



# Command and Control Arrangements in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations<sup>1</sup>

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## I. Introduction

1. Demand for UN peacekeeping as a tool for maintaining international peace and security has continued to rise in recent years. DPKO and DFS currently support 18 peace operations, fielding nearly 87,000 military personnel, over 12,000 police, and some 20,000 civilians worldwide.<sup>1</sup> A growing share of deployment has been for robust missions in complex environments where there is often no peace to keep.

2. From Darfur to the DR Congo, peacekeepers are encountering more sophisticated spoilers and operating with limited consent – not only of rebel groups, but of host governments as well. The prospects of effectively responding to military challenges – whether protecting civilians or deterring attacks against peacekeepers themselves – are further complicated by the dispersion of UN forces across vast territories with little infrastructure, and without critical force enablers like helicopters.

3. As the size of UN deployments and the complexity of mission environments have increased, so have the demands on – and importance of – command, control, and oversight mechanisms. Mounting high-risk operations requires an unprecedented level of planning, coordination, and, critically, political guidance if they are to be carried out successfully and with minimal danger to personnel. The potential for crises that threaten civilians and peacekeepers alike is also higher in such environments; effective command and control is vital not only for timely and appropriate response – whether to localized attacks or large-scale emergencies, like the siege of Goma in 2008 – but also for minimizing their occurrence.

4. UN command and control arrangements, emphasizing flexibility and civilian leadership, have historically served peacekeeping well. Yet, the growing gap between increasingly ambitious mandates and limited military capacities creates new dilemmas for the leadership of peacekeeping, in the field and at headquarters. Difficult decisions have to be made on when and how to show or to use force. It is impossible to address all situations – even when a show or actual use of force might be warranted. Priorities have

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to be set and a rigorous assessment of each situation needs to be made. Meanwhile, longstanding troop contributors of the UN have expressed some dissatisfaction with the way UN mandates are operationalized and have complained about the lack of transparency of the Secretariat.

5. Assessing those dynamics, some Member States have argued that the United Nations should shift away from the existing mission-based model of command and control towards a stronger operational headquarters, comparable to NATO, the European Union, and many national militaries. And indeed, UN command and control arrangements are a source of serious concern for military establishments that have been trained according to the completely different model of NATO developed during World War II and the Cold War and, more recently, the EU. The crises that have repeatedly plagued a mission like MONUC have been interpreted as a confirmation among certain troop contributors that stronger strategic military backstopping is essential and that deployments in a UN context carry excessive and poorly analyzed risks. At the same time the experience of Yugoslavia, where members of the Security Council ensured that some key military decisions would be under the control of the SRSG while others would be referred to the strategic level (dual key mechanism) are powerful reminders of the dangers of undue political interference in military matters. The UN model thus seems to combine the worse of two worlds: too much military decentralization and too much political control over the conduct of military operations. The Strategic Military Cell (SMC), which was created by secondment of officers from major troop contributors to UNIFIL when the mission was reinforced, is a first attempt to address some of those concerns by providing an additional oversight capacity at the strategic level. Importantly, it augmented, rather than supplanted, field-level operational command. The recent expansion of DPKO's Office of Military Affairs has enabled it to assume many of functions provided by the SMC to UNIFIL, and across a wider range of missions.

6. Obviously, it would be wrong to point to inadequate command and control arrangements as the sole cause of the various crises encountered by the UN: overstretch and insufficient military capacities are a much more important factor. At the same time, it is important to look at UN command and control arrangements to see how they might be improved, if only to make sure that they address the concerns of all Member States (irrespective of the military tradition that informs their organization and doctrine) so that the pool of contributing nations can be broadened at a time of great demand on peacekeeping. Three dimensions need to be addressed: *(i)* the role of the Secretariat in planning and supporting missions; *(ii)* the relationship between headquarters and the field (the strategic and tactical levels); and *(iii)* the orchestration of different peacekeeping components in the field.

