



UN Peacekeeping: An Uncertain Future

By Michael Renner, Worldwatch Institute

United Nations peacekeeping is yet again at a crossroads: it may finally succeed in establishing itself as the preeminent force for conflict prevention and peace, or it could continue operating with a severe mismatch of mandates and resources. Which option will materialize depends on the policies of UN member states, particularly those of the United States.

Following a brief but stellar rise, UN peacekeeping virtually collapsed in the mid-to-late 1990s. Operations undertaken by the "blue helmets" in Somalia, Bosnia, and Rwanda were widely considered to have ended in failure, eclipsing successes in Nicaragua, Mozambique, Namibia, and Eastern Slavonia/Croatia. Right-wing Republicans in the U.S. Congress eagerly heaped blame on the organization and cultivated the view that it was not to be entrusted with challenging missions.

increase to 20,500 in August 2000), 10,790 in East Timor, 5,537 in the Congo, and 4,756 in Kosovo. (The fragility of a peace accord in the Congo casts doubts on when, if ever, the UN mission will be deployed; only about 260 observers have thus far been dispatched.) Further increases will come as an existing mission in southern Lebanon is bolstered from 5,000 to 8,000 troops and as a new observer force monitoring a cease-fire between Ethiopia and Eritrea grows to an expected strength of about 4,200.

The challenges inherent in these new missions are manifold. For example, UNAMSIL was created in October 1999 to oversee a peace agreement between the weak government of Sierra Leone and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), a brutal force that imposes its will through massacres and mutilations. But the agreement was revealed as a sham when RUF forces, unwilling to disarm or relinquish their control over lucrative diamond smuggling operations, ambushed UN peacekeepers in May 2000 and reignited the fighting. The Security Council's preference for "peacekeeping on the cheap"—having dispatched an undersized, ill-equipped, and ill-trained peacekeeping force—nearly resulted in an embarrassing failure. The Council only belatedly moved to reinforce the peacekeeping contingent, and the United States decided to train several thousand West African soldiers to augment the UN mission. It remains to be seen whether these efforts will bear fruit.

In Sierra Leone, as elsewhere, UN peacekeepers face an array of complex tasks that include repatriating refugees, facilitating humanitarian relief, developing plans for effective disarmament and demobilization of combatants, and maintaining public order. In Kosovo and East Timor, the UN has even been asked to administer the territories and prepare the foundations of a democratic order. But intense ethnic and factional hatreds, efforts to sabotage peace agreements, and the persistence of desperate economic conditions could easily confound the UN's efforts and trigger substantial new violence in many of these troubled places.

The challenge posed by these new missions is aggravated both by the continued ad hoc nature of UN peacekeeping and by the organization's financial crisis. When there is success, it is taken for granted. But in the event of setbacks, members of Congress and other UN critics unfailingly rush to condemn the world body as hopelessly ineffective. The UN's revival is tenuous at best.

Key Points

- UN peacekeeping is at a crossroads: it could become a permanent force, or it could continue to repeat past mistakes.
- UN peacekeeping virtually collapsed after several failed missions in the 1990s.
- By 2000, UN peacekeeping operations—and their budgets—were again rapidly expanding.

But what seemed like a moribund organization has reemerged as a beehive of activity. In the last two years, the UN has taken on several new challenging missions in different parts of the world. The peacekeeping budgets and the number of people involved in the missions reflect this rollercoaster development. From peak expenditure levels of about \$3.5 billion per year in the mid-1990s, expenditures dropped to a low of \$838 million in the July 1998-June

1999 budget year. But then, appropriations for July 1999-June 2000 doubled to \$1.6 billion and are now projected to top \$2.2 billion for July 2000-June 2001. The number of troops, observers, and civilian police peaked at almost 80,000 in the mid-1990s, falling to 12,000 in 1999. Rising again, peacekeepers totaled 37,000 in August 2000 (in addition to about 11,700 civilian personnel).

Four missions initiated in 1999 and 2000 precipitated this latest upswing. They are the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL); the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET); the UN Observer Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC); and the UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). The UN Security Council has authorized 13,000 peacekeepers for Sierra Leone (and Secretary-General Kofi Annan asked for an

Problems with Current U.S. Policy

Notwithstanding its earlier multilateralist rhetoric, the Clinton administration chose not to expend any significant political capital in support of the United Nations, even as congressional hostility toward the UN rose to a fever pitch. The United States has for many years short-changed the UN financially, attached debilitating conditions to reluctant U.S. arrears payments, and failed to provide political backup to the world body.

