Peacekeeping at the Precipice: Is Everything Going Wrong for the UN?[1]

On the Edge of Disaster?

In a five-week period from mid-August to mid-September 2014, the United Nations (UN) had to digest a rapidly growing torrent of bad news from its peace operations.

On 16 August, two peacekeepers serving in the north of Mali died in a terrorist attack. On 25 August, a UN helicopter was shot down in South Sudan, killing three crewmen. Three days later, an Islamist group seized over forty Fijian troops serving on the Golan Heights. A similar number of Filipino personnel were almost taken prisoner nearby but, ignoring orders from their Force Commander to parlay with the Islamists, they defended their base until an Irish unit was able to extract them.

The Fijian contingent was held hostage until 11 September. In the meantime, four more peacekeepers were killed in a roadside bombing in Mali. A fifth died in another bombing on 14 September and (as this paper was being completed) five more were killed on 18 September. Meanwhile, fears were rising about the safety and viability of the long-running operation in Liberia in the face of the spiking Ebola epidemic.

Absorbing this litany of fatalities and dangers, it has been tempting to conclude that the entire peacekeeping enterprise is on the threshold of a major crisis. Senior UN officials have been saying as much increasingly frankly in recent months. In June, the innately cautious Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon surprised the Security Council (and by some accounts some of his senior advisors) with a challenging overview of blue helmet operations. Many UN missions, he warned, are (1) 'increasingly mandated where there is no peace to keep'; (2) 'being authorized in the absence of clearly identifiable parties to the conflict or a viable political process'; and (3) 'increasingly operating in more complex environments that feature asymmetric and unconventional threats.' Ban announced a full-scale review of peace operations.

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[1]   This paper is a commissioned background paper for the International Forum for the Challenges of Peace Operations. The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Challenges Forum Partnership or the Host.

Ban's words reflected a deepening frustration within the organization about the pressures being placed on UN peacekeeping by the Security Council. The UN has recently been directed to deploy peacekeepers in hostile environments, including:

- **Syria**, where 300 unarmed monitors were sent to observe a non-existent ceasefire between government and rebel forces for four months in 2012;

- **Mali**, where the UN deployed in parallel with an incomplete counterterrorist campaign led by France in mid-2013 and struggled to function in northern areas where terrorists and secessionists outgun the government and the UN;

- **The eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)** where the UN has had a history of setbacks in dealing with rebel groups, but the Security Council launched a new Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) to restore order in 2013.

Equally or even more disturbingly, the UN has seen a series of missions that were previously seen as relatively safe – or even successful – plunge into chaos, including:

- **South Sudan**, where UN officials failed to predict the collapse into civil war in December 2013, despite extremely poor relations with the government;

- **The Golan Heights**, where a mission that had long been a byword for drowsy 'classic' peacekeeping has been dragged into the Syrian civil war;

- **Liberia**, where an operation often cited as one of the most effective UN operations and a candidate for closure is at the center of a horrific epidemic.

This paper will not focus on the Liberian case, despite Ebola's potential to wreak havoc in the country, its neighborhood and (in a worst case scenario in which the disease mutates into an airborne form) the wider world. These are profoundly troubling prospects but as Michael R. Snyder remarks, the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) was only mandated and equipped to play a 'supporting role' in the early phases of the crisis, while the World Health Organization (WHO) initially underestimated the scale of the threat.[2] UNMIL may come to play a larger role in fighting Ebola, but this is hopefully not going to become a standard element of blue helmet operations.

By contrast, the challenges that the UN is experiencing in South Sudan, the DRC, Mali and the Middle East add up to a complex pattern of violence and disruption with the potential to undermine the entire peacekeeping enterprise. The prospect of deploying to the extremely volatile and poorly-understood Central African Republic (CAR) this September has also caused much concern in the UN. As the next section of this paper argues, the UN has faced similar challenges before

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[2]   Michael R. Snyder, *What role for UN peacekeepers in tackling Ebola*, (IPI Global Observatory, 8 September 2014). Available at www.theglobalobservatory.org.

– sometimes with disastrous results. Veteran peacekeeping officials see parallels with the mid-1990s, when the organization's cascade of failures in Somalia, Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia led the Security Council to cut back global peace operations dramatically.

The third section of the paper argues that the current challenges facing the UN need to be understood on three levels: (1) immediate threats to peacekeepers' safety and freedom of action; (2) broader threats to the strategic credibility of entire missions; and (3) fundamental political challenges to the UN's entire peacekeeping paradigm.

The last section of the paper argues that, if UN peacekeeping is to survive in the years head, it must address problems at all these levels, becoming (1) more operationally resilient; (2) more strategically adaptable; and (3) more politically credible. Ban Ki-moon's review of UN operations may contribute to all three goals.

