



Peacekeeping Overstretch: Symptoms, Causes, and Consequences

Background Paper for the Thematic Series “Building More Effective UN Peace Operations”

United Nations peace operations face an extended and dangerous period of strategic uncertainty. A series of setbacks have coincided with military overstretch and the financial crisis, raising the risk that UN peacekeeping may contract, despite high continuing needs.

An excessive contraction in peacekeeping would have serious consequences for international peace and stability. UN peacekeeping has proved to be a versatile tool for deterring or reversing inter-state conflict, ending civil wars, mitigating humanitarian crises, and extending state authority in areas where state capacity is weak or contested. Not all operations succeed, or succeed in full. But collectively, according to rigorous research, international mediation and peacekeeping have contributed to an 80% decline in total armed conflict since the early 1990s. Although this has not been the work of the UN alone – individual member states, regional organizations and non-governmental actors have played vital roles – the UN has been an indispensable contributor.

Research also suggests that demand for peacekeeping – and specifically for UN peacekeeping – will rise, not fall, in the coming years. To overcome current strains and meet future challenges, both individual operations and the peacekeeping system as a whole require continued political, military and financial commitment by states and institutions.

The good news is that although there are divergent perceptions of the nature and scale of current difficulties, a broad majority of UN member states share a sense of the importance of making peace-keeping work – and work better.

This paper takes as its starting point the notion that a shared diagnosis of the problem is the prerequisite of shared solutions. To this end, it is necessary to distinguish between the observable *symptoms* of peacekeeping’s current malaise – various forms of overstretch – and its *causes*. This paper argues that the increasingly familiar symptoms of overstretch – strains on troop contributors, rising financial costs, headquarters strains – are consequences of two sets of underlying challenges, operational and political. Strains are also caused by incomplete (or reversed) reforms – again, both operational (the Secretariat) and political (UNSC).

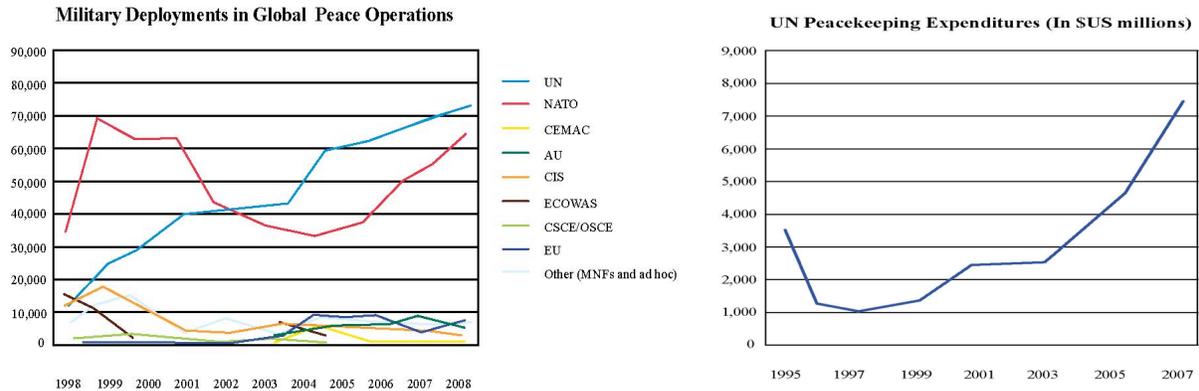
Shared diagnosis and shared solutions are critical, because peacekeeping is a shared responsibility – the Security Council, the General Assembly, and the PBC all have roles to play. Troop and financial contributors, both in and outside of the Security Council, are essential actors. The Secretariat and member states both have vital responsibilities. Restoring confidence, improving performance and enhancing the capacity of UN peacekeeping will take renewed effort by all concerned actors. If unity of effort is a

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critical determinant of success on the ground, unity of purpose at headquarters is an essential pre-condition.

Symptoms of Overstretch

The overall number of UN peacekeeping personnel in the field has grown nearly ten fold over the last seven years. The result is an overstretched system. The principal symptoms of peacekeeping overstretch are three: strain on troop contributors; rapidly rising financial costs; and diffused attention at headquarters, by both the Secretariat and the Security Council.