The U.S. policy of routinely paying its peacekeeping dues late and withholding portions of the money legally owed has weakened the UN. Even though the United States is assessed at 30.4% of total peacekeeping costs, Congress decided in a unilateral move in October 1995 to ignore UN assessments beyond a 25% share. Thus, U.S. payments are automatically falling short each budget year. In exchange for partial payment of its arrears, the United States has demanded that the unpaid balance be written off. But these are notions that other UN members, increasingly irritated with U.S. policy, do not accept without intense U.S. lobbying and arm-twisting.

In 1995, the United States paid only 40 cents of each dollar assessed by the United Nations, and just 70 cents in 1996. From 1997 to 1999, as the United States teetered on the brink of forfeiting its vote in the General Assembly, Congress moved closer to full appropriation of U.S. peacekeeping assessments, paying about 90 cents per dollar assessed.

Full payment of dues remains a distant prospect. In July 2000, for example, the Senate and House appropriations committees cut President Clinton's FY2001 peacekeeping request from \$739 million to about \$500 million, though it is clear that even the administration request falls short of covering U.S. assessments for the year. Congress also turned down a supplemental request of \$107 million for missions in Kosovo and East Timor.

A substantial amount of U.S. peacekeeping arrears has built up over the years—some \$1.36 billion as of July 2000 or two-thirds of the sum owed by all UN members. Conservatives in Congress have sought to wield the outstanding arrears as a weapon to force a series of debilitating "reforms" onto the UN. In November 1999, the Clinton administration accepted the so-called "Helms-Biden package," which stipulates that \$926 million in back dues be released over three years. Even though this amount would not repay all U.S. debts,

actual disbursement of the money is conditional upon a long list of demands. Among other stipulations, the package bars creation of any standing UN military force, opposes any special agreements earmarking forces to be available for UN call-up (as stipulated in Article 43 of the UN Charter), and requires the election of U.S. candidates to an advisory UN budgetary panel.

Washington has repeatedly blocked efforts to create and dispatch peacekeeping missions in a timely manner, because those who would have benefited did not qualify under the rarefied definition of U.S. "strategic interests." Perhaps the most egregious case occurred in 1994, when the Clinton administration delayed Security Council approval of a UN force that could have stopped the genocide in Rwanda, a policy the president later apologized for during a tour of African countries. More recently, in 1999, the United States opposed a 15,000-strong force for the Congo—requested by many African leaders—consenting only to a mission one-third that size. During the May 2000 Sierra Leone crisis, the UN needed help in dispatching additional peacekeepers. The Pentagon was at first reluctant to make air transport available and only offered it at triple the commercial charter rate.

Washington has been far more willing to initiate operations outside UN purview—so-called "coalitions of the willing." Two NATO-led operations, SFOR in Bosnia and KFOR in Kosovo, fielded more than 88,000 soldiers in 1999 and cost an estimated \$11 billion—seven times the total resources available for all UN peacekeeping. But such operations are problematic, because they are likely to serve the interests of the intervening military alliance more than the interests of humanity as a whole. In Kosovo, KFOR was born of an end-run by the United States and its NATO allies—around the UN Security Council—when NATO initiated a bombing campaign against Yugoslavia and forced Yugoslav military forces to withdraw from Kosovo.

Key Problems

- The U.S. has shortchanged the UN financially, imposed debilitating conditions, and failed to provide political support.
- By mid-2000, U.S. arrears totaled \$1.36 billion, two-thirds the amount owed by all UN members.
- Washington has repeatedly blocked UN peacekeeping missions while initiating incursions outside UN purview.

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Toward a New Foreign Policy

Even though there have been more than 50 individual UN peacekeeping missions since 1948, the organization has repeatedly had to improvise. The chronic lack of funds and the absence of a truly permanent, reliable peacekeeping structure usually result in a severe mismatch between the expectations attached to peacekeeping missions and the actual capacity to fulfill them.

Each time a new peacekeeping mission is authorized, UN officials scramble to find governments willing to commit personnel and equipment. This has proven to be an agonizingly slow, months-long process, even

though a speedy dispatch can make all the difference between mission success and failure. Often the contingents offered are poorly trained and equipped, particularly in the areas of transport, logistics, and communications. Additionally, national contingents all too often refuse or second-guess orders from the mission commander.