## II. Preparation and Planning Phase

7. "Traditional" military operations have clear objectives – defend this territory, defeat that opponent. These goals are relatively straightforward, if not always easy to achieve.

“Traditional” peacekeeping – monitoring cease-fires, interposing a force between two well-disciplined and well-defined armies – is similarly well understood by national militaries. Since the 1990s, these missions have become the exception rather than the norm, however.

8. The mandates of today’s peacekeeping are far more ambitious, involving protection of civilians, electoral assistance, extension of state authority, strengthening rule of law, and undertaking security sector reform. In such environments, the end state is unclear. Rather, it is a multidimensional undertaking. The military is only one tool among many, alongside increasingly vital police and civilian dimensions. In Haiti, for example, police operations to take down gangs in Port-au-Prince have been critical to strengthening government authority in the capital and reducing criminality. Determining the right mix of military pressure and political engagement is an evolving process; the UN’s military posture therefore must not only be tailored to the political goal, but must be adaptive. Rupert Smith has observed that the objective of military force in a peacekeeping operation is not “to produce a clear end state,” but to create enabling conditions for reaching an end state.<sup>ii</sup> This is a very different goal than traditional military operations; one that is more complex and more closely related to evolving political considerations.

8. In such complex undertakings, the quality of the military answer depends in large part on the quality of the question put to the military. The planning process therefore requires not just more military planning capacities – a need that the SMC and then the reinforced OMA address in part, – but also more sophisticated political thinking, and a capacity by the policy makers to ask the right questions from the military. It is the responsibility of the political side to develop political scenarios and to request from the military clear answers on what military force can achieve in specific circumstances. It is the responsibility of the military to translate political requests into a set of well-defined military tasks, and then to determine the military resources needed. The political side can then further adjust the political strategy on the basis of the answers it has received from the military and the resources it is prepared to contribute. The planning process, as far as the military component is concerned, should therefore be an iterative and interactive process.

9. The present reality is a far cry from that ideal planning process. The size of forces is largely determined by political considerations that reflect the degree of political support of major powers rather than the actual needs. Liberia, for instance, was allocated almost as many troops as the DRC, although the size of the challenge in DRC was considerably greater. The moral imperative of human solidarity influences the drafting of mandates without a serious discussion of its operational implications. For instance, the “protection of civilians” mandate does not provide any strategic direction: it would require, if it was to be systematically and seriously implemented, military forces of a different order of magnitude, which the international community does not have the capacity nor the will to mobilize. Such broad mandates therefore transfer to the UN the strategic responsibility of defining operational priorities. But, because it is politically uncomfortable to admit such limitations, because troop contributors are understandably unwilling to make open-ended commitments, and because there is not enough detailed,

pre-deployment knowledge of the politico-military situation, the process through which priorities are identified is the result of circumstances rather than methodical thinking. This is deeply unsatisfactory.

10. Instead, a well thought-through strategy would identify the critical situations where a limited show of force, or use of force, would have a demonstrative effect, creating momentum that will sustain a self-reinforcing peace process, eventually leading to effective protection of civilians. The drafting of rules of engagement also becomes a much more complex exercise. Rules of engagement are always a ceiling, they are never a floor. In the absence of adequate military capacities – e.g., sufficient force enablers and multipliers, the gap between the ceiling and the actual practice of troops may understandably widen, however. It is therefore an illusion to expect the rules of engagement to decisively shape the posture of the force. The posture will be determined by the combination of the rules of engagement, the actual military capacities, and the will of the troop contributors. This consideration is another reason why it is so important to have more clarity in the politico-military discussion that will shape the mandate, the concept of operations, and the rules of engagement.

