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**The Future of Peacekeeping Operations:
Fighting Political Fatigue and Overstretch**

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1 Background

On February 27-28, 2009, a group of leading policy makers and experts in the field of peacekeeping came together at Princeton University for the conference *Coping with Overstretch: Realigning Capacities to Fit Peace and Security Challenges in a Time of Political Fatigue*, organized by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, the Century Foundation and the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs.

Attending the meeting were past and present senior figures from the US, Europe, Africa and Asia as well as the UN and regional organizations, including Mr. Ramtane Lamamra, Commissioner for Peace and Security, African Union; Admiral William Fallon, Former Commander, US Central Command; Lt. General Satish Nambiar, Former Deputy Chief of Army Staff, India; Mr. Mohamed Ibn Chambas, President, ECOWAS Commission; Mr. Ali A. Jalali, Former Minister of Interior, Afghanistan; and Mr. Alain Le Roy, Under-Secretary General, United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations.

Participants discussed the complex and diverse challenges of peace operations as these are increasing in numbers. Drawing from experiences in previous and current operations, participants emphasized the need for new policy initiatives and institutional reforms that address the lack of resources, capacities and political divergences that affect peacekeeping missions.

Much of the content of this paper is informed by the two days of debate at the Princeton conference.

2 Introduction

In the last sixth months, NATO and the UN have both confronted the possibility that their largest individual peace operations may fail. In Afghanistan, NATO troops have struggled to contain the Taliban. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) the UN was unable to halt rebel attacks that displaced as many as 250,000 people last September.

Afghanistan and the DRC are rarely addressed together. Western commentators see Afghanistan as strategically essential but perceive the DRC as a tragedy with few implications beyond its neighborhood. If the Congo mission is big by UN standards, with over 20,000 personnel, it is dwarfed by NATO's presence in Afghanistan which – with reinforcements promised by the US – may pass 70,000. The European countries that

contribute half the Afghan force have fewer than 200 personnel in the Congo combined.¹

Yet the cases have many similarities. In both, international forces face brutal insurgents, but lack clear political or military strategies – in spite the fact that the UN has been in DRC since 1999 and Western troops in Afghanistan since 2001. Militarily, each mission is constrained by differences between national contingents and commanders over the use of force. Politically, they are compromised by tense relations with the elected leaders they are meant to support: Afghanistan's President Karzai and DRC's President Kabila.

In these weaknesses, the two missions are symptomatic of strains in the international peace operations system that has emerged (very unpredictably) over the last decade.

This paper argues that international peacekeeping has been weakened by a lack of trust among governments and institutions.² This lack of trust inhibits missions from developing effective political strategies in cases like Afghanistan and DRC – and cases including Darfur and Somalia.

If the international community is to manage weak and failing states during the financial downturn, it must restore trust in peace operations. The alternative may be a breakdown in operations and institutions that would do lasting damage to international cooperation.

3 A System Waiting to Crash?

What is the peacekeeping "system"? There is no all-encompassing global framework for peace operations. Instead there is a network of institutions and countries fielding forces, from Brazilian marines in Haiti to Australian police in the Solomon Islands. They are held together by a web of overlapping mandates, financial arrangements and – perhaps most importantly – joint operations that constitute a haphazard, decentralized system.

¹ This includes not only personnel under UN command, but also members of two small EU missions. Figures based on Center on International Cooperation, Annual Review of Global Peace Operations 2009 (Lynne Rienner, 2009).

² This paper uses "peace operations" and "peacekeeping" interchangeably. There is an ongoing debate over terminology in this sector – especially where "peacekeeping" tends towards "peace enforcement". It is an important debate, in political as well as academic terms, but one that this paper does not aim to resolve.

This system is big: by the start of this year, there were 200,000 peacekeepers in over forty UN and non-UN missions worldwide and this figure may grow by up to a quarter in the year ahead. It is expensive: the UN peacekeeping budget alone is over \$8 billion a year and the per capita cost of NATO troops is up to five times higher than the UN's. And it is complex: while the UN and NATO are responsible for nine-tenths of peacekeepers worldwide, institutions like the European Union and African Union are also established players.

