for policy at the Centre on International Cooperation at New York University. He is also the UN policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations. He has previously worked at the Foreign Policy Centre in London and with the OSCE Mission to Croatia, and worked as a consultant for the UK Department for International Development and the UN’s Department of Political Affairs.