

LOWER EXPECTATIONS AND CARRY ON: THE UN AND THE CHALLENGE OF “SUSTAINING PEACE”

Seeking to break with its reputation for unwanted complications, sexual scandals and serving Western interests, António Guterres is determined to find a new direction for UN peacekeeping forces: better coordinated, more reflexive and agile, and able to adapt to concrete demands. Is there a future for UN peacekeeping troops as mere facilitators consigned to work in the background? In what follows, I will discuss the transition from peacebuilding towards “sustaining peace”, sum up the key advances and anticipate potential weaknesses.



Pol
Bargués

Research Fellow, CIDOB

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Introduction

In a Security Council meeting of March 2018 on how to improve the record of United Nations (UN) peace operations, Secretary-General António Guterres launched a new initiative, “Action for Peacekeeping”. This was meant to mobilise all partners and stakeholders to support the UN in the key tasks of conflict prevention and sustaining peace. The challenge is enormous, he said, because UN forces “now operate in far more dangerous, complex and high-risk environments” (UNSC, 2018). Guterres counselled refraining from “creating unrealistic expectations”: “I urge the Security Council members to sharpen and streamline mandates and put an end to mandates that look like Christmas trees. Christmas is over ... By attempting too much, we dilute our efforts and weaken our impact” (Ibid.). He added that the role of peacekeeping forces was to support existing initiatives, rather than to offer guidance; in other words, UN forces were “a tool to create the space for a nationally-owned political solution”, because “peace operations cannot succeed if they are deployed instead of a political solution, rather than in support of one” (Ibid.).

What is the role of UN peacekeeping operations when Guterres preaches modesty and restraint?

Once the ideals of promoting a “liberal peace” fade away, what does peacekeeping look like? In what follows I discuss the evolution of peacekeeping operations towards a model of sustaining peace. Seeking to break away from the poor record of past operations – which were overly ambitious and costly, intruded upon national and local politics, and generated widespread criticism – Guterres is determined to find a new direction for the use of UN peacekeeping forces: better coordinated, more reflexive and agile, and able to adapt to concrete demands. This short piece is divided into two parts. First I will explain the early euphoria and swift disillusionment with peacekeeping operations in the 1990s and 2000s. Then I will discuss the transition towards sustaining peace in order to sum up the key advances and hint at the challenges that remain, particularly in the light of unpredictable emergencies like Covid-19.

Euphoria and crisis after the Cold War

It has become obvious that the optimism at the end of the Cold War about United Nations peacekeeping operations was just an anomaly in a long history of disillusionment, Western bias and scandals. In 1988, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to UN Peacekeeping Forces, in recognition of the four decades of peace support operations in war-torn areas such as India, Pakistan, Lebanon, the Congo, Western New Guinea and Cyprus. The UN immediately sought greater influence in international politics and launched more operations from 1988 to 1992 than in the previous four decades.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF UN PEACEKEEPING OPERATIONS WHEN GUTERRES PREACHES MODESTY AND RESTRAINT? ONCE THE IDEALS OF PROMOTING A “LIBERAL PEACE” FADE AWAY, WHAT DOES PEACEKEEPING LOOK LIKE?

In 1992, then UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali seized the opportunity presented by the end of the Cold War to empower the UN

and welcome an era of extensive involvement in war-ridden societies. He introduced the idea of “post-conflict peacebuilding” to increase and broaden the tasks of the blue helmets beyond preventive diplomacy, peacemaking and peacekeeping (Boutros-Ghali, 1992: 212). This implied that UN peacekeeping forces could go beyond their traditional mandates of setting up buffer zones, facilitating negotiations between conflicting parties, monitoring armistice agreements and providing humanitarian aid. Since then, peacebuilding has also involved civilian personnel working alongside military forces on complex tasks for consolidating peace, such as policing, human rights protection, democratisation, aid, the strengthening of government institutions, and the promotion of political participation, often continuing long after the peace agreements and their monitoring have concluded.

As originally conceived, the success of peacebuilding relied on the success of a process of democratisation and economic development, supervised by external agencies. Between 1992 and 1996, Boutros-Ghali published “An Agenda for Peace”, “An Agenda for Development” and “An Agenda for Democracy”, as the three goals were seen as both complementary and valuable to international peace. However, it quickly became evident that these processes generated tension, insecurity and instability in countries affected by war. In order to contain the volatility of these processes, towards the end of the 1990s, the UN sought to strengthen institutions in weak or fragile states. The solution arrived at was state-building, where an institutional framework – the rule of law, standards of good governance, and the development of a vibrant civil society – would protect democracy, development and peace (Chesterman, 2002; Paris, 2004).

In 2000, the Report of the Panel on UN Peace Operations, chaired by Lakhdar Brahimi, considered that “the key conditions for the success of future complex operations are political support, rapid deployment with a robust force posture and a sound peace-building strategy” (UN, 2000: 1). Intense partnerships were required for interventions of this magnitude. Throughout the 2000s, international actors – including the European Union (EU), the World Bank and governmental agencies like the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization in the United States and the Post-Conflict Reconstruction Unit in the United Kingdom – helped the UN to promote stability by fixing states’ failed or weak institutional structures. For the purposes of peacebuilding, they assisted in rule of law reform, provided technical assistance to government institutions and rebuilt civil society.