Déjà Vu All Over Again?

In June, Council members were inclined to agree with Ban's diagnosis that peacekeeping has reached a 'pivotal' moment. But was this an overstatement? One ambassador, Jordanian Permanent Representative Prince Zeid of Jordan, dissented.

Zeid, a veteran of the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) in the former Yugoslavia (and now the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights) argued that many claims about the unprecedented complexity and violence surrounding peace operations are myths. 'The reality is that the environments facing the United Nations in the 1960s—in the Congo, for example—or in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s were no simpler then than those we face today,' he argued, and the UN missions deployed in these cases, 'were just as complex as anything we have now.' While allowing that organized criminal and terrorist networks do present a fresh threat to the blue helmets, he nonetheless perceived 'a repetition of previous cycles in peacekeeping.'

These comments are simultaneously necessary, reassuring and disturbing.

It is essential to see that the situation the UN faces today is not uniquely awful. The kidnapping of peacekeepers on the Golan Heights was unnerving, but on a far smaller scale than the crisis in Sierra Leone in 2000, when rebels seized 500 troops.

It is also reassuring to recognize that today's UN has learned from its previous tribulations. The organization was having a bad year even before the crises of August and September. In South Sudan, in particular, UN officials have struggled to settle on a long-term strategy for protecting and resettling the 80,000 or more civilians that fled to its bases when the country collapsed into violence in late 2013.

Yet the South Sudanese case also demonstrates how far the UN has advanced since some of its failures in some of the operations of the 1990s mentioned by Zeid. The peacekeepers' willingness to safeguard those who fled to their bases is impressive when compared with the UN's failure to protect Srebrenica or respond effectively to the Rwandan genocide.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, UN officials strove to learn from those calamities and promote the doctrine of the Protection of Civilians. The UN's performance in South Sudan, if imperfect, bore the imprint of those efforts.

But Zeid's reference to the UN's history in the Congo and Bosnia has dark undertones. The first UN intervention in the Congo in the 1960's was a landmark experiment in state-building, but it was an extremely difficult and controversial operation. The scarring experience effectively spelled the end of large-scale UN peacekeeping until the conclusion of the Cold War. Bosnia, Rwanda and Somalia, had a similarly destructive impact on peacekeeping in 1990s. We may indeed be seeing 'a repetition of previous cycles in peacekeeping' play out in cases such as Mali and South Sudan. But each previous cycle of peacekeeping has involved periods of international humiliation for the UN. Are we on the edge of another such dark time?

What's Wrong?

The sheer quantity of bad news flowing in from peace operations in recent months makes it difficult to identify which crises are fleeting problems and which present a serious challenge to the UN. As I have argued elsewhere, it helps to have a diagnostic framework that distinguishes between (1) immediate threats (the current series of attacks and challenges to UN forces); (2) systemic threats (challenges that fundamentally compromise the ability of UN missions to project security and fulfill their mandates; and (3) paradigmatic threats which throw the UN's underlying assumptions about peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding into real doubt.[3]

From Immediate Threats to Systemic Crises…

Some immediate threats to UN peace operations in recent years have coalesced into systemic challenges and brought missions close to collapse. The deteriorating security situation in Syria in 2012 caused the short-lived UN mission there to cease most operations after less than three months. This summer's round of attacks on the UN mission in the Golan Heights, combined with an earlier round of kidnappings of personnel in 2013, have led many troop contributors to pull their contingents out.

Sustained violence has compromised a series of operations in Africa, including those in Côte d'Ivoire, Darfur and South Sudan. This spate of serious challenges to UN missions has raised questions about peacekeepers' equipment, security procedures, doctrines for the protection of civilians and intelligence capacities. Another paper prepared for this conference calls for 'high mobility, agility and the capacity to make the most efficient and effective use of military, police and civilian capacities.[4] The UN has made progress in experiments with drones in the eastern

[3]   Richard Gowan, 'UN Crisis Diplomacy and Peacekeeping: An Emergency Health Check', Background Paper (Oslo Forum 2014). Available at www.osloforum.org.
[4]   'Enhancing Peace Operations' Capacity to Face Threats against Peacekeepers', Background Paper (Challenges Forum, October 2014).

DRC and the creation of an intelligence fusion cell in Mali, although it continues to be plagued by technical difficulties, such a shortage of night-equipped helicopters in South Sudan in 2013.

…to Political Challenges to the UN Peacekeeping Paradigm.

It is difficult and unwise to separate these efforts to reform the UN's operational abilities from debates over the broader political paradigm guiding peace operations.