A supportive U.S. policy could make a vast difference. First and foremost, the United States needs to pay off its legally owed arrears quickly and without the crippling conditions that Congress now routinely attaches. New assessments need to be paid

in full and on time. Peacekeeping cannot succeed on a shoestring budget. Even an adequately funded UN peacekeeping system is a bargain compared with annual U.S. military budgets of \$300 billion or more.

The United States has long opposed the creation of any permanent UN peacekeeping force, considering it an unwanted appendage. However, experience suggests the need for a robust, versatile system that can be available to accomplish a broad variety of delicate tasks in time to make a difference. For that purpose, it would be sensible to establish several different well-coordinated tiers or branches within a larger, permanent peacekeeping structure, staffed by well-trained, well-coordinated, and experienced volunteers.

These tiers could cover the range of specialized activities found in most UN peacekeeping missions, which are currently ad hoc in manner. They could include military observers, to help hostile armies disengage and to patrol cease-fire lines; specialists in disarming and demobilizing former combatants; civilian police, to help reestablish order after a civil war ends; a roster of legal and administrative personnel; human rights observers; demining experts; specialists in electoral assistance; and others. The UN also needs better early-warning capacity and a strengthened conflict-prevention capability.

But consideration should eventually be given to a more controversial idea: the establishment of a rapid intervention force that is able to provide protection for civilians under assault, perhaps by setting up "safe zones" secure enough to prevent the mass killings that occurred in the ad hoc safe zones in Bosnia. Such a force could be

relatively small (perhaps in the range of 5,000 to 10,000) but should be backed up by specially trained national forces. By prior arrangement, such forces would need to be designated in advance by their governments and quickly released for UN duty, once a Security Council resolution determined a need for them.

Greater care is needed in training and preparing peacekeeping personnel for the specific challenges awaiting them. Soldiers trained for combat duty cannot be expected to be proficient in the delicate tasks of defusing conflicts and patrolling tense civilian areas. The UN needs to ensure that peacekeepers can be transported quickly to their deployment areas and that they have ready access to equipment commensurate with their tasks. Last, but not least, the personnel strength, contingency planning capacities, and communications infrastructure at UN headquarters in New York need to be substantially scaled up and supplemented by a mobile command headquarters. Currently, there are only 32 UN officers providing planning and guidance to almost 30,000 troops and only nine UN staff for about 8,600 civilian police in the field.

Some of these ideas exceed what current political realities permit. But for starters, the recommendations issued by an independent "Panel on UN Peace Operations" in August 2000 would help reduce the ad hoc character of UN peacekeeping, eliminate many of the arbitrary limitations of the current system, and give the UN a greater chance at succeeding in complex peace missions. If permitting the UN to establish a permanent peacekeeping structure is more than Washington or other UN members states can currently stomach, then they could at least implement the panel's suggestion to set up national pools of experienced personnel, to be made available at the UN's request. The initial U.S. reaction to the panel's report was positive, though it remains to be seen how much U.S. policy will actually change.

Fundamentally, the United States needs to decide whether it wants multilateral peacekeeping to be a serious option. On the one hand, Washington wants to retain the ability to act unilaterally. On the other hand, it does not want to be dragged into conflicts that it judges insignificant or too messy to resolve, like those in Rwanda, East Timor, Sierra Leone, and the Congo. It wants the UN to be available for such purposes and to serve as a convenient scapegoat when things go wrong.

The broader—and more troubling—context is that Washington does not want to be bound by the very rules governing international conduct that it urges others to respect. U.S. policy toward UN peacekeeping bears the tell-tale signs of an exceptionalism that rejects common, reciprocal obligations. The struggle over peacekeeping policy is also a struggle involving the legitimacy of international law and institutions. Both struggles hinge on cooperatively reconciling the contradictions of national sovereignty in a globalizing world.

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Key Recommendations

- The U.S. must quickly, fully, and unconditionally pay its legally owed UN arrears and meet new assessments on time.
 - The UN should create a robust, permanent, multitiered, and well-coordinated peacekeeping force staffed by well-trained volunteers.
 - Other UN needs include greater early-warning capacity, a strengthened communications infrastructure and conflict-prevention capability, and a new rapid-intervention force.
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Sources for More Information

Organizations

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World Wide Web

UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations

<http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/>

United Nations--Peace and Security section

<http://www.un.org/peace/>
(includes links to Rwanda and Srebrenica [Bosnia] reports)

UN Security Council

<http://www.un.org/Overview/Organs/sc.html>

Department of State, Bureau of International Organization Affairs, UN Peacekeeping Issues

<http://www.state.gov/www/issues/iopeacekeeping.html>

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