2019 International Day of the Peacekeepers
The Thin Blue Line

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2019 International Day of the Peacekeepers

The 2019 INTERNATIONAL Day of the Peacekeepers 17th annual conference at RUSI was organised around the theme of the Thin Blue Line. This represented both the way in which contemporary UN peacekeeping operations must consider the risk of becoming parties to the conflict and the increasing importance of the policing function in these complex missions.

Keynotes

The opening keynotes were delivered by Minister of State for the United Nations Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon and Deputy High Commissioner for Canada in the UK Sarah Fountain Smith. The Folke Bernadotte Memorial Lecture was delivered by Ambassador Ellen Margrethe Løj. These are posted on the conference website along with the presentation from the closing keynote by Professor Paul D Williams of George Washington University. ¹ This report therefore only covers the two panel discussions.

Session 1: Should the UN Take Sides?

Fred Carver (Head of Policy, United Nations Association-UK), Lenneke Sprik (University of Groningen and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) and Matt Preston (Multilateral Research Group, Foreign and Commonwealth Office), chaired by Karin von Hippel (RUSI)

The session highlighted the challenge for UN peacekeeping to maintain the principles of impartiality, consent and the minimum use of force in contemporary missions and hence the risk of becoming a party to that conflict. It was argued that according to a strict interpretation of international humanitarian law, the UN could not be a party to a conflict as peacekeepers were considered as having the protected status of civilians. However, it was noted that some scholars argue that customary law suggests this is no longer the case, based primarily on the experience of the UN Force Intervention Brigade in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). ² A problem arises when the state which has given consent for a UN peacekeeping operation on its territory is responsible for significant human rights violations, as has been suggested in both the DRC and South Sudan, for example. This is emphasised in missions where there is a specific mandate to protect civilians. It was noted that it appeared to be easier for the international community

to act against non-state actors who commit human rights violations than states. This is despite developments that have suggested that sovereignty is conditional, such as the doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect.  

It was argued that while the nature of peacekeeping is complex, peacekeeping forces should never become warfighting organisations as that is not what they are resourced for. If a peacekeeping mission ends up taking sides, it seldom leads to better peacebuilding. However, UN peacekeeping missions are increasingly being used to extend state authority in ways that can impact on perceptions of impartiality in what is inherently a politicised process.

It was noted that the use of force is sometimes required but the narrative around robust peacekeeping has been extended from the need for force elements to be more proactive and engaged with local communities and their security, to something that suggests more regular use of force. There was also discussion about whether the UN’s 2017 report on improving the security of peacekeepers had contributed to a perception of a greater willingness to use force than had been the case previously. The relationship between UN peacekeeping operations (PKOs) and other forces operating in the same territory with more robust mandates, such as G5 Sahel and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), could have implications for perceptions of the UN’s impartiality.

While there was no formal conclusion, it was recognised that the nature of contemporary peacekeeping and the associated use of force was only the latest challenge. It was hoped that the Secretary-General’s Action for Peacekeeping programme would contribute to the ongoing process of improvement.

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5. Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) is a programme initiated by the UN Secretary-General which seeks to improve the performance of UN PKOs. It seeks to address challenges including protracted conflicts, elusive political solutions, increasingly dangerous environments, rising peacekeeping fatalities, and broad and complex mandates. See UN Secretary-General’s Initiative on Action for Peacekeeping, ‘A4P: Our Core Agenda for Peacekeeping’, <https://www.un.org/en/A4P/>, accessed 8 July 2019.
Session 2: Policing, Peacebuilding and Peacekeeping (The Dame Margaret Anstee Memorial Seminar)

Andrea Meyer (Deputy Director, Peace Operations, Stabilisation and Conflict Policy, Global Affairs Canada), Inspector Cris Gastaldo (Regional Manager Liaison Officer, Royal Canadian Mounted Police) and Colonel Nicola Mangialavori (Italian Carabinieri), chaired by Elisabeth Braw (RUSI)