There is no truly universal political paradigm for UN operations (there are obvious differences between what the blue helmets are doing in Cyprus and South Sudan) but over the last fifteen years, new missions have typically (1) been deployed in support of peace agreements, even if these are often very thin; (2) been mandated to extend the authority of state authorities in parallel with host governments; and (3) been tasked with protecting civilians, in addition to the promotion of human rights.

Now, as Ban Ki-moon warned the Security Council in June, this paradigm is breaking down. In northern Mali and CAR, peacekeepers are operating in areas where armed groups either reject or ignore any peace agreements. In Mali, as on the Golan Heights, the UN faces off-shoots of al-Qaeda that view the blue helmets and West as inter-changeable targets, although these groups feed on local political grievances.

While transnational Islamist terrorism is a high-level concern at present, it is neither the only nor even the greatest challenge to peacekeeping today. Relations with host governments are often an even larger problem. In some cases, as in CAR, the state authorities are so weak that talk of 'extending their authority' in the immediate future is delusional. Elsewhere, host governments treat UN peacekeepers as a threat to their sovereignty and/or continued grip on power, as during the 2010-2011 post-electoral bloodshed in Côte d'Ivoire. In South Sudan, the national leadership has responded to the peacekeepers' efforts to protect civilians by (1) accusing Ban Ki-moon of imperialist tendencies; (2) harassing UN military convoys and patrols; and (3) aiming to block parallel humanitarian relief efforts.

In such circumstances, UN missions can hardly be expected to sustain credible long-term strategies for bolstering state authority. Protecting civilians is reduced to guarding those who are able to flee to a UN compound or its environs. Even where peacekeeping operations have less overtly antagonistic relations with their host states, as in Mali and DRC, national leaders have become highly critical of the UN's perceived failure to attack their opponents. Congolese president Joseph Kabila has, on more than one occasion, threatened to expel all the UN troops from his territory.

Such challenges not only confound UN officials' individual political strategies but also complicate the broader politics of international peacekeeping. Repeated attacks on UN missions have sown discord among members of the Security Council and prominent troop and police contributors. In the DRC, Mali and CAR, for example, African contingents have become increasingly willing to use force and take risks

in response to physical threats. In this spirit South Africa, Tanzania and Malawi furnished troops for the FIB in the DRC, which has carried through its mandate to 'neutralize' the M23 rebel group. Rwanda and Burundi likewise sent troops to CAR under the AU's flag to launch robust operations.

Yet other troop contributors, such as India and Pakistan, have been far more cautious, questioning the FIB and refraining from sending contingents to the missions in Mali and CAR. In South Sudan, some UN units have interpreted their mandate to protect civilians as the basis for relatively wide-ranging patrols to project security. Yet others have taken a far narrower view, staying on or near their bases.

These divisions amongst troop contributors, including some stalwart suppliers of blue helmets, threaten to escalate into a broader breakdown in the peacekeeping system. UN missions are already weakened by individual contingents' tendency to 'phone home' to their national high commands for guidance on how to act in dangerous situations, circumventing their formal Force Commanders. But if there is an indefinite increase in current divisions over operational questions such as risk management and the use of force, it is likely to lead to (1) worsening misunderstanding and disputes at the field level, potentially opening the way for serious mission failures; (2) mounting political tensions at UN headquarters further poisoning already bitter diplomatic discussions of peacekeeping and (3) knock-on difficulties in mandating, launching and sustaining future UN operations.

This does not mean that peacekeeping is near a collapse like that in the 1990s. But the seeds for more turmoil and a general retreat by the blue helmets are now sown.

What is to be Done?

How should the UN respond to the tide of immediate, systemic and paradigmatic threats it faces? It clearly needs answers at all three levels. To address immediate threats, missions urgently need increased intelligence, mobility and security assets. The goal for all missions must be operational resilience in the face of future attacks.

To address systemic threats, however, missions need more than up-to-date kit. They must develop strategic adaptability: the capacity to respond flexibly to developments such as the collapse of South Sudan at short notice. This requires (1) greater contingency planning; (2) a new focus on selecting high-quality mission leaders who can recognize and manage risk; and (3) collaboration between troop contributors, the Security Council and other actors to scrutinize options like the FIB.

But collaboration requires a political consensus among Security Council members, troop contributors and others on the costs, limits and dangers of peace operations in high-risk environments. As this paper has suggested, there is not merely no consensus at present but a growing dissensus on these matters. UN officials and concerned governments need to find ways to spark constructive discussion of these issues, or the UN

paradigm for peacekeeping is going to fray further. Ban Ki-moon's new review of peace operations is an opening for such a discussion, although such policy processes need a lot of political will behind them to make a real difference.

But right now, anything that might just bolster peacekeeping is worth giving a try.