

Challenge Paper

The UN at 70—Celebration, or Commemoration?

Or: The Case for Re-Tooling the UN's Conflict Management Capacity

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As the UN turns 70, should we be celebrating or commemorating? Two and a half decades of important progress since the end of the Cold War suggest the former; great power deadlock in Ukraine and Syria (with its attendant humanitarian catastrophe) suggest the later. The balance arguably lies in whether the UN can initiate the kind of re-tooling that adapted the UN for the post-Cold War era. Then the challenge was to meet new geopolitical opportunities and take on new roles in internal conflict; now the challenge is to confront complex crises unfolding on a fraught geopolitical landscape.

Since its founding the UN has played a range of conflict management roles in different settings. In conflicts with low geopolitical salience, the UN has been a supportive actor in mediation, the leading actor in peacekeeping and humanitarian response, and a participant in peacebuilding. In conflict with higher geopolitical salience, the UN has also *contributed* to conflict management, often combining forces both figuratively and literally with NATO, the EU, and coalitions who are willing to invest the manpower and resources to produce peace and security outcomes. And in proxy wars or conflicts where the largest military powers are closely engaged, those powers have sometimes turned to the UN to help freeze the conflicts or de-escalate proxy tensions. Will the UN be able to perform these functions in the years ahead? Or will it lapse back into the kind of paralysis that characterized much of the Cold War?

This question arises during important shifts in the nature and location of conflict. During the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s violence and insecurity was concentrated in internal conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa and at the peripheries of the major continents—in the Balkans, Haiti, Timor Leste, etc. In all of these regions conflict has declined substantially, though the challenges that remain are large and enduring (e.g. in D.R. Congo and Sudan). They are also costly, at a moment when resources for the UN are shrinking. In one region of the world, the Middle East, violence and insecurity are rising: the region confronts in internal war but also inter-state conflict, as well as sub-state and trans-national violence. And most conflicts in the Middle East (and North Africa) have terrorist entities as combatants, which poses challenges to the UN.

The second form of rising insecurity is geopolitical. Already we have seen a form of attenuated proxy war in the Ukraine and direct support to war-fighting in Syria by both the great powers and regional powers. The deterioration in U.S.-Russia relations and rising tensions between the China, the U.S. and other east Asian powers, especially in maritime Asia, bode ill for international security. Of course, there are some issues on which there are underlying shared interests, like aspects of proliferation and terrorism. Even here, though, shared interests do not necessarily translate into shared approaches, as has been brutally evident in Syria.

Against these difficulties there is a silver lining for the UN, in the form of a growing number of states with the capacity to make effective contributions to peace and security. Many of these are states that have grown economically but are still far from having the military capacity to act beyond their neighborhoods. Their diplomatic reach exceeds their military grasp. Because this is so, and for reasons of status, these states have a strong interest in working through the UN, often the only tool accessible for them to project capacity beyond their neighborhoods (within their neighborhoods, some of these states have access to effective regional organizations). These states are a resource and the question of whether the UN is an effective source of peace and security in the coming period will depend heavily on how these countries engage the UN and whether the UN learns how to mobilize their capacity.

In short: If the UN is going to be useful in conflict management and peace and security in the coming period, it has to pull off a multi-part retooling:

- Increase the efficiency of its operational capacity to sustain large field operations for peacekeeping and humanitarian response;
- Streamline its bureaucracy to aid in more integrated policy and operations between preventive, peacekeeping and peacebuilding work
- Create new platforms that allow a wider set of states to contribute more, both operationally and in the political and diplomatic management of conflicts;
- Increase its ability to contribute to conflict management in the Middle East, including in cases where terrorist actors are present, either by building its own operational capacity, through deeper partnerships with more capable organizations (though there are few of these), or by more consistently utilizing multi-national arrangements;
- Position itself diplomatically to be useful to the great powers when they seek to de-conflict themselves from proxy entanglements or from escalating tensions.