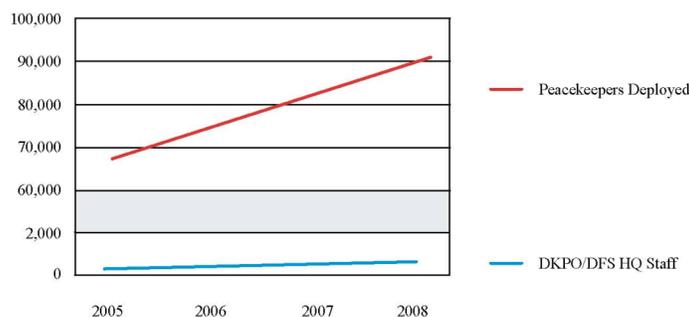


Troop contributor overstretch. There are over 82,000 military personnel and some 10,300 police currently serving in 18 UN missions worldwide. Deployments of UN peacekeepers slowed significantly in 2008, as it became increasingly difficult to find and deploy personnel for new missions. Traditional large-scale contributors face new constraints on their ability to deploy into UN missions. Even where UN peacekeeping operations have sufficient levels of infantry to meet deployment requirements, it faces a shortage of force enablers, like airlift and field hospitals, and of force multipliers, including helicopters and armored personnel carriers. Without this equipment, UN troops can neither rapidly respond to protect civilians in vast territories like Darfur and Congo, nor adequately protect themselves from attack, resulting in caveats on what operations troop contributors are willing to undertake.

Headquarters Overstretch. The United Nations is the biggest institutional provider of peacekeepers worldwide, accounting for some 50 percent of global deployments. It manages those peacekeepers with a fraction of the headquarters resources employed by member states or better resourced organizations like NATO. Despite increases in staffing to both the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the Department of Field Support, to the ratio of headquarters staff to field personnel is nearly 1:100. By comparison, NATO has a ratio of 1:18, or 4000 headquarters staff to over 74,000 troops. This matters, because it reduces the options available to DPKO for more sustained headquarters engagement in command and control. Although the UN's decentralized command and control arrangement has served it well in many instances, it does have limitations: in its ability to sustain political support for high-risk operations; and in its ability to manage regional dynamics. These are likely to be growing, not receding, challenges for future UN operations.

Strain on mission oversight is not limited to the Secretariat. The crisis in eastern DRC generated tensions among the Security Council, troop contributors, and the Secretariat over timely and adequate reporting. But political attention in the Security Council was also strained. Whereas in the past, the Security Council has had to oversee a handful of peacekeeping operations, only a small number of them in complex or risky environments, now the Security Council has to oversee 18 peacekeeping operations, many of them in highly complex environments, as well as several political missions – to say nothing of managing critical strategic files on its agenda that demand sustained political attention.

Growth of UN Peacekeeping Deployments and Headquarters Staff: 2005-2008



Financial Overstretch. The budget for UN peacekeeping reached a record US\$7.3 billion in 2008-2009, a ten percent increase over the previous year and a five-fold increase in just under a decade. This figure significantly understates the financial strain, however, as at the same time, many of the UN’s largest donors have experienced rapidly rising costs for their participation in UN-mandated NATO and European Union missions, as well as their voluntary contributions for African Union operations. Globally, the net budget for peace operations likely exceeds US\$30 billion.

The impact of the financial crisis will exacerbate these strains, as member states look to reduce national budgets. Their ability and willingness to underwrite UN costs will be measured against competing priorities. There may be several impacts.

First, although UN operations continue to be relatively cheap, member states are likely to question the expense of long-running missions, creating pressure to draw them down. In some cases, the timing may be right; elsewhere, premature downsizing or withdrawal can have disastrous effects, as seen in Timor-Leste in 2006.