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The outcome of these operations, however, did not meet initial expectations. The “liberal peace”, as this period of invasive international interventions came to be known, failed to create peaceful, liberal democratic states and prompted severe criticism of and disillusionment with the UN (Campbell et al., 2011). First, operations were economically and politically costly to contributing states, which had to invest considerable resources without clear outputs. Even if war was halted relatively quickly in most countries where the UN deployed troops and civilian personnel, peacebuilding always required more support (Bargaés-Pedreny, 2020). As soon as goals broadened and missions geared towards building positive peace, more complications

arose – often related to the need to accommodate politics, conflict resolution and culture (Brigg, 2010; see also Abdullah in this volume).

Second, the war on terror tainted the humanitarian purposes of international peacebuilding. During the US-led statebuilding projects in Afghanistan and Iraq scholars argued that Western humanitarian rhetoric and global norms – enshrined in democratisation, peacebuilding or the Responsibility to Protect – in fact masked neo-colonial and imperial ambitions. The UN was no longer seen as an unbiased entity in pursuit of international peace and any mission and action became suspect. As Tara McCormack summed up: “Today the ideals of international justice and the breaking down of state

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sovereignty are argued to be not an expression of growing international morality but an extension of American power” (McCormack, 2010: 72).

Scandals also damaged the image of UN troops as neutral guardians. In 2017, an Associated Press investigation into the UN’s peacekeeping troops found more than two thousand allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse worldwide, some involving children as young as twelve. Although the UN adopted Resolution 2272 in March 2016 on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers, critics have repeatedly noted the limited effect of these measures when it comes to preventing such heinous crimes and assisting victims (Smith, 2017). In sum, both the tendency to align with Western interests and the scandals involving abuses and crimes called into question the UN’s commitment to democracy,

transparency and inclusivity and marred the organisation’s legitimacy, both among local populations and internationally (von Billerbeck, 2017).

Sustaining peace and the UN’s light footprint

As seen in the previous section, in the first decade of the 2000s the inevitable complications of intervention, the leaning towards Western interests, and episodic scandals increased the disillusionment with peacebuilding processes and the unpopularity of UN troops. This deep discontent has coincided with the shift towards a multipolar world order: on the one hand, the West’s relative power has declined and liberalism has retreated world-

wide; on the other hand, non-Western powers have risen, and regional organisations like the African Union have taken prominent roles in peace operations. Currently, UN peace operations appear to be adapting to this changing world order in which the confidence in “liberal” peacebuilding has ebbed away (de Coning and Peter, 2019).

Importantly, the nature of contemporary conflict is also changing. More complex and intractable, today’s conflicts are a far cry from inter-state wars between two regular armies, or even ethnonationalist intra-state wars. War at present seems more diffuse, porous and fragmented, and to be dominated by non-state actors that spread violence and give rise to complex governance arrangements and war economies. Think, for example, of the challenge presented by the Islamic State and other insurgent groups that contest state authorities, while affecting and regulating social, political and economic life across regions; the hybrid conflicts generated by campaigns of disinformation and new technologies; the effects of global warming on ecosystems – disrupting land management and food security – and on migration flows; or the human, economic and social consequences generated by the current global health emergency (see the chapter by Vandendriessche).

There is a consensus that UN responses must change and indeed the UN peacebuilding architecture has undergone a series of reforms – initiated by Ban Ki-Moon and continued under Guterres – to integrate different bodies and unite the pillar of peace and security with the pillar of human rights and development (ensuring more cross-pillar engagement). The proposal for peace operations is “sustaining peace”, a comprehensive approach that is more modest in setting goals and high expectations, and which assists conflict-affected societies “all along the arc leading from conflict prevention (on which, in particular, the UN system needs to place much greater emphasis), through peacemaking and peacekeeping, and on to post-conflict recovery and reconstruction” (UN, 2015a: 8). This reconfigures UN peace operations into three key dimensions that are assessed below: an attention to human security and focus on the local level as the basis

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for consolidating peace; trust in partnership and cooperation with other international and regional organisations; and the idea of sustained and prolonged interventions with no beginning and no end.

In 2015, a report by the United Nations Independent High-Level Panel on Peace Operations intended to reflect on the limitations of past operations and offer guidance on future operations opened with a powerful story from the community level. A three-year-old South Sudanese girl, Nyakhat Pal, had to walk through a conflict-affected area for four hours with her blind father and two dogs to receive life-saving supplies from the UN. After the treatment, she returned by foot. The spirit of the UN, explains the report,

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was created to provide human security and address the needs of the most vulnerable. This must remain its purpose: "The Organization will remain relevant to the extent that it responds effectively to the expectations of people experiencing great hardship, sometimes in remote and inaccessible places, and who yet demonstrate enormous resilience, pride and bravery" (UN, 2015b: iii).