The efficacy and efficiency of UN-led peacekeeping

An international audience reading about the UN in early 2016 will have predominant in their minds the blockages in UN Security Council over Syria and Ukraine; and may scoff the notion of strengthening or reforming UN conflict management functions. However, P5 tensions over those two geopolitically significant conflicts obscure the fact that the United Nations still has 138,000 personnel on the field in 39 missions, an all-time high. Unfortunately, new security challenges and new resource constraints mean that both resources available for such operations and political support for UN roles is likely to shrink, putting a premium on the efficacy and efficiency of UN operations.

On the question low geopolitical conflicts, the recent High-level Panel on Peace Operations provides the essential guide; the challenge is implementation. Gains are likely to come most quickly in four areas: in improving planning, in reinforcing the political frameworks for peace keeping, in rapid deployment of field headquarters, and in augmenting the efficiency of management tools.

The UN needs no new authorities, no new capacities, and no new budgets to augment civilian planning; it simply needs creativity and will on the part of its most senior leadership. Similarly, for reinforcing the political framework for operations: it's a matter of vital policy that peacekeeping operations should be conducted in support of a political framework, or a political agreement, or in pursuit of one. The two most important variables here are the attitudes of the P5/regional powers, and the quality and the creativity of the special representatives that the SG deploys to lead UN missions. This is another area where gender issues will be particularly important, as leadership from the top will help ensure that gender issues are prioritized throughout the UN response.

It will take more political will by member states to return to an earlier situation of the UN having available to it a rapidly deployable headquarters and planning tool. In Ethiopia/Eritrea, and other contexts, the UN made very effective use of such a mechanism in the form of the European-supported Standby High-Readiness Brigade (SHIRBRIG). A revived capacity could be broadened to include a wider set of aspiring powers.

The UN can also do more with regional organizations, where they are effective, and with the World Bank; and this may be particularly important for prevention. A theme that should run throughout the preventive work is inclusion; everything we know about conflict suggests that inclusive governance and inclusive economies are essential to conflict avoidance.

A fourth step, and one extremely important for efficiency, but requiring more political negotiation among member states, entails a greater flexibility for the Department of Field Support (DFS), and greater flexibility in its interaction with the more bureaucratic, headquarters-focused Department of Management (DM). As will streamlining the bureaucratic arrangements between DPA, DPKO, and UNDP, and – finally – forging an effective relationship with the World Bank, to make for more integrated peacebuilding efforts at all parts of the conflict cycle. It may require substantial changes to Secretariat arrangements and even more so to the hard divisions between various UN budgets. This will not be an easy lift, but incoming Secretaries-General

have a honeymoon period in which, historically, they have been able to execute important bureaucratic changes with tacit support from the membership.

That is a lot to take on. But if we think about how the UN can contribute to conflict management in more complex, more geopolitically fraught settings, then we have to look more deeply at two other issues: the question of operating in settings (of which there will be a growing number) where terrorist entities are operating; and the involvement and participation of rising powers in policy and mandate making functions.

Contributing to Conflict Management in Higher Geopolitical Settings

If the UN is going to meet contemporary security challenges, it will have to have access to the capability of the widest possible range of actors: the major African and South Asian states that have become the bedrock contributors of the large, but relatively low-capability forces that the UN now fields; high-end and enabling capabilities from European contributors; and an increasingly sophisticated set of force capabilities and enabling capabilities from states that have not historically used the UN to project power status or force.

The High-Level Report touches on this issue but in a modest way, as have the members of the P5, who, when they've opened up to light consultations, haven't seen much impact and thus resist further reform. That is not a way to drive political change. The UN is going to have to go much deeper on reform of its machinery to seriously involve aspiring countries if the latter are to take up new roles and put serious resources into the organization and its operations. That's an important agenda for the coming Secretary General, who confronts now a set of activist states who want to do more, who can do are, and who are frustrated by a lack of reform at the UN.

Of course, the broader question of Security Council reform is germane to this; but there is much the UN can do short of Charter reform to meet the appetite of rising powers for more engagement. The first and most obvious is for the new incoming Secretary-General to use senior positions in the UN Secretariat for political and diplomatic figures from the non-European, non-P5 powers. That may create some tensions with OECD states who frequently claim such roles, but that is a balance that the new secretary general will have to strike.