Second, as the cost of the military component of peacekeeping missions is relatively fixed (reimbursement scales for troops, police, equipment, prices for fuel and rations), cuts may be made to more “flexible” aspects of budgets, like civilians – but these have significant impacts on performance.

Third, reductions in assessments and voluntary funds risk undermining efforts to secure more predictable, sustainable, and flexible financing for strengthening the capacity of regional organizations, above all the African Union. As the willingness of countries outside the continent to field troops for African missions has declined, African countries have themselves shouldered the burden – including in the most insecure

environments, like Somalia and Darfur. Mounting these missions places a greater strain in terms of financing and capabilities on the AU relative to other organizations.

Causes of Overstretch

If there is increasing awareness of the symptoms of overstretch, there is as yet inadequate shared understanding of its causes. Some of these cases are operational – UN peacekeepers are deploying in large and logistically constrained environments; and they are doing so for longer, in part because of lags in early recovery.

Scale: big missions in big places. Successfully implementing mission mandates is complicated by the nature of the environments into which they deploy. High levels of troops are unable to compensate for the size and logistical difficulty of the environments in DRC, Sudan, and Chad in which they are deployed. There are frequent references to the ‘large’ mission the UN has deployed in the DR Congo – now has nearly 17,000 troops. But by comparison, the UN had 17,500 troops deployed in Sierra Leone with a similar mandate in 1999. And whereas in Sierra Leone that translated into a troop-land ratio of 1:1.6, (one soldier for every 1.6 square kilometres of territory), in DRC the equivalent ratio was 1:48. Even taking into account that fact that MONUC concentrates its presence in the east of the country, the difference in density is still striking.

The lack of infrastructure exacerbates the problem of scale. Implementing complex mandates in such environments often leads to an excessive dispersion of forces, reducing the chances of effective responses to military challenges. This is a constant risk in large theaters; one that the UN cannot remedy without greater agility and mobility brought by equipment like helicopters. (At the same time, sophisticated capabilities are not a panacea, as NATO difficulties in Afghanistan demonstrates.)

Exit Strategies: Transitioning to peacebuilding and development. A viable political framework and security presence are preconditions for the resumption of economic recovery and other development activities. These, in turn, are vital to creating sustainable peace and therefore to the eventual drawdown of UN peacekeepers. The ability of the international community to organize around early support to economic recovery, livelihoods, and essential services, as well as core state-building tasks has proven a significant challenge. The Peacebuilding Commission has begun to address some of these problems – but so far only in late recovery contexts.

Gaps in strategy, financing and capacity weaken international efforts to support early economic, social and political recovery from conflict. Consequently, early efforts to build a functioning government and to jump-start economic activity are often not launched. As a result, local confidence in the political process and in international commitment is not maintained. All this contributes to poor outcomes. International actors have been compelled to stay longer than expected, as in Bosnia, their recovery efforts have faltered, as in Afghanistan, or both, as in Timor-Leste.

The forthcoming SG report on early recovery is intended to address these gaps. Also warranted is a hard look at the success to date of the integrated mission model used by the UN to link its political/security and developmental/humanitarian efforts. While this model has at times and in places served as an effective building block for broader integration of strategy, it has not done so reliably or in an adequately inclusive manner.

Political Process Failures. Scale, duration, strain – all of these matter. But in the end, the performance of peacekeeping has to be judged in the context of wider political engagement. As the Brahimi report emphatically established, peacekeeping cannot substitute for an effective political process.¹

In recent years, though, it has been tasked to do so. During 2008, political processes in central Africa, Lebanon, Sudan, Chad, and Haiti suffered collapse or failure, placing peacekeeping operations in these theatres under severe strain. Credible political process and credible military presence should reinforce one another. But these cases demonstrate that the obverse is also true: a large deployment of UN peacekeepers is alone an insufficient guarantee of generating or maintaining a credible political process.

Political issues not only underpin peacekeeping, but are key to determining the overarching strategy for – and most appropriate form of – UN engagement. Peacekeeping may not always be the best response from the Security Council. In the absence of viable political frameworks, UN peacekeeping missions have been deployed with high expectations, but without real chances of success.