Unsurprisingly, complexity is not conducive to efficiency. Peace operations work best when there is a single line of command to hold them together and set priorities. In reality, responsibilities tend to be spread thinly and sometimes irrationally. In Afghanistan, NATO handles the troops and the UN is supposed to direct aid. Individual nations took the lead on tasks such as policing (Germany and later the EU), the legal and judicial system (Italy) and poppy eradication (the UK). This has mostly led to incoherence and ineffectiveness.

More problematically, such convoluted situations result in an absence of responsibility. If duties are shared out haphazardly, who is responsible when things go wrong? Is it NATO's fault that security has deteriorated in Afghanistan – or did the original American rebuff of NATO military assistance in 2001 in favor of Northern Alliance forces outside Kabul sow the seeds of later insecurity? Did the UN fail to follow up the military success of 2001 with an aid strategy that would engender lasting peace – or should the US and its allies take the blame for tasking the UN with coordination, but then embarking on numerous uncoordinated bilateral aid initiatives? The buck stops nowhere.

Blame games grow even more vicious when larger UN operations wobble. For all its faults, the NATO system (like those of the EU and AU) gives decision-making power to the countries that are being asked to deploy their forces. The majority of UN operations are manned by soldiers and police from Asian and African countries typically absent from the Security Council, where the goals and shapes of missions are negotiated.

When a UN mission faces set-backs such as those in the DRC, arguments over responsibility proliferate. In the Congolese case, European members of the Security Council blamed Indian soldiers on the spot who did not fight advancing rebels. But Indian commentators criticized the

Council for authorizing too small a force to handle this threat – especially when the EU chose not to send a reinforcement mission.

The flaws in the peacekeeping system resemble those in the financial system prior to 2008. Just as banks passed on risky loans to one another packaged as complex financial instruments, governments have pushed one another to take on risky countries.

The classic case of risk transferal is Somalia. In the early 1990s, the US deployed 25,000 troops there under a UN mandate.³ After the "Black Hawk Down" incident, the US drew back, leaving a follow-on UN mission reliant on troops from the developing world. This pulled out in turn in 1995. Since 2006, following a decade of chaos and growing Islamist influence, the Security Council has pushed the UN to return to Somalia. But the UN Secretariat has been resistant, fearing a debacle. Instead, an AU force has been based in Mogadishu, unable to make a difference and taking increasing casualties.

The NATO presence in Afghanistan may be exponentially larger and stronger than the AU mission in Somalia, but the Afghan story is another tale of risk transferal gone wrong. After initially resisting large-scale European peacekeeping, the US has urged its European allies to deploy in ever greater numbers. Although they have sent more troops, the rate has been below American expectations. Only six of the twenty-six NATO members involved place no caveats on the use of their forces. The Obama administration appears to have accepted that it will have to carry more military responsibility from now on.

Such episodes create mistrust across the peacekeeping system. Within the UN, relations between the Security Council and major troop contributors are strained. The AU resents the UN Secretariat's efforts to stay out of Somalia. In NATO, the US views its European allies as insufficiently committed to Afghanistan while the Europeans complain that the American definition of stability operations is too close to war-fighting. This results in a vicious cycle, by which American efforts to keep the mission multinational and multilateral meet weak responses, and the US feels obliged to fill the resulting gaps – leading Europeans to conclude that this is an "American war".

³ Another 12,000 troops were provided by other nations.

Mistrust has also complicated EU missions: repeated advocacy by France and Belgium for missions to former colonies such as Chad and the DRC unsettles countries with weaker African commitments like Germany. The EU mission to Chad was delayed for months through the winter of 2007-8 because member-states failed to offer helicopters.

Trust problems like these – given large amounts of media attention – offer openings for peacekeepers' opponents to disrupt missions. In Chad, the EU's delay allowed rebels to prepare an attack on the capital to coincide with the European deployment – which was duly delayed. In Afghanistan, insurgents have attacked troops from less confident members of NATO in the hope of peeling them away from the coalition. In Darfur, the Sudanese government has persistently exploited differences between the AU and the UN.