Today, every single UN document puts emphasis on local ownership of the peace process and the importance of engaging with host countries, civil society and local governments as key to mission success (see Garcia-Chueca in this volume). This involves serving and protect-

ing those most in need but also consulting and listening to them, considering them as agents of peace. This sensitivity necessarily implies restricting external leadership. UN missions must rely on the existing capacities, community resilience and resources of war-affected societies to advance stability and peaceful relations. The role of UN missions is to accompany and cooperate with local agents to sustain peace. This is different from the role of past missions, which assumed the goodness of any UN action. Today there is more caution and prudence, as awareness has grown that some policies may generate unwanted side effects.

Second, the UN assumes that the scale of the challenge of sustaining peace requires comprehensive partnerships between several international, regional and local actors. While cooperation between organisations has always existed, today the UN creates deep and plural groupings of stakeholders. These groupings mobilise a variety of resources and allocate responsibilities among stakeholders. Important partnerships exist in Africa between

the UN and regional organisations such as the African Union, the Economic Community of West African States and the Southern African Development Community. These have been key to helping the UN address conflicts in for example the Central African Republic, Darfur, Mali and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (and even in cases where the UN has been unable to deploy troops, such as Burundi and Somalia). However, mixed operations have sometimes generated international law and human rights controversies; for example, when attempting peace enforcement or counter-insurgency and counterterrorism interventions (Karlsruud, 2019; Nel, 2020).

Another central partnership is the one between the UN and the European Union, which cooperate on diverse projects for sustaining peace. For example, in 2017 the EU and the UN launched the Spotlight Initiative with the ambitious goal of “eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls” in more than a dozen countries around the world by 2030. Initially backed by €500 million from the EU, this multi-year global partnership provides large-scale, continued and targeted support to countries and regions in their fight against sexual and gender-based violence and is grounded in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It also advances a “new way of working” that brings together all relevant UN agencies, funds and programmes, the EU, its civil society and government partners, and a conglomerate of local groups as diverse as autonomous women’s organisations, grassroots organisations, the media and the private sector.

IN THE FIELD, THE UN HIDES AND DILUTES TO AVOID LEAVING HEAVY FOOTPRINTS. IN ORDER TO AVOID ERRORS, PEACEKEEPING FORCES KEEP EXPECTATIONS LOW AND CARRY ON.

Third, UN peace operations require prolonged and continued engagement. In the words of Ban Ki-Moon, “political processes and institution-building require sustained and long-term international political, financial and technical support” (UNSG, 2014: 10). In 2016, the twin resolutions of the General Assembly (70/262) and Security Council (2282) emphasised the need to “work better together to sustain peace at all stages of conflict and in all its dimensions ... not only once conflict had broken out but also long beforehand, through the prevention of conflict and addressing its root causes” (UNGA, 2018: 1). In the last few years, field operations have tended to last on average three times longer than before, and the trend is growing exponentially. Today, operations that set short-term and ambitious timelines are deemed counterproductive, as they reaffirm war tensions and exclude dialogue at grassroots level. Instead, the prolongation of external support – intervening long before the conflict has broken out and deferring the final end point – brings proximity, leeway and openness to opportunities along the way,

while averting the anguish of meeting deadlines and specific objectives. The UN and its programmes and partners endorse accompanying local actors in the long term to collectively address the vagaries of peace.

Conclusion

In 2020, the optimism about the UN leading democratisation and development processes in conflict-affected societies to achieve international peace has faded away. At the same time, the period of pessimism around international peacebuilding and state-building that led to further complications, fierce criticism and a generalised distrust towards UN troops also seems to be over. Today, the reforms initiated by Ban Ki-Moon and enhanced by Guterres are giving the UN new momentum. A mixture of greater coordination, reflexivity and inclusivity in the headquarters, as well as more caution, responsiveness and greater contextual sensitivity in field operations is bringing positive results.

The key idea here is that of sustaining peace, which is anathema to the more intrusive operations of the 2000s: “The UN’s new sustaining peace concept is, then, a pragmatic alternative that is emerging in response to the failures of the determined-design approach of the liberal peace doctrine”, writes Cedric de Coning (2018: 304). In this short piece I have summarised the ethos of peace operations like this: current peace operations operate at community level and are attentive to the most vulnerable, build on partnerships with multiple organisations, and are long-term. It is too soon to evaluate their outcomes. What seems clear is that the UN is striving to achieve its founding principles with prudence. The troops are becoming mere managers of crises, rather than forces for peace. For example, during the current pandemic, UN peacekeepers in South Sudan have been key in training local community leaders to raise awareness on the risks of coronavirus, as well as have renovated a care centre in a hospital so that doctors can treat patients with Covid-19.¹

However, while peacekeepers and humanitarian partners have a presence in many post-war areas and are useful to prevent or mitigate the effects of crises, they are increasingly translucent. In the field, the UN hides and dilutes to avoid leaving heavy footprints. In order to avoid errors, peacekeeping forces keep expectations low and carry on. Objectives are modest and flexible, meant to offer support to governments and community influencers. Peacekeepers are willing to adapt to the inconsistencies and contingencies of peace processes and swallow criticism along the way.

1. <https://unmiss.unmissions.org/>

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