The Security Council has paid insufficient attention to the political dimensions of prevention and to stabilization. Earlier, more robust political engagement by the Security Council, or on its behalf, might prevent tensions from escalating into full-blown crises warranting more robust engagement and investment. Similarly, more sustained engagement once a crisis has reached the Council's agenda would help ensure that settlements are not derailed by local political disputes, or regional complications.

Limited Consent. A more tricky question is that of consent. The Brahimi report made clear while consent was a bedrock principle of UN peacekeeping, it would not always be present in full. UN peacekeeping operations – sometimes with support from other actors – have shown that they can overcome limited consent from non-state actors, including through robust operations (Haiti, Sierra Leone, eastern DRC in 2006.) Indeed, these missions have performed an under-examined but critical function – that of *extending state authority*, both through civilian and military means. This is a tough challenge, though, and one that most UN operations are neither mandated nor equipped to handle.

Far, far more complicated is the question of non-consent, or limited consent from the state. Where peacekeeping operations have been deployed without strong consent of the state, their ability to make a positive impact on the ground has been sharply constrained. Such operations may perform roles in helping to mitigate the humanitarian consequences of conflict – but even this function can be frustrated.

The distinction between state and non-state consent is important because, some recent debates notwithstanding, the majority of large-scale UN operations are deliberately designed to extend rather than limit the authority of states. Put differently: the Security Council is normally in the business of *strengthening* governments rather than changing regimes. This fact, often overlooked, is essential to explaining some recent successes and failures of peacekeeping – and may help guide future deployments.

¹ “Political process” has a variety of meanings: it may include ongoing contacts between parties to a peace agreement; a democratic process involving elections or the approval of a constitution; or regional and international contacts on the status of a contested territory.

Incomplete Reforms. To say that UN peacekeeping is facing logistical/management strains as a function of operational overstretch, and that it is facing political/conceptual strains as a function of a mismatch between peacekeeping per se and the underlying political processes it is designed to support, is simply to say that the process of implementing the Brahimi reforms has stalled, or even reversed. Significant elements of the Brahimi agenda were adopted by member states and the Secretariat between 2000 and 2005, but reform slowed after the start of the Iraq war.

In the Secretariat, efforts to enhance personnel quality, logistics, and command and control all suffered. More recent reform efforts, like the establishment of the Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions (OROLSI) and expansion of the Office of Military Affairs, both in DPKO, have yielded cautious optimism. But much work remains to be done in such areas as command and control, rapid deployment, civilian deployment, procurement, and human resources.

The problems are compounded by the perception that the Security Council has also forgotten to observe the “rules” of Brahimi: the need to match politics to peacekeeping, and resources to mandates. Moreover, as the Security Council has authorized of missions where the political framework is absent or weak, where consent is in question, and risks are therefore high, it has not commensurately expanded its consultation with non-Council troop contributors and financial contributors – i.e. with other risk takers. The gap between decision-making and risk-taking has widened, eroding the sense of shared responsibility, and shared commitment.

Conclusion

Shared commitment to UN peacekeeping is important because an assessment of future conflict trends suggests rising not falling demand, and increased not decreased complexity. New operations will likely face opposition from hardened and sophisticated ‘spoilers’, sometimes with international backers, and be called upon to play a primary or supporting role in extending the authority of weak or contested governments. Capacity and political factors ensure that much of the upcoming demand will land on the shoulders of the UN.

The challenge ahead, then, is both to manage current strains but also to do so in a way that helps to jump-start necessary and stalled reforms – both operational and political. This paper, and the seminar into which it is designed to feed, aim to contribute to that by providing research and information that can – hopefully – help forge a shared diagnosis of the problem. (The next two seminars and accompanying research papers will delve more deeply into two critical issues touched on but not elaborated here: matching political strategy to peacekeeping operations; and partnership with regional organizations, including on the question of financing.) As argued at the outset, shared analysis is a prerequisite for shared responsibility; and shared responsibility is the *sine qua non* for more effective, more efficient and more equitable action by UN peacekeeping.