



The Political Dimensions of Peacekeeping Operations Summary of 11 September 2009 Thematic Series Panel Discussions

The second installment of the thematic series, “Building More Effective UN Peace Operations,” hosted by the Canadian Permanent Mission to the United Nations and the Center on International Cooperation (CIC) was held on 11 September 2009. Building upon the series launch, which surveyed the current causes and symptoms of peacekeeping overstretch, the second roundtable probed the intersection between politics and peace operations – and the tensions therein. Following introductory remarks from Canada’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Ambassador John McNee and CIC’s Director, Dr. Bruce Jones, panelists Jean-Marie Guéhenno (formerly the UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, 2000-2008) and Mr. Michael von der Shulenberg (Executive Representative for the United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone [UNIPSIL]), drew on their extensive operational experience for a frank discussion with attendees on the centrality of political processes in the success of any peace operation. The meeting’s proceedings were governed by Chatham House Rule.

The panel emphasized that the goal of peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions is first and foremost a political one; wielding a range of available means in support of a political process that will facilitate long-term peace. Consent of the parties to the conflict and the host nation is therefore an overarching political concern for the UN; peacekeeping missions cannot impose peace. Current practice has demonstrated an over-emphasis on the military component of UN peace operations at the expense of securing and maintaining consent, tailoring military operations to political goals, and supporting the evolution of the political processes necessary to engender long-term stability and development. This has been detrimental in UN peacekeeping operations from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Darfur to Georgia and Ethiopia/Eritrea, where complacency and a failure to pursue genuine political settlements have served to marginalize the UN’s efforts and create strategic uncertainty within peace operations – resulting, in the latter cases, in mission closure.

The panel agreed that political processes must be adaptive to the operational environment. There is a significant change in the means by which the UN supports consolidation of the political process during the handover from peacekeeping to longer-term peacebuilding activities – from the strategic use of security, to the strategic use of development. This progression must be matched with adequate and appropriate human and financial resources from the UN and Member States, as well. The case of Sierra Leone serves as a prime example: with the establishment of UNIPSIL, a peacekeeping force comprised of 20,000 military and civilian personnel was succeeded by a team of 70 highly specialized personnel. However, sufficiently skilled personnel needed to maintain political processes in peace operations are a finite resource and harnessing the full range of political resources among the UN and its Member States is a central challenge.

During the open discussion with audience members, Member State representatives reinforced the centrality of the evolution of political processes throughout the lifespan of a UN peace operation intervention and the need for better engagement with local actors for any political strategy to achieve its goals. The discussion also reinforced the difficulties in matching political, financial, and material resources at the inception of a mission, especially during the creation of its mandate – a subject that will be the focus of the next installment of the thematic series in December 2009, where distinguished panelists, Ambassador Lakhdar Brahimi will discuss the process of negotiating and implementing mandates for UN peace operations.