The second way a wider set of states can participate in a more serious manner is through their own contributions to peacekeeping. This is a decision in their hands. Brazil has been providing force commanders in Haiti, using its own region as a testing ground, but then going farther afield and putting a force commander in the eastern Congo, even in the context of a controversial and complicated mission with a stabilization presence. This is an important part of how Brazil will build influence in the UN. The other aspiring powers will simply have to take this step themselves if they want to see more influence.

A third step, and one that lies in the hands of the P5, is to engage the aspiring powers on policy. Here, one option would be to revive the Brazilian concept of responsibilities while protecting—an argument that when the Security Council authorizes other actors to use force, it should do so under a policy framework where the “responsibility to protect” (R2P) is embedded in a wider concept of the responsible use of force. Re-engagement on this issue would go some distance to creating a legitimate political framework around UN Security Council authorization decisions, which would enable a far wider set of capabilities to be deployed under a political framework. It would helpfully create a more legitimate framework for the authorization of multi-national forces, which may be crucial to confront today’s complex conflicts.

Tackling more complex conflicts and conflicts involving terrorist entities

Indeed, the debate around UN conflict management tends to focus on the traditional “blue helmet” operations, that is, operations managed centrally by the UN Secretariat. There’s a powerful alternative in the UN’s toolkit, namely UN-mandated multi-national forces (MNF). These are operations that fly under a UN banner but are led and commanded by an individual state, rather than the UN Secretariat. As the UN conflicts more complex conflicts with stronger armies, stronger rebel forces and sophisticated terrorist entities, it may be necessary to put more emphasis on using this option, and some of its variants.

Friends of the UN should undertake a detailed examination of the range of alternatives available to the UN—from blue helmet operations to multi-national forces to so-called hybrid operations (where the UN

and a regional organization fuse their forces into a single structure). Such a study would enable the member states to better support and more firmly encourage the UN to explore a variety of options when confronted with an emerging conflict.

Another tool in the UN's potential quiver is to ask the most capable military powers to provide over-the-horizon guarantees to more traditional UN operations. This would add confidence to potential contributors. And to anticipate the criticism that this is an unrealistic ask of the top-powers: the United States did exactly this in the early days of the Kosovo crisis, mounting an over-the-horizon extraction force that provided guarantees to the unarmed Kosovo Verification Mission established by the OSCE. Over-the-horizon guarantees would be eminently feasible in a context like Libya, for example.

Finally, the UN will have to engage in a deeper examination of its current high degree of conservatism in its role in confronting trans-national terrorist organizations in the conflict theatres in which it's deployed. The High-level Panel tackled this issue, and rightly insisted that the current UN is not the right mechanism to undertake counter-terrorism operations. That's surely true of the present: currently configured, currently managed, currently mandated peacekeeping missions are not particularly well suited to taking robust counter-terrorism operations, or even really robust counter-insurgency operations.

But looking forward, we need a deeper answer to the question: if not the UN, who? The risk of the Security Council not taking this on is that of un-restrained unilateral action by states, with seriously destabilizing consequences. There is no consensus on this issue in the Secretariat; in member state missions to the UN; or in the international community. But the simple fact of the matter is that we confront a growing number of conflicts where terrorism is a central part of the reality and there are few organizations other than the UN with the operational or legal authority to mount peacekeeping operations. How we grapple with this thorny challenge will be as consequential for the UN's next twenty years as was the decision in the early 1990s to enter into internal wars, breaking with the long UN tradition of limiting itself to inter-positional roles.

De-confliction of Great Power Tensions

Finally, how then can the UN be relevant to the management of tensions between the top military powers? How can it serve as a mechanism for de-confliction or mitigation when the top powers find themselves butting up against one another or risking conflict?

