



Don't write off the future of peacekeeping

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The enduring loyalty of Canadians to United Nations peacekeeping should not be treated – as it often is these days – as an unwanted remnant of the past. Canadians are correct in believing that peacekeeping has a vital role to play in the increasingly challenging world of global conflict.

Contrary to the impression often left by our political leaders, peacekeeping has not died, nor has the demand for it dissipated. There are currently 122,000 peacekeepers from 115 countries deployed in 15 UN operations worldwide.

This growth is unprecedented – although largely unknown in Canada, since our soldiers have largely disappeared from UN peacekeeping operations during the past dozen years.

The new generation of UN operations is considerably different than the earlier operations, which concentrated on separating belligerent forces from opposing states through the use of lightly armed multinational forces.

Today, complex multidimensional UN operations are used to respond to civil war and conflicts within weak or failing states. These involve a wider array of tasks, new military, police and civilian participants, as well as carefully integrated, comprehensive approaches. In addition, efforts at peace-building now accompany almost every peacekeeping operation to ensure essential governance structures are in place.

Contrary to popular perception, these new UN operations are seldom light or lame. They are authorized under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which allows for the use of force in self-defence and in defence of the mission. Since 2000, a high priority has been given to robust force compositions with a deterrent capacity. And most operations have also included a mandate to protect civilians at risk – which may involve peacekeepers countering aggression.

It's no longer fair to fault the UN for ad hoc efforts that formerly required each new peacekeeping operation to "reinvent the wheel." The lessons learned from extensive experience have been consolidated and institutionalized. UN capstone doctrine – circulated in 2008 – now provides procedures for more than 80 operational requirements from mission start-up to fuel transport.

Encouraging developments are increasingly evident. Professional management and planning practices have revitalized the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations. In the field, the innovations range from mobile operating bases, special operations units and quick-impact projects to joint mission analysis cells. Intelligence and advanced technology for surveillance – once contentious in UN circles – are increasingly recognized as essential for situational awareness and safety.

In addition, the innovation of paramilitary units of female peacekeepers has proved very effective in calming tension and reducing violence.

Of course, problems remain, mostly as a result of the "commitment-capability gap." Countries with the greatest capabilities (northern member states) often refuse to commit troops, while contributing nations (southern member states) lack sufficient resources and the well-trained, well-equipped personnel required.

Still, the frequent claim of constant failure is misleading.

It's true that the UN's record was marred by tragic developments and insufficient support for four missions: Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Sierra Leone. Similar problems continue to plague the United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) and the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO).

Elsewhere, however, UN peacekeepers have been largely successful, offsetting horrific suffering, saving millions of lives and billions of dollars. And the UN continues to do this on a relatively paltry annual budget of \$7.2-billion.

Given a total of 63 UN peacekeeping operations, with six widely considered to be failures, a success ratio of 90 per cent might seem impressive. (One could contrast that with the record of U.S. armed forces abroad and their enormous annual defence budget of more than \$700-billion.)

But the UN still urgently needs help. Canada is well-positioned to provide assistance, such as special operations units, modern communications, surveillance and logistics assets, as well as much-needed transport in strategic or tactical airlift and helicopters. Yet, Canada ranks 50th in troop contributions – behind Yemen and slightly ahead of Slovakia – despite popular support for UN missions among Canadians.

A larger problem remains. Lacking a dedicated capacity or force of its own, the UN depends on the governments of its member states for access to standby national resources and personnel. These are conditional standby arrangements that allow countries to opt out at any time. While occasionally helpful, no standby system can be made adequately rapid or reliable – as we know from the experience in Rwanda and elsewhere.

With the primary focus in peacekeeping on postconflict stabilization, there has also been insufficient effort and resources to prevent armed conflict, to stop genocide, to protect civilians at risk and to ensure the prompt start-up of demanding operations. Yet, this has prompted renewed interest in developing a dedicated UN rapid deployment force that could prevent the development of armed conflicts, and eliminate the need for later, larger, longer and more costly military operations.

Last year, Oxford economists proposed a UN over-the-horizon force as a cost-effective security guarantor. The Economist and others have recommended a standing UN force for intervening promptly in humanitarian and environmental crises.

A proposal for a permanent UN Emergency Peace Service is aimed at creating a UN 911 first-responder. The idea, which originated in Canada, would involve about 16,000 UN personnel professionally trained and equipped, ready within a standing formation to respond immediately to each critical challenge.

UN peacekeeping has evolved, improved and demonstrated the potential to help in very tough and changing circumstances. A renewed Canadian commitment to “Pearsonian idealism” – ideas and initiatives to help develop a safer, saner world – continues to inspire Canadians and might well be the way for Canada to show better global leadership.

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