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How UN Peacekeeping Operations Can Adapt to a New Multipolar World Order

We are experiencing a momentous phase-shift with potentially significant implications for UN peacekeeping. The unipolar era is waning in the face of a significant increase in the economic and political influence of countries like China and India in the global system. It is still uncertain what may follow the unipolar era, but there are signs that the next stage will be a new multipolar era, in which several states – the United States, China, Germany, India, and Russia, to name a few – each have access to networks and forms of power sufficient to prevent any of the others from unilaterally dominating the global order. Another emerging characteristic of this transition is that several international and regional organizations, numerous large companies, and some non-governmental agencies, can exert significant influence on the global system on selected issues where they have a substantial capacity or competency.

What implications will these changes at the global systems level have for UN peacekeeping operations? I will highlight three themes – strategic political coherence, the employment of force, and the outer limits of peace operations – that may suggest how UN peacekeeping are likely to adapt to a new multipolar world order.

Strategic Political Coherence

Strategic political coherence relates to the UN High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations' (HIPPO) emphasis on the primacy of politics, that is the recognition that peace operations should always serve a political purpose, and that there is rarely a sustainable solution that does not boil down ultimately to a negotiated political agreement. However, strategic coherence also refers to the new reality that the UN, and UN peacekeeping operations, will rarely, if ever, operate on its own in the future. In every theatre it will operate alongside other international, regional and in some cases bilateral actors, each with its own mandate, responsibility, and comparative advantages. The HIPPO framed it as a new era of networked peace operations. The UN system, and UN peacekeeping, will need to adapt to this new reality and develop the capacity to continue to play a key role, which may often include a convening role, in a network of national and international efforts.

In this new era of networked peace operations, several international actors, including the World Bank and other regional development banks, multilateral

donors, bilateral powers and donors, and regional organizations each play an important role alongside national and local actors. It is the combined and cumulative role of all of these national and international actors together that constitute the larger political project. UN regional offices, special political missions and peacekeeping operations need to understand their role in this larger political project, and they need to have the capacity to support the effort necessary to coordinate, track and take stock of this larger political project. The complexity of maintaining overall strategic political coherence among such a large and diverse group of self-governing actors should not be underestimated. Nor can it be avoided as it seems to be the organizing feature of global governance in the twenty-first century. The performance of UN peacekeeping operations will in the future not be judged only on the ability of the mission to carry out its own civilian, police, and military tasks. Nor will it be enough to be integrated with the rest of the UN system. In this new era of networked peace operations, effectiveness will also depend on the degree to which a UN peacekeeping operation contributes to the strategic political coherence of the larger national and international effort to sustain the peace in a given country or region.

Employment of Force

The employment of force will remain one of the key defining challenges of UN peacekeeping. How force is employed in UN peacekeeping operations is one of the key features that distinguishes it from African Union, European Union and NATO peace support operations. The principled approach to the use of force in UN peacekeeping operations has been one of its most resilient features. Whenever the UN has deviated from this norm, for instance in the 1960s in the Congo, or more recently in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Mali, the norm seems to be validated and reinforced. At the end of the twentieth century, most United Nations (UN) peacekeepers were engaged in the implementation of comprehensive peace agreements. Today, only a decade and half into the twenty-first century, more than two-thirds of UN peacekeepers are deployed in missions that have a stabilization and/or protection of civilians mandate. This major shift in the core role of UN peacekeeping from conflict resolution to conflict management came about as an unintended consequence of the decision by the UN Security Council to adopt the protection of civilians norm in the late 1990s.

This Security Council will continue to task the UN with the protection of civilians, and as a last resort, with enforcement or stabilization operations. The principled approach to UN peacekeeping, including the minimum use of force principle, is however, likely to remain one of the defining features of UN peacekeeping. Not only are rising powers like China and India in favour of maintaining this principled approach, but the HIPPO has also argued against utilizing peace operations in counter-terrorism and other enforcement roles. The HIPPO maintained that the inherent features of UN peace operations, including its globally diverse force generation structure, its civilian logistics chain, its multilateral financing system and its political command and control mechanism, make it unfit for combat operations.

Outer Limits of UN Peacekeeping

When peacekeeping started in 1948 in the Middle East with the UN Truce Supervision Organisation (UNTSO) it consisted of lightly armed military units that monitored a cease-fire agreement. More complex tasks were added over time, including supporting the implementation of comprehensive peace agreements in the late 1980s, facilitating the birth of new states like Timor-Leste and South Sudan, and the protection of civilians in the late 1990s. Police and civilian experts were added in the late 1980s, and peacekeeping became multi-dimensional. During the unipolar era, UN peace operations became a key facilitator for the adoption of neo-liberal state institutions. UN peacekeeping operations organized elections, oversaw the writing of new constitutions, helped to develop rule of law institutions and promoted western-style multiparty democratic models. While several peacekeeping missions ended successfully during this period in places like Angola, Cambodia, Guatemala, Mozambique and Namibia, criticism started mounting in the 2000s against the seeming inability of missions like the UN mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the joint African Union and UN mission in Darfur to reach a fitting end.

Aided by increasing pressure on the funding of peace operations, principally but not solely by the new Trump administration, questions are increasingly being raised about the scope of peace operations. Why do some contemporary peacekeeping missions have responsibility for building the capacity of justice, police and corrections institutions? Should they have human rights mandates? Why is the support for elections part of UN peacekeeping operation mandates, why should it not be the role of, for instance, the UN Development Programme (UNDP)? Thus far the reason why many of these functions were included in UN peacekeeping operations seem to have more to do with the assessed contribution funding model of UN peacekeeping operations than with any theory of change model. Given the option of assured funding if included in a peacekeeping mission mandate, versus seeking voluntary contributions from donors, resulted over time in more and more tasks being added to UN peacekeeping. Most of the institution and capacity building tasks are also supported by UN agencies, funds, and programmes, as well as other bilateral donors, regional organizations, and international and national NGOs.

As a result of the end of the neo-liberal unipolar era, the growing influence of China and other rising powers and financial pressure to down-scale UN peacekeeping operations, the debate seems now to be leaning towards the arguments for a new era of limited UN peacekeeping operations, where these operations should be focused on fewer priority areas, mainly protection, stability, and politics.

Conclusion

Despite, or perhaps partly as a result of, the changes underway in the global order, and the uncertainties that come with such a significant phase-shift, most countries and regional blocs, such as the African Union, European Union and the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), agree on the

importance of the UN as the centrepiece of global governance. Despite these changes at the macro-level, the comprehensive reforms of the UN's management, development and peace and security structures, and the significant attention that is rightly being focussed on prevention, UN peacekeeping is likely to remain the flagship enterprise of the UN. This is because UN peacekeeping remains the most visual embodiment and achievement of the post-World War II multilateral system of global governance. Over the past 70 years, more than one million troops from more than 110 nations have participated in 70 UN peacekeeping missions. This is a remarkable achievement in collective security and global governance. One of the enduring characteristics of UN peacekeeping operations over this period has been the resilience of its identity, as most clearly defined by its three core principles. Another has been the continuous evolution of the specific manifestations of that idea into practice, whether it is unarmed military observers in the Golan Heights, formed police units in Haiti or protection of civilian sites in South Sudan. UN peacekeeping have thus shown a remarkable capacity to continuously adapt to new challenges over the past 70 years, and there is no evidence to suggest that it will not continue to do so into the future.

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