Is it time to stop panicking about peacekeeping?

Discussions of United Nations peace operations are always tinged with a sense of crisis. Blue-helmet operations have been through a rough patch in recent years, struggling to stay on top of crises from the Central African Republic and South Sudan to the Golan Heights. As I noted last week (https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/25829/the-downside-of-keeping-the-u-n-out-of-counterterrorist-missions), many experts fear that U.N. forces in trouble spots like Mali have stumbled into counterterrorist and stabilization missions that they cannot sustain. This is just one aspect of a broader malaise. The U.N. has endured a long series of revelations about indiscipline, corruption and cowardice among peacekeepers.

Next week, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will gather leaders on the margins of the General Assembly in New York to discuss how to fix this situation. He has been blunt about peacekeeping’s flaws. As a former U.N. refugee chief, he has seen blue-helmet missions up close. He does not seem to have been impressed. “Peacekeepers are often under-equipped, under-prepared and unready for the dangerous environments in which they now operate,” he told (https://www.un.org/en/content/sg/statement/2018-03-28/secretary-generals-remarks-security-council-high-level-debate) the Security Council in March.

Most peacekeeping analysts agree with the secretary-general, while also noting that missions have no clear exit strategies. “Years of stymied progress, backsliding, and periodic crises have meant that even defining a viable political outcome in most of these settings is vague at best,” as my colleagues Adam Day and Jake Sherman rightly warn (https://theglobalobservatory.org/2018/06/political-solutions-drive-design-implementation-peace-operations/).

But if peacekeeping is in a crisis, it is not a new one. U.N. officials have been warning the Security Council that their operations are overstretched for over a decade. Blue-helmet operations, which almost died out after the disasters of Rwanda and Bosnia in the 1990s, expanded rapidly in the early 2000s as the Security
Council sent peacekeepers to end wars in West and Central Africa.

As early as January 2007, Jean-Marie Guehenno—at the time the undersecretary-general for peacekeeping operations, with 80,000 police and troops under his command—warned (http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/spiegel-interview-with-un-peacekeeping-boss-the-way-we-operate-is-dangerous-and-problematic-a-458801.html) that U.N. missions were becoming “the aspirin of the international community.” In terms similar to those employed by Guterres this year, Guehenno noted that it was a “stretch finding troops for all those missions” and a “political stretch” keeping the Security Council focused on his operations.

Peacekeeping’s woes may have multiplied since 2007, but the underlying difficulties facing the U.N. have remained constant. Today there are still some 90,000 uniformed peacekeepers around the world (https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/data), grappling with operational and political problems very much like those their predecessors encountered 10 years ago. U.N. officials regularly propose alternative models of crisis management, such as focusing on preventive diplomacy and mediation, but the Security Council still relies heavily on blue helmets.

This makes it tricky to say much original about how to fix peace operations. The U.N. Secretariat has initiated incremental improvements in how peacekeepers use intelligence, get medical support and protect civilians. But nobody has hit on radical solutions to the basic strategic problems of peace operations. As I have argued (https://theglobalobservatory.org/2018/07/political-gap-reform-agenda-questions-a4p-mechanisms/) elsewhere, next week’s U.N. meeting will raise the political profile of existing reform ideas, not generate new ones.

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In this context, the most interesting questions about peace operations are how they have kept going over the past 10 years despite their flaws—and how much longer they can keep on like this.


The first was the persistence of short-term spikes in violence in countries where the U.N. deployed. The
second was “systemic”: the challenge of generating the forces and resources necessary to sustain a growing range of missions. Finally, operations could face a “paradigmatic crisis” if members of the Security Council started to disagree on the principles—like democratization, human rights and protecting civilians—that most U.N. missions of the early 2000s aimed to fulfill.

How have these types of crisis played out over the past 10 years? During that time, U.N. forces have continued to face serious outbursts of violence including, in the collapse of South Sudan in 2013, an extraordinary humanitarian catastrophe. These have hurt the organization’s reputation. But no single incident has decisively undercut peacekeeping’s credibility to the extent that the Rwandan genocide and Srebrenica massacre did in the 1990s. U.N. forces have often failed to stop atrocities on their doorsteps, but no mission has unraveled completely in the face of violence like those did.

At the systemic level, the U.N. has improved its force-generation and logistical systems over the past decade. Ten years ago, the organization often failed to find the helicopters and other essential assets it needed to launch new missions. It has filled most of these gaps by assiduously lobbying governments for extra military resources, even if some peacekeeping units are as weak as Guterres says. The Trump administration threatened to upset this progress by slashing operational budgets, thereby depriving forces of essential capabilities, but has since backed away from these threats.

At the paradigmatic level, U.N. peacemaking norms have faced deeper challenges. Autocratic leaders such as South Sudan’s Salva Kiir and the Democratic Republic of Congo’s Joseph Kabila have attacked the U.N.’s emphasis on democracy and human rights, accusing it of imperialism. In the Security Council, China and Russia have also questioned peacekeepers’ promotion of liberal values. But at the end of the day, the council has been able to find compromise solutions over these issues, and continued to direct U.N. forces to support elections, monitor rights abuses and protect civilians at imminent threat of violence.

Broadly speaking, U.N. peace operations have rumbled along despite numerous threats and failures. A large number of states, including permanent members of the Security Council and major troop contributors, have political or financial interests in sustaining the peacekeeping system. At the time of writing this column, 114 countries have backed a new set of commitments on “action for peacekeeping (https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/dpko-dfs-declaration-shared-commitments-unpeacekeeping-1812605e.pdf),” which they will endorse alongside Guterres at the General Assembly.

So perhaps peacekeeping is not in crisis after all—or at least its crises are manageable. Another Srebrenica-like massacre could humiliate the organization. Mounting geopolitical rifts in the Security Council could make political deals over future missions harder. But the evidence of the past decade is that the U.N. peace operations system is much more resilient than it often appears.
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