The discussion noted that the changing nature of conflict meant that conflicts are now larger, longer and more complex than in previous times and thus need broader roles and functions in mission structures and mandates. Canada recognises the importance of deploying police not just into UN peacekeeping missions but also into other capacity building and mentorship roles for the benefit this brings in strengthening the bonds between societies and states, as this can foster peace and reduce the requirement for peacekeeping. It was further noted that policing was a function within a broader security sector reform process that contributed to development and needed to be seen as part of that development process. The importance of achieving at least gender parity was also noted, with Canada achieving it on its deployments and appointing women to key senior leadership roles. This was considered essential both to the impact on the ‘peace kept’ (civilians in the area where the peacekeeping mission takes place) and as a tool in reducing sexual exploitation and abuse. Canada considered including gender considerations from the outset of interventions to be essential to eventual success and was partnering with police services in Africa to build female police capacity.

As with many countries, Canada takes police from its federal, provincial and municipal levels on peacekeeping missions. It was recognised that in many cases where there were no formed police units, local authorities and commanders were reluctant to encourage their officers to participate in peacekeeping missions despite the ways in which the experience enhanced skills and personal qualities. This experience was contrasted with that of the Italian Carabinieri. The Carabinieri is a gendarmerie-type force that has the capacity for international deployments in support of Italian foreign policy. Despite a shared heritage, it was noted that there were significant differences in approach between the different European gendarmerie-type forces, but that interoperability was being improved by the creation of the European Gendarmerie Force. It was also highlighted that Italy is the home of the Centre of Excellence for Stability Police Units, which trained units from all over the world in peacekeeping policing. There was discussion about the need to balance security functions with those more traditionally associated with policing. There was also a need to develop the capacity to track who had been trained in what and by whom, both to ensure that local police were being developed effectively and to identify potential contributors to future peacekeeping missions. Finally, speakers discussed a requirement that development of policing capacity was backed by improvements in the wider rule of law including in the judicial system.
Closing Keynote: Lessons for UN Peacekeeping from AMISOM

Professor Paul D Williams (George Washington University), chaired by Angie Pankhania (Acting Director UNA-UK)

The presentation outlined ten lessons on peacekeeping from the experience of AMISOM.

- Partnership peacekeeping such as that between the African Union and the UN is the norm in Africa. It is important to learn from the experience of AMISOM how to do it better.
- PKOs need not only consent from the host nation but to be part of an active political process. This needs the mission to have leverage or influence over local elites.
- PKOs need effective command and control if they are to be more than the sum of their parts. Where there are seams between contingents, these can be exploited by spoilers.
- Planning must be based on the actual context and not on wishful thinking. Host nation security forces might not be at the desired level of operational ability at the outset.
- If the UN is to support a regional organisation’s PKO, it needs to develop logistical support for the actual tempo of operations rather than for traditional peacekeeping.
- Security sector reform is a political as much as a technical process. There is a need to support the development of oversight mechanisms as well as operational capability.
- Protection of civilians needs to be at the heart of PKOs even if not specifically mandated.
- Strategic communications strategy and capability need to be built into PKOs from the outset, otherwise the spoilers have free rein.
- Stabilisation approaches to hold and develop ground are important where a PKO seeks to rebuild state control.
- Politics, not plans, will determine the exit strategy. PKO missions need to be prepared to adapt their plans when they inevitably fail.

Conclusion

The 2019 International Day of the Peacekeepers conference was set against the background of continued increases in the complexity of mission mandates for PKOs and rising levels of violence against peacekeepers in the context of complex conflicts. Discussion among participants highlighted the importance of peacekeeping being conducted in contexts where there is the possibility of a political solution. The relationship between missions and host nations’ governments is often difficult, as sometimes the security forces of the latter can be responsible for significant violations of human rights. Where the mission is operating alongside the forces of the host state, there is a risk of the PKO losing its position of impartiality.

The complexity of mission mandates has seen growth in the need for policing capability in PKOs. Discussion at the conference noted that provision of this capability can be challenging for contributing states, particularly those where there is no tradition of gendarmerie-style policing. However, the ability of police not only to provide local security and policing services at a level
below that of armed forces, but also to build capacity in local policing organisations was felt to be of increasing importance.

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