If the UN evolved in the way detailed above, with more capable machinery built on a wider political coalition comprised by both European states and aspirational powers, then there is a greater chance that the top powers will be able to identify their interests in, and have confidence using, this tool to deescalate tensions. The participation of both the European and the aspiring powers is important because the top military powers have important bilateral interests with all those actors. Where a UN mechanism has the confidence and participation of such states the top powers will be more hesitant to ignore it than they would a device primarily confined to lower geopolitical contexts. This may matter a great deal for the period we are entering.

An important silver lining is the shared P5+ consensus on limiting nuclear proliferation. This has led to critically important major power cooperation through the UN on Iran, and increasingly on North Korea. Such P5+ diplomatic mechanisms are an important part of how the UN can contribute to peace and security in today's environment.

Are there other parts of geopolitical challenge where the UNSC could, in principle, help slow the upwards spiral of tensions? Let's first acknowledge that the most important issues—China's strategic perspective and economic/resource claims in the East and South China Seas, Russia's search for a security architecture that limits Western influence on its border, America's sustained naval role in the Pacific and its sustained political/economic/military roles in Russia's backyard—are ones that fall squarely into the realm of bilateral relations and perhaps bilateral arms control regimes, as aspects of the Soviet-American relationship did during the Cold War. But specific crises or incidents within this challenges, incidents that could generate unwanted escalation of tensions, could be the subject of UN contribution. There could be value added, for

example, if there were a standing incident review mechanism, established under the UNSC, on which an aggrieved country could call in the case of a maritime accident or incident to give an impartial assessment of the facts of the case, to push solutions towards diplomacy and arbitration, rather than military escalation. The search for *ad hoc* mechanisms is an alternative but one that leaves tense states scrambling for diplomatic options at a moment of crisis. Standing mechanisms established under UNSC authority would give the major powers tools for de-confliction, time for diplomacy.

Of course, another aspect of rising geopolitical tensions is the concern that P5 tensions will restrict UN action, including in cases of high levels of violence. On this, the French have introduced their proposal that the P5 should voluntarily restrict their use of the veto when the UN seeks to confront instances of mass atrocity crimes or humanitarian crises. Were such incidents to occur only in low geopolitical settings, perhaps the P5 would agree; the problem is that such situations also occur in places where the P5 have high geopolitical stakes, and are highly unlikely to agree to unfetter the UN. But what if we narrowed this proposal to the question of the establishment of UN operations? In other words, each P5 nation would agree to voluntarily restrict its use of the veto in circumstances where we confront the risk of mass atrocity *and* (the combination is critical) the Secretary General proposes to establish a *UN* operation—not handing the operation off to a coalition, NATO or to a unilateral actor. Why is this different? Because UN missions report back to the UNSC and that body holds the power to renew the operations; and so in restricting veto use in the establishment of a mission, the P5 are not giving up their ability to shape policy or manage the UN's engagement in that situation. Instead, they would retain that capacity on a continuing basis. Even this suggestion is ambitious, but by contrast to the wider proposal it may have a slim chance of being considered.

Of course, it is evident that it will not be the Secretary General her or himself that will determine the position of the UN in the coming period. The top powers, the major economies, and the aspiring powers will either choose to craft the UN into an effective tool and use it to manage their tensions, or not.

But there is an important interaction between the Secretary-General and these powers. And at present, the Secretary-General has only a limited ability to understand and interact with that wider set of powers, beyond the New York missions. Over the Cold War period, successive Secretaries-General have understood the need to maintain a more direct relationship to Washington and to have an Assistant-Secretary-General level official in his office assisting in that function. As the number of decisive powers grows, replicating that model is not an option. But the Secretary-General could establish an (informal) International Affairs Advisory Board comprised of former senior officials or prominent policy scholars to assist her (or just possibly him...) in tracking both the evolution of conflict and security but also the dynamics of the relationship between the major powers, a dynamic that will shape the options available to the UN.

Taken together, these four sets of issues—increasing the efficiency of existing operations; preparing for more complex roles, perhaps through multilateral arrangements; more directly engaging a wider set of states; and re-positioning the UN for the new realities of geopolitics—could help re-tool the UN for the coming era. There is no doubt that we will need an effective UN; whether we will have one is the challenge in front of us.