International mistrust also hinders efforts to define clear strategies for peace operations. Peace operations need to have clear goals or "end-states" to aim for. The size, shape and longevity of missions should be based on these strategic targets.

Yet, in the current system, institutions and governments are often unable to set out such goals. They are often focused on keeping a peacekeeping coalition together at all in the face of political tensions (as in Afghanistan) and operational challenges (as in Darfur). Operations are maintained not to resolve a country's underlying problems – requiring military, economic or political resources that the international community cannot bring to bear while simultaneously managing other crises – but to maintain a bare minimum of stability. At worst, keeping the mission going becomes the primary goal in its own right.

When a mission starts to stagnate, local people (including spoilers) take note. In Afghanistan, the Taliban believe that they can outlast NATO in a war of attrition, just as Afghans outlasted previous interventions by British and Soviet forces.

Public opinion in countries involved in peace operations can also be affected by a sense of stagnation. Neither voters nor leaders tend to follow operations closely – and although advocates argue that they should pay closer attention, it is hard to imagine politicians trying to whip up public interest in the DRC during the financial crisis. But a steady flow of negative news about

an operation does seep into public consciousness.

In the US, the public has displayed a higher tolerance for casualties – at least when its own security is threatened – than some pundits predicted in the 1990s. However, bad news from Iraq and Afghanistan surely contributed to electoral successes for the Democrats in 2006 and 2008. In Europe, public opposition to the Afghan campaign is a major constraint on governments. When ten Burundian soldiers were killed in Somalia this February, opposition parties in Burundi were quick to criticize the government. Political fatigue at home is an obstacle to bold new strategies in the field.

A lack of strategic direction is inevitably detrimental to the quality and credibility of peace operations in terms of tactics, morale and personnel. One symptom of this is widespread and growing difficulties in finding qualified civilian staff to handle political, development and managerial issues. Many UN missions currently have only two-thirds of the civilian staff they need – the EU suffers from similar deficits. The US encountered similar problems in Iraq, with the State Department threatening to send diplomats to Baghdad compulsorily in 2007 unless enough volunteers were found.

Such short-falls are easy enough to understand: sensible civilians are wary of going to deprived and dangerous places. Incidents such as the 2003 bombing of the UN headquarters in Baghdad and the repeated kidnapping of foreigners in Afghanistan do not attract new recruits. However, qualified candidates are also put off peace operations because they do not believe their presence will serve a clear purpose. It is one thing to take personal risks for the sake of a coherent strategy. It is far less appealing to do so just to keep a mission going for its own sake.

If individuals can grow cynical about peacekeeping, so can governments. In cases where operations appear to exist for their own sake, governments are unlikely to send good or even competent contingents. As UN forces have expanded quantitatively, their overall quality has declined (this should not detract from the skills, commitment and courage of specific units and personnel). By the UN's own estimates, it turns down nearly three-quarters of the police it is offered on qualitative grounds – and even so when it reviewed the Formed Police Units (riot squads) it now deploys, only a third were deemed operational.

To summarize: the sheer scale of current peace operations has resulted in an ad hoc system of operations in which responsibilities are poorly distributed and mistrust is growing. This mistrust has significant negative operational implications at the field level.

The international community seems to grow less committed to making peace operations work as the number of operations proliferates. There are many reasons for this – some are analyzed in the next section. But the overarching problem of trust around peace operations must be addressed. The financial crisis of 2008 involved a massive loss of confidence among investors: a loss of trust has meant that there is no longer credit available for viable investments as well as bad ones. There is a risk that international peacekeeping could unravel in a comparable fashion: further set-backs for NATO in Afghanistan, the UN in Congo and the AU in Somalia may severely reduce governments' desire for future operations, even well-planned ones.