11. How can such clarity be achieved? The top level of command and control is the Security Council itself. The issue, then, is whether the Council is prepared to be part of that iterative discussion with the Secretariat and the troop contributors that would allow it to adjust the mandate to the realities on the ground. The Security Council has a vested interest in the conduct of operations, as the recent UK-French initiative has underscored. This is encouraging. The recommendation of the Brahimi report that resolutions be adopted in two steps – a framework resolution first, and a second resolution, once the troop contributors have been identified, could be a possible answer to the concerns reflected in the initiative. However the lack of support in the Council for that key recommendation may indicate that the Security Council is not yet ready for such a sweeping reform. (*Nb. The issue of mandating-making is covered in greater detail in the accompanying Challenges background paper on mandate-making and implementation.*)

12. In the absence of radical progress at the top level of command, some progress can nevertheless be achieved in the UN Secretariat. On one hand, the military component should continue to be strengthened, and that strengthening can open the way to a better interaction with the troop contributors. Drawing on the experience of the Strategic Military Cell and the subsequent reinforcement of the Office of Military Affairs, it should be possible to strike a balance between the need to involve the key contributors of a specific mission and the principle that UN operations are not coalitions of the willing but the expression of the whole membership. The reinforcement of OMA with officers seconded by the troop contributors of each specific mission, in a proportion that would not overwhelm the core structure, is a possible solution. It is important, if challenging mandates are to be effectively implemented, that the troop contributors who will carry the risk be involved in the planning process.

13. On the other hand, a reinforcement of the military component of DPKO that would insulate it from the political side would not lead to real progress.

It must therefore be accompanied by a parallel strengthening of the interaction between the military and political components of DPKO. The development of formal military committees, modeled on the initial concept of the UN Charter, or on the NATO or EU model, may not provide an effective answer if it consolidates an independent military planning process that makes continuous interactive and iterative exchange with the political side more difficult. The way in which NATO was tasked to develop a plan for the withdrawal of UN forces during the Yugoslavia war without consideration for the political implications of such action is a good illustration, well described by Richard Holbrooke, of the dangers of sequential rather than ongoing communications between the political and the military sides.<sup>iii</sup> The specificity of multi-dimensional peace-operations requires a planning process that integrates the military and police components in a broader effort where they become levers in support of a broader multidimensional strategy.

14. Consequently, peacekeeping operations depend on strong strategic vision. How will the multiple parts of a mission work together in such a way that maximizes the likelihood of achieving the overall strategic goal? This must be planned from the outset. Other organizations are grappling with this problem as well – witness the discussions within NATO on defining a comprehensive approach to Afghanistan. The UN, NATO, the EU, the African Union should compare notes on the experience of their respective institutions. They should include in the discussion the Bretton Woods institutions, which are major actors in post-conflict situations. In the UN, the integrated mission planning process (IMPP) is the first attempt to bridge the gap between a broad political direction that informs a peace strategy and the more detailed guidance needed by the various components of a mission. It needs to be further developed and systematized.

15. Lastly, the rapid growth of the police component in UN operations raises specific questions. While the advisory, monitoring, and mentoring roles of UN police do not raise major command and control issues, the deployment of formed police units (FPUs) does. These issues need to be addressed first at the strategic level, if police commissioners are to exercise effective authority over FPUs, and if FPUs are to coordinate effectively with military units. The use of FPUs, when available, for the maintenance of law and order and crowd control is always preferable to the use of military units. But the tactics used vary considerably from one country to the other. Inevitable differences in training of FPUs must be managed through effective standard operating procedures that likely need to be developed by the UN. The Police Division has been engaged in a major effort to address this issue. As for the coordination between FPUs and military units in situations where they have to work together, the UN has, in particular, the experience in Haiti upon which to draw. Following discussions with troop and police contributors, it could further refine procedures that clearly define, based on the level of violence, the command and control arrangements applicable.

