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United Nations Peace Support Operations: Why, Where and When?

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Synopsis

UN Peace Support Operations are typically driven by the need to prevent conflicts from spreading and harming one's own national interests. However, there are other issues to consider before contributing troops to such missions.

Commentary

21 SEPTEMBER is observed across the world as the International Day of Peace. Established in 1981 by United Nations General Assembly resolution 36/67, it has become recognised as an annual day for ceasefire and non-violence. On this day, all countries and people are invited by the UN to participate in activities that promote peace and facilitate the end of hostilities and conflicts. For nations not directly plagued by war, a long-term commitment to this laudable goal is their contribution of uniformed personnel to UN peacekeeping and peace-enforcement missions, known collectively as Peace Support Operations (PSOs).

UN PSOs

To avoid confusion on the rationale for participating in UN PSOs, two points of clarification must be made. Firstly, PSOs are by definition different from Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) missions that we often see after natural calamities. PSOs invariably involve efforts to contain conflict, facilitate reconciliation between warring parties, and restore peace. Secondly, although it has recently been included within the mandates of UN PSOs, the protection of civilians still remains largely undefined as a mission-wide function, let alone as a military task for UN peacekeepers and peace-enforcers.

In 2006, the UN Security Council stated its intention to ensure that mandates include clear guidelines as to what missions can and should do to protect civilians. However, a report by the UN Secretary General last year noted that "[a]ctions on the ground have not yet matched the progress in words", and that a clear disconnect still remained between mandates, intentions, expectations, interpretations and real implementation capacity.

So while humanitarian reasons may appear at the forefront, maintaining international or regional peace and security is usually the underlying basis of UN PSOs. In the realist world of international politics, there is indeed little incentive to commit national resources and risk the lives of one's own soldiers in a faraway place, even in the face of human suffering. There is admittedly monetary inducement (US$1000 per soldier a month) for developing countries to contribute troops to UN PSOs. But in most cases, the key driver for a country's

participation would be to prevent the conflict from spreading and causing destabilisation that could its harm national interests.

This point was clearly highlighted by a senior member of the US Mission to the UN, who told a recent US military symposium on PSOs that American troops would only participate if such missions were in "US national interest". Little has thus changed from the position of the US administration seven weeks into the 1994 Rwandan genocide, when President Bill Clinton said that the decision to intervene in a humanitarian crisis "in the end must depend on the cumulative weight of the American interest at stake".

Problems Plaguing UN PSOs

Even if it serves national interests, countries must also be aware of five key areas of concern before participating in UN peacekeeping or peace-enforcement missions.

One, PSOs can only achieve their objectives when there is a peace to keep in the first place. The nature of conflicts has changed over the years, from mainly inter-state conflicts to intra-state conflicts and civil wars. Still, the existential angst remains that neutral PSOs are doomed to fail if even one party to the conflict refuses to cease hostilities and negotiate. The failure of the UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) to prevent the escalation of hostilities and stop the genocide is a case in point.

Two, it remains unclear how PSO success can be accurately measured. As no two missions are the same, there is a doctrinal challenge of determining reasonable expectations for PSOs and assessing their performance. Without clear deliverables, PSOs could possibly also drag on without an end in sight. For example, the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) that was set up in 1964 is currently still in place.

Three, there are a host of operational challenges, beginning with the absence of common and centralised pre-deployment training for troops from different countries. On the ground, there are often also military command and control problems between the various contingents, which are further complicated by the fact that PSOs do not have military intelligence capabilities; like the UN Mission in the Sudan (UNMIS) PSOs may not even have complete freedom of movement throughout the country.

Four, the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) has been extremely overstretched. Currently, there are only about 1000 staff in New York looking after approximately 130,000 people in the field across the world. There is evidently a need for DPKO to further strengthen its capacity to manage and sustain increasingly complex and varied PSOs.

Five, DPKO faces the serious challenge of filling up its leadership ranks with qualified individuals. While the military component remains at the core, PSOs now also involve civilian administrators and economists, electoral observers, police officers, humanitarian workers, as well as public information, human rights and legal experts. Given the growing number and complexity of PSOs, there are not enough individuals with the appropriate skills available to handle the multidisciplinary administrative issues.

Where and When should Singapore Participate?

This begs the questions of where and when should a country contribute troops to UN PSOs, especially when other objectives like defence diplomacy and operational training opportunities for the armed forces would at best be of secondary importance. For Singapore and the SAF, the focus should then be in geographical locations that are of immediate and critical importance, where the strategic rationale is able to withstand pressures to cut-and-run if our soldiers are hurt or killed. In addition, we should only participate in PSOs when we have the capability and means to contribute effectively to the overall effort, and where the mission objectives are clear and can be reasonably met.

Last but not least, we must ensure that the mission has sufficient political backing both internationally and within the UN system, as well as adequate administrative and logistical support to perform its tasks. As the saying goes, we must carefully pick the fights that we can win and avoid those that we cannot.

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