4 Restoring Trust in a Complex Political Moment

Is it possible to restore trust across the international peacekeeping system? To do so, it is necessary to address three fundamental imbalances that feed current levels of mistrust:

- **There is an imbalance between the growth of peace operations and international investment in peacekeeping resources.** A basic factor underpinning governments' desire to transfer peacekeeping risks to one another – and spread them across international institutions – is their own lack of resources.

While the US still has incredible military resources, these are already heavily committed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Other governments have limited military spending in favor of domestic priorities: defense spending among European NATO members fell from 2.06% of GDP to 1.75% from 2005 to 2007.⁴

The comparable figures for South Asia and Africa – the main suppliers of UN forces – were 3.33% to 2.25% and 1.75% to 1.47% respectively. In part, this reflects positive trends: periods of regional stability and growth. But it at the same time, funds

have not gone to building up specialized assets like helicopters, and defense spending is liable to contract during the global downturn. Governments have not matched the growth in operations with necessary investments in capacities.

- **There is a mismatch between available peacekeeping forces and their operating environments.** Compounding the lack of investment in peacekeeping capacities, peacekeepers are being asked to take on increasingly challenging tasks.

In the later 1990s, most peace operations were conducted in relatively straightforward operating environments. NATO was able to sustain large troop formations in the Balkans relatively easily because they were close to home. The UN took on big missions in small places: Kosovo, Sierra Leone and Timor-Leste. Today, missions are deployed far further afield, often to places with poor infrastructure. NATO has to funnel resources to Afghanistan through Pakistan and Russia. The UN estimated that it would take six months to dig all the wells necessary to supply its Darfur force with water. On top of logistical challenges, hardened spoilers and insurgents target peacekeepers. This range of obstacles and threats require robust, mobile and (when necessary) self-sufficient forces. NATO has struggled to deploy these in Afghanistan – they are largely beyond the UN.

- **There are growing gaps between governments on the threats and values that should shape peace operations.** In addition to financial and operational difficulties, international organizations are constrained by political divisions over the principles of peace operations – reducing the chances of effective strategies.

There has never been an easy international consensus over peace operations. Today, however, there are growing political tensions over how to justify and run operations. In Afghanistan, NATO has been split over whether the mission should have a strong counter-insurgency focus (and thus an aggressive military approach) reflecting differing threat perceptions between the US and Europe. At the UN, major force contributors like India have been suspicious of initiatives linked to some proposed peace operations – most obviously the Responsibility to Protect

⁴ Figures from IISS, *The Military Balance* (Routledge, 2009).

– that appear to weaken the principle of sovereignty.⁵ The AU has clashed with the West over the International Criminal Court's decision to issue an arrest warrant for Sudan's President Bashir, arguing that it endangers African peacekeepers. Such divergences, arising from legitimate differences over priorities, corrode the credibility and unity of the missions involved. They have the potential to make governments withdraw from sensitive operations altogether.

Resolving these fundamental imbalances would be hard enough in calmer political and financial times. But they must be tackled in a complex political moment in which the overall financial base for funding operations and international capacity-building has shrunk and global power shifts will create new dynamics in debates over peacekeeping.

International efforts to mitigate the financial crisis have confirmed the fast growing influence of India and China.

Dialogues over peacekeeping can hardly continue in isolation from such global trends. In the next one to two years, these deep political shifts may combine with high-profile failures in one or more peace operations to do major damage to the peacekeeping system.

Yet there is also a possibility that the level of pressure on the peacekeeping system may also have positive results. This paper has shown that the system's complexity is often self-defeating, creating mistrust and actually working against effective strategy-making. In the current climate, governments simply cannot afford to sustain the system as it presently exists. It is neither cost-efficient nor militarily efficient, and crises in Afghanistan and DRC should persuade that "business as usual" is no longer acceptable.

Tragically, it is possible that downward trends in cases like Afghanistan, Congo or Somalia may prove irreversible. Some experts argue that the international community has a maximum of two years to stabilize Afghanistan. Yet it is important to recognize that even large-scale set-backs in these cases will not remove the need to prepare for future operations – the problem of failing states will remain, and the US and the interna-

tional community will need to invest in more effective responses to future crises.