### III. Strategic versus Theatre Level

16. Under the system of command and control for UN peacekeeping, the Under-Secretary General for Peacekeeping Operations has overall responsibility for UN

missions. UN Headquarters provides strategic level guidance and light backstopping. Operational authority rests with mission leadership – usually civilian – in the field. Force Commanders and Police Commissioners, answering to the SRSG, wield enormous control of their respective forces, independent from the Military Advisor and Police Advisor in New York. Vesting the SRSG with autonomy to create strategies for mandate implementation has proven an effective format of command for most mission environments. Decentralization of decision-making power to the mission level empowers the SRSG to make context-specific decisions on complicated issues. Decisions can be taken quickly, without having to be referred back to national capitals, as is the case with deployments by NATO and the European Union. In peace operations, decisions of a tactical nature can have strategic consequences, as they affect political perceptions that in turn can have a critical impact on the credibility of the mission. The strategic level cannot possess the detailed knowledge required to effectively manage such situations. “All politics is local” and the management of a peace-consolidation strategy is a highly political endeavor. The high level of decentralization of UN command and control structures rightly recognizes that fact. From this standpoint, the flat command structure of the UN, with a high degree of decentralization, is appropriate.

17. Yet, the model of UN command and control has shown signs of strain in the complex, highly fluid operating environments of contemporary, robust peacekeeping. Military contingents in DR Congo, Sudan, Somalia, are often required to enforce failing peace agreements.

18. First, where the threat to peacekeepers is high, both SRSGs and Force Commanders have faced challenges in maintaining authority over large forces. Mounting tactical operations which go beyond a purely defensive posture comes with higher risks that some Member States are unwilling to bear. In times of crisis and danger, the authority of the Force Commander is often challenged, implicitly or explicitly, as national chains of command tend to assert themselves. When the senior commanders are nationals from one of the major contingents, the possible tension between their authority and the national chain of command may be minimized, but tensions may then develop with the civilian leadership of the mission or with UN Headquarters in New York, as different understandings of the implementation of the mandate clash. Too much decentralization may then lead to a breakdown of effective communications between headquarters and the mission.

19. Second, while in some circumstances, Member States have imposed informal caveats with the full knowledge of UN Headquarters, through their Memoranda of Understanding, by limiting where their national contingents will deploy or what operations they will undertake, units have sometimes also quietly made clear to the Force Commander the limits of their engagement, including through a restrictive interpretation of their rules of engagement. While this is, in part, a matter of whether contingents have the right profile for the task requested of them, it is also an issue of command. The distance between HQ and the theatre level can only facilitate such tendencies, possibly leading to a dramatic weakening in the effectiveness of force, and to a weakening of efforts more generally. It is therefore important not only that the Security Council, the

Secretariat, and troop and police contributors have the same understanding of the mandate, but also that the strategic level be fully informed at all times of developments in the field and of the real posture of the force. Striking the right balance between creating a sense of ownership in the mission and maintaining UN control is a delicate, but essential task. Too much decentralization can make such control difficult.

20. Thirdly, where multiple peacekeeping missions are operating in a region, as across the Central Africa - “Greater Horn” of Africa axis, operational decisions made in one mission can negatively affect another. For instance, the Lord’s Resistance Army impacts on MONUC as well as UNMIS: the two missions have had regular discussions on the issue, but there is an obvious need for strategic direction coming from HQs.

21. Fourth, where missions concern regional or great powers, as in Kosovo and the Middle East, decisions may reverberate globally, and excessive decentralization may be manipulated by major powers with influence over the mission. Different members of the Security Council may have different expectations with the mission, and they may try to influence it directly, through their nationals in the mission. It may then put the Secretariat in a delicate situation if a high-risk operation encouraged by a Member State goes wrong, or if it is seen as contradicting the interpretation of the mandate made by other Member States.

22. Fifth, sexual abuse and exploitation of civilians by peacekeepers is another area where greater oversight from the Secretariat is warranted. Following such incidents, difficult decisions concerning repatriation of units or sanctions against commanders need to be closely coordinated with troop or police contributors. All troop contributors have stated that misconduct, if not criminal action, not only undermines the legitimacy of peacekeepers, but also, by violating the very values of human rights upon which the United Nations is founded, the legitimacy of the Organization as a whole. Decisive action needs to be taken, and it has to be coordinated and consulted at the strategic level to be effective.

