



***The Political Dimensions of Peace Operations***  
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From the signing of a peace agreement and the decision for a Security Council mandate, to planning and implementation, UN peacekeeping operations are simultaneously reliant on and support a series of political processes to facilitate long-term peace. A credible military presence and political processes reinforce each other operationally and ultimately the utility of UN peacekeeping operations correlates to the political progress they contribute to. Striking the adequate balance between stability activities and enabling political reconciliation in a post conflict situation is no easy task and always context specific, but is a crucial determinant for a successful operation and its ultimate withdrawal.

That military peacekeeping is never a substitute for an effective political process was a central lesson of the Brahimi Report, but this principle has fallen from focus in several large-scale UN peacekeeping contexts. Recently, the failure or suspension of political processes in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Georgia and Somalia have had detrimental impact on security situations on the ground and the resultant strategic uncertainty has placed strain on headquarters and contributing country resources. Further, the failure to engender domestic political processes has delayed the transfer of responsibilities from costly military peacekeeping to other, ‘lighter’ peacebuilding presences.

***The Relationship Between Peacekeeping and Politics***

Conflicts are triggered by political factors, and short of outright victory for one side, political processes must always be the means to solve them. In the context of peacekeeping operations, a ‘political process’ evolves over time and can come in a number of different forms: it may include ongoing contacts between parties to a peace agreement; a democratic process involving elections or the approval of a constitution; or regional and international contacts on the status of a contested territory. Across the range of circumstances it is important that the ultimate goal an intervention be aimed at building the domestic ability to lead and manage sustainable political processes after war’s end. However, rogue actors, spoilers and sudden shocks can test even the strongest political settlement.

Insulating and sustaining one or more political processes are the key functions of UN peacekeeping operations. The UN’s field presences serve this role by: providing transitional security for the consolidation of peace agreements and national political process; supporting those political processes through facilitation and substantive support, and; reducing the risk of recourse to arms by demobilizing forces and helping national authorities articulate the rule of law.

To perform their political functions effectively, UN peacekeeping operations need a variety of resources: First, they need strong political teams backstopping the political functions of mission leadership; Second, they need effective substantive support from headquarters from not only DPKO, but also the Department of Political Affairs (DPA), and other parts of the UN system; Third, because all politics is local, a peacekeeping operation needs effective political presence outside of capitals and in the surrounding region; Fourth, missions need to be equipped with a mechanism that allows for using budgeted funds toward political activities, especially as regards capacity building, and; Fifth, they need appropriately equipped force contingents able to interpret and adapt to local political conditions with a mandate to protect the political process. This is most difficult – even

well-led force contingents are frequently deployed without adequate situation awareness or local political knowledge.

In many cases, peacekeeping ‘success’ depends heavily on the ability of a mission’s civilian leadership (in most situations the Special Representatives of the Secretary General.) to alter the goals of warring parties and stimulate political progress. Indeed, from Namibia to Cambodia and Timor Leste, SRSGs with a strong grasp of the conflict dynamics were able to employ political mediation tactics to capitalize on the communication space provided by military peacekeeping, taking the ‘force out of politics.’ Unfortunately, finding the right person for the job tends to be quite difficult.

Most of all, UN field presences need to be linked to and supported by broader political mechanisms, at the Security Council and beyond, that reinforce their political role and bring weight and authority to bear on UN messages. Consolidating national political stability also often means corralling regional political actors – a task not often suitable for heads of missions, but one that must be closely coordinated with them. Further, when considering whether to deploy at all, the Security Council should keep in mind that the most effective political strategies for concluding conflicts may be implemented through mechanisms other than a peace operation.

### ***Consent - The central political challenge***

The political challenges for UN peacekeeping largely emerge from the principle of consent and how it is applied in modern operations. Consent by the host, warring parties and the international community, along with impartiality and non-use of force, is a longstanding core principle of UN peacekeeping doctrine, derived from Cold War operations – reaffirmed in DPKO’s 2008 “principles and guidelines”. Yet recent Security Council mandates have grown increasingly ambitious, especially around the use of force, and peacekeepers are deployed in theaters where they cannot expect the consent of all parties, where there is often ‘no peace to keep.’

This has, in some circumstances, such as in the DRC and potentially Somalia, set UN missions on collision courses with rebel/splinter groups with substantial external backing who are left out of political processes. To deal with such spoilers, a UN peacekeeping mission need not only be equipped with the military credibility to protect the peace process, but also must have sufficient resources to properly respond politically to these pressures.

The lack of consent by host states themselves presents an even larger problem. Some UN missions have had to operate in the face of explicit withdrawals of consent by governments, as recently in Ethiopia/Eritrea. Others have had to contend with constraints on their actions as a price for continued consent, as in Darfur and Chad. In such cases where a lack of consent yields the absence of viable political frameworks, UN peacekeeping missions have been deployed with high expectations but with little prospect of supporting long-term settlement of the conflict. Full consent need not be a determinant of success of an operation - but its absence certainly adds to the challenge, the complexity and the likelihood of failure.

This is a political problem that goes to the heart of UN peacekeeping. It highlights divisions between states that emphasize the importance of sovereignty (including major troop contributors) and those that tend to give humanitarian concerns and human rights precedence. The consequence of consent-less peacekeeping is that the UN has recently found itself in a strategic muddle, operating neither in an enforcement mode nor with a political basis for consent-based peacekeeping and peacebuilding.

### ***Conclusion***

As demand for UN peacekeeping operations is likely to rise, political challenges will then continue to represent the central obstacle to establishing long-term peace. To ensure that peace operations continue to serve their intended role and bring relief to conflict-ridden states, it is important that UN peacekeeping rest on a solid political consensus around both the aims and means to which achieve its ambitious goals.