The near-collapse of the financial system in 2008 has pushed major powers to rethink global economic governance – most notably through the G20 conferences in Washington DC and London. The fragility of international peacekeeping could stimulate the leading troop suppliers and international institutions involved in operations to review the system.

Their common goal should be to move from a system of "risk transferal" to one of "shared risk management" across international peacekeeping. The new system should be characterized by greater transparency and trust between major military and financial contributors to peace operations – providing a base for better peacekeeping strategies.

Five significant inter-governmental initiatives could mark progress towards this goal:

- To cut across institutional divisions fuelling mistrust in peacekeeping, the Permanent 5 members of the UN Security Council should convene a **heads-of-government conference on the peacekeeping system** involving the top twenty or twenty-five contributors to peace operations (calculated on the basis of UN and non-UN operations). This would not supplant the role of the Security Council, North Atlantic Council or similar bodies in mandating and directing missions, but would permit strategic discussion of future operational requirements, capacity gaps and cross-institutional cooperation.⁶ It would be followed up by regular meetings of defense and foreign ministers to drive policy initiatives on peacekeeping issues.
- Use this new forum to promote **joint development of military and police resources for peace operations**. Potential priorities are to (i) create a pool of helicopters and other specialized assets for long-range missions like Darfur and Afghanistan; (ii) developing a system of internationally-available police units to fill gaps in this area. In the current financial climate, these must

⁵ See Richard Gowan and Franziska Brantner, *A Global Force for Human Rights? An Audit of European Power at the UN* (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2008).

⁶ This draws on a proposal developed by Managing Global Insecurity, a project of the Brookings Institution and New York and Stanford Universities. The author was a member of the project's research team. See Bruce D. Jones, Carlos Pascual and Stephen J. Stedman, *Power and Responsibility* (Brookings, 2009).

be multilateral projects. To reduce the tensions of “risk transferal”, governments that have largely been absent from UN military operations – especially from Europe and North America – should commit force elements to UN missions as a sign of commitment.

- Build on these capacity-building projects to establish a system of **rapidly deployable reserves** to back up UN and non-UN missions in crises, giving peace operations the military credibility to deter opponents like Sudan’s government.
- Reduce barriers to trust through **investing in knowledge management and communication across international organizations**. While the UN in particular has invested in “lessons learned” projects, it is necessary to couple capability-development with the creation of shared concepts and doctrines accessible to all international institutions. This does not mean that UN and NATO operations might become homogeneous – but it would allow their officials to address problems together using common concepts, and learn lessons from each other.
- To strengthen the intellectual and managerial capacities of all peacekeeping organizations – and let them communicate better – governments should also fund an **international pool of civilian peacekeeping staff**. Drawing on training centers in the West and South, and with considerable cross-posting between international institutions and governments, this pool of staff would facilitate inter-institutional and inter-governmental contacts and so help engender trust.

In the medium term, these investments should reduce the burden of peacekeeping on individual governments and institutions by enhancing shared problem-solving. But they will require initial financial, political and military investments

at a challenging time. To push this agenda, leadership will be required from both emerging powers and the West.

To stimulate that leadership, a political catalyst is necessary. Within the UN system, the most obvious political stimulus for operational change would be to engage in serious discussions of Security Council reform. This is a priority for major contributors to UN operations such as India, and would stimulate contenders for permanent seats (or, depending on the formula used, long-term membership) to increase peacekeeping efforts.

Perhaps unexpectedly, the best advocate for co-operation on peace operations may be the United States. As a privileged interlocutor with both Europe and emerging powers, the Obama administration is best-placed to promote an approach to peace operations that cuts across long-standing institutional boundaries. Its experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as its central position in the UN, should sensitize it more than most countries to the need for a better peacekeeping system. The US has arguably discovered that it cannot “go it alone” in dealing with fragile and dangerous states – but it needs to overhaul peace operations if it is to have a reliable set of companions in future.

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