23. Such examples point to the need for strengthening the grip of UN Headquarters on missions, above all for peacekeeping missions with robust mandates. This can be designed in a manner that preserves the day-to-day autonomy of the SRSG, the Force Commander, and/or Police Commissioner. And it should enable peacekeepers to better manage high-risk operations, to deconflict regional dimensions of operations, and to facilitate better information sharing, satisfying Security Council members and countries with personnel on the ground. OMA still remains comparative small, however; additional complex missions – or simultaneous crises would still strain existing capabilities.

24. How can greater operational oversight be achieved? So far DPKO has used the instrument of “inspectors general,” often with extensive experience of peacekeeping, appointed by the USG DPKO and supported by a multidimensional team provided by DPKO. This tool has proven to be flexible and effective.

It has helped re-direct mission strategies at critical moments, as well as adjust command and control structures in a mission, correct support deficiencies, and identify issues of conduct and discipline beyond the area of sexual exploitation and abuse. It should continue to be used and strengthened. But, certainly, it is not enough.

25. Planning, because of the evolving nature of peace processes, is not a one-off event that happens when a mission is launched. It should be a process, in which the initial assumptions and policy responses of the early planning phase are continually reviewed and up-dated. Integrated Operational Teams (IOTs) have helped to bring together military, police, political affairs, and support staff in a formal structure to support integrated planning, mission management, and support. Since the first IOT was established to assist with planning UNAMID in 2007, six others have since followed and support other peace operations. The teams serve as the core for Integrated Mission Task Forces, and provide a hub for information sharing and cross-component liaising, enabling delegation of decision-making. Nonetheless, they remain more focused on day-to-day support provided by operational staff in the Office of Military Affairs, Office of Operations, Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions, and the Department of Field Support. A greater involvement of senior leadership, leading to a genuine strategic dialogue between the mission and HQs would be useful. Once a mission is launched, the strategic level relationship between functional parts within DPKO – OMA, for example – to the Integrated Operation Team (IOT) needs to be further refined. In response to developments in the field, concepts of operation may need to be adjusted, directives to the force commander and rules of engagement need to be regularly reviewed through an iterative process similar to the one described for the initial planning phase. Here, maintaining distance between the strategic level and the field is useful – the strategic level can focus on the bigger picture, without being caught up in the day-to-day minutiae.

26. However, for that dialogue to be substantive, DPKO HQ needs to strengthen its policy capacities as well as its information base. The strengthening of policy capacities requires that the directors in the Office of Operations, under the guidance of the Assistant Secretary-General for Operations, be able to focus on major policy issues, on keeping abreast of the political thinking among Member States, on liaising with non-Secretariat stakeholders (UN system, Bretton Woods Institutions, Security Council, Member States, major troop contributors and donors, independent think-tanks and experts) – and on avoiding being caught in day-to-day management issues, which should be dealt with at the level of the IOT leaders (who need to be appropriately empowered). The strengthening of the information base requires that a regular and effective dialogue be developed between the Joint Mission Analysis Centers (JMACs) that are established in missions and the Situation Center at HQ. Both structures are presently evolving and they are both key assets for an effective conduct of peacekeeping. They should leverage what should be a key asset of the UN, namely a capacity to consolidate information from a range of sources, military and non-military.

#### IV. Political versus military primacy in theatre

27. Military and police operations need freedom from interference, but they also require political guidance. Balancing the two is one of the greatest challenges facing a mission's civilian leadership; knowing when to assert control and when to defer can make the difference between success and failure.

28. Too often, the default is in fact to leave military matters to the military, to offer little more guidance than "do your best." Where peacekeepers are mandated to use force, the assumption is that they will do so when circumstances dictate. But absent a strategic vision of *what military force is intended to achieve*, the military cannot blindly intuit its operational priorities.

