

Defending Peacekeeping Mandates: the Use of Force

Background Paper for the March 3rd, 2011 Event for the Thematic Series “Building More Effective UN Peace Operations”

Since the failure of UN peacekeeping to prevent the tragedies in Bosnia and Rwanda during the 1990s, the Security Council has steadily demonstrated an increased willingness to authorize peacekeeping missions to use force under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter.

The response to crises in Sierra Leone, East Timor, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Haiti during 2000-2005 were characterized by peacekeeping missions that were increasingly mandated to use force to protect both themselves and civilians, to implement peace agreements, and, where state capability and legitimacy were deteriorating, to safeguard governments and extend state authority.

Today, the ability of peacekeepers to use tactical force to defend their mandate is largely accepted. Yet, as recent events in Côte d’Ivoire, Darfur, and the DRC underscore, the effective wielding of force continues to be challenged by a lack of consensus over its conceptual limits, its operational requirements, and its strategic risks.

The emphasis in recent mandates on protection of civilians (PoC) implies a moral obligation for peacekeepers on-the-ground to do what they can to prevent and halt violence against non-combatants, and of the need for UN Member States to ensure that missions have adequate capabilities and resources to act. Moreover, PoC mandates increase expectations of protection even when peacekeeping forces are drastically below the levels to protect populations. Far too often, as mass rapes in the DRC illustrate, missions are inadequately resourced and sized to prevent such atrocities to the detriment of civilian lives and UN legitimacy.

The use of force should be viewed as one tool to accomplish the political aims of the mission – to demonstrate the resolve of the international community in the face of spoilers. Consequently, the ability to use force to change the course of action on the ground and to ensure the physical protection of civilians should not be overestimated, particularly since most UN missions lack the necessary capacities to do so. Effective projection of force by a peacekeeping mission requires a consensus among the international community on how tactical force is best utilized and what situations it is best suited to address. Member States must also acknowledge that the use of force causes operational constraints on the ground and carries strategic implications for the missions themselves and the UN as a whole.

Conceptual Limits

Identifying what peacekeeping can reasonably be expected to achieve in post-conflict settings is a starting point to addressing when and how force should be used to accomplish discrete mission goals. Peacekeepers can protect inchoate political processes, extend government authority, and thwart spoilers without risk of becoming a full-fledged counter-insurgency operation. Selective use of force in these situations is largely uncontroversial. However, dilemmas arise in contested political environments, as Côte d’Ivoire shows, or in complex, unresolved, and ongoing conflicts, as in DRC. In these theaters, selective uses of force and robust postures have given rise to a host of political and operational dilemmas, not least of which are accusations of taking sides in a conflict and war-fighting.

To overcome these challenges more political consensus is needed in order to provide clear guidance for mission leadership on the use of force. Divisions among the Security Council, TCCs, and force

commanders, inhibit alignment behind a common strategy. By tasking peacekeepers to do more in ever-challenging and riskier environments, a solid political backing and sustained international engagement is required.

Operational Requirements

In addition to an increase in troop deployments, effective conduct of the use of force requires better intelligence, quick reaction capabilities, and force enablers, such as helicopters. However, the UN's ability to effectively increase missions' capacities is impacted by the prevailing economic environment and military overstretch both of which have caused governments to cut their defense budgets and UN contributions.

Another impediment to operationalizing mission-wide preparedness for robust action is the lack of collective engagement in UN peacekeeping efforts. Given the heavy involvement of a limited set of troop contributors in current operations, it is unreasonable to expect the same countries to shoulder the burden of increased risks required when using force.

Strategic Risks

If the use of force is to be recognized as a collective signal sent by the international community, Member States have to convey this message by showing their universal commitment to the mission. The absence of Western forces in many UN military deployments undermines and weakens the message of universal support necessary for the success of such operations.

Because of the fluid environment in which the use of force may be utilized, decisions made at UN headquarters and the field have immediate strategic implications. In order to react to fast changing situations, force commanders should have the authority to make decisions on when to use force. At the same time, to uphold its legitimate and strategic control over missions, members of the Security Council should be closely involved in these decisions as well (though not on a tactical level). The strategic guidance provided to field missions by the UN Secretariat, meanwhile, should be strengthened.

Under certain circumstances, where the strategic risks are especially high, command and control arrangements for robust operations may warrant greater control and guidance from both the Security Council and the Secretariat, while upholding flexibility and operational decentralization to allow mission leadership to react to arising situations quickly. Striking the appropriate balance between the Secretariat, the Council and Mission leadership is difficult, requiring negotiation and flexibility.

Conclusion

Peacekeeping has evolved from its original principles of impartiality, consent and the minimum use of force to more robust rules of engagement. This evolution has not come without its challenges. While the initial principles governing peacekeeping remain as core principles today, there is a lack of a common understanding how and where the use of force fits with these principles. A common vision for the use of force is necessary to address the operational and strategic implications that come with more robust operations. In addition, the use of force has to be embedded in a viable political strategy in order to be utilized effectively.

The Security Council's decision to authorize the UN Mission in Côte d'Ivoire's troops to use force to protect its staff, civilians and key political actors shows confidence in the ability of robust peacekeeping to ensure stability in deteriorating contexts. However, the impact of additional troops and more robust rules of engagement on a broader political resolution to the post-election impasse remains uncertain. Indeed, the

situation in Cote d'Ivoire highlights the limits of the use of force as much as it demonstrates its increasing relevance.