29. Weighing immediate options – whether to engage a militia when civilians may be caught in cross-fire, or to wait for a safer, if uncertain chance later on, for example – and their possible consequences are not decisions that can be readily made, nor operations that can be managed, from the strategic level or an intermediate operational headquarters. Military operations by peacekeepers can have very real strategic implications for the mission as a whole, and therefore must be made with well thought out political guidance. The consequences of operations are often most immediately felt by civilian personnel in regional offices, who may be cut off from populations or present a softer target for retribution. Greater attention must therefore be paid to the relationship between peacekeepers and civilian leadership at the regional and local levels.

30. Leadership is a critical, if highly variable, factor of effective command and control. The selection of SRSGs is inherently political – and there are few prospective candidates, let alone candidates with the right combination of political and management skills. The selection of Force Commanders has also been politicized at times, but with greater consequence. National militaries are rightly wary of placing their personnel and assets under the command of a foreign national – yet this is precisely what is required of them in UN peacekeeping. The authority of a Force Commander over national contingents – particularly large contingents – might be enhanced in robust environments where use of force is required by having a Force Commander of the same nationality as the largest contributor, but it should not become a rule: there may be situations where several major troop contributors are present and having a force commander from another nationality may be preferable to rotation between the major troop contributors of a mission.

31. The interaction between the civilian and the military and police in UN operations is therefore highly dependent on personalities. This is inevitable, but can be dangerous if the responsibilities and authority of the respective actors are not clearly defined: SRSGs can overstep their role and get involved in military decisions for which they have no expertise, while military commanders must be willing to listen to political directives and understand the political implications of their decisions. How can the present state of affairs be improved, so that the benefit of civilian leadership at theatre level is maintained, without creating a risk of unwarranted political interference?

32. First, clear directives on command and control at the mission level should be drafted: they should define the extent of authority of the SRSG over the Force Commander; they should protect the Force Commander against undue interference by allowing him to refer to UN HQ in New York in case of disagreement, without being censored by the SRSG. They should also define the interface between military and civilian components at lower levels (e.g., regional heads of office and battalion commanders) – the relationship at lower levels should never be a command relationship. Rather, a cooperative relationship should be encouraged and procedures should be established in case of disagreement so that the mission leadership is duly informed and the SRSG can take appropriate action to resolve differences.

33. Second, mission implementation plans with appropriate benchmarks should systematically be drafted at the mission level and continuously updated through a rolling process. The military and police components of the mission implementation plan should be drafted in the same interactive and iterative process that have been described for the mission plan. This would bring greater clarity on what is expected from the military and allow the military component to develop tactical plans without unwarranted political interference.

34. Third, more attention should be given to training. SRSG and deputy SRSGs, Force Commanders, unit commanders, and senior personnel from HQ should, on a yearly basis, participate in a crisis-management exercise where their command capabilities would be tested and sharpened. Such exercises, which could also include non-UN personnel, would help improve performance as well as procedures.

## V. Conclusion

35. Empowering the SRSG, on balance, appears to be the appropriate model of command and control for UN peacekeeping. Alternative models, despite many advantages, would risk compromising the flexibility, greater situational awareness, and ability to orchestrate the multiple components of a mission that are the main strengths of peacekeeping missions. Nevertheless, the challenges of newer, robust missions have clearly indicated that refinement of the existing model is needed if UN peacekeeping is to effectively and efficiently carry out its mandates. Multidimensional peacekeeping is a highly political activity that requires continued and intensive interaction between different professional groups. The specific expertise of each profession – military, police, civilian – must be respected, but success depends on their capacity to interact effectively. That interaction needs to be further developed in the planning phase, in the relationship between HQ and the mission, and within the mission itself.

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<sup>i</sup> This includes 15 peacekeeping operations, two special political missions (UNAMA and BINUB), and DFS-supported AMISOM, with 5,250 AU troops.

<sup>ii</sup> Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2008).

<sup>iii</sup> Richard Holbrooke, *To End a War*, (New York: Random House, 1998).