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Peacekeeping in Africa: Prospects for the Future?

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Abstract

The article discusses peacekeeping in Africa, primarily, though not exclusively, of the United Nations. More specifically, it examines some problems associated with the expanded utilization of peace enforcement in the absence of an international consensus on the norms and principles governing the collective use of force in various dimensions. The concept of “farming out” of peacekeeping both to regional organizations and to willing coalition of member-states is reviewed. It is argued that, almost invariably, collective peacekeeping in the post-cold war period has been executed in a haphazard and ill-defined manner. It is also argued that largely because of such shortcomings, credibility and legitimacy of the United Nations as the ultimate guarantor of international peace and security has all but been lost.

As peacekeepers begin to deploy in the Democratic Republic of Congo in support of the United Nations Observer Mission in Congo (MONUC), it seems apropos to discuss the evolution of peacekeeping in Africa. At the beginning of a new millennium, and nearly a decade subsequent to the publication of An Agenda for Peace, a period of reflection and re-examination of the peace and security dilemmas and debates is once again necessary, and the realm of peacekeeping is one in which eight years of expansion and experimentation does require some form of overview. The stakes are higher, though. In a very short space of time, the United Nations (UN) in the area of peace and security and in particular peacekeeping, has moved from an organization once described by former Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali as one with, “too much credibility”,¹ to one whose credibility has all but been lost. Africa has been at the receiving end of some of the most controversial peacekeeping and peace-enforcement operations, by both the United Nations as well as regional and sub-regional organizations, and coalitions of states, which this paper examines.

Much has been written in recent years concerning the renewed activism of the Security Council in the post-cold war era and the possibilities for the collective security machinery of the United Nations to finally come to fruition. In his now
famous quotation, Boutros Boutros-Ghali stated, “the time of absolute sovereignty, however, has passed; its theory was never matched by reality”. The renewal of the Security Council in the early 1990s in part enabled the rapid proliferation of peacekeeping operations and the widening of the scope of their mandates, and much of this expansion took place in Africa.

The paper examines peacekeeping in Africa, primarily, though not exclusively of the United Nations. In particular the paper examines some of the problems associated with the expanded utilization of peace enforcement, or Chapter VII operations in the absence of an international consensus on the norms governing the collective use of force in various dimensions. As Sharam Chubin has argued, “unfortunately the renovation of the UN system and of collective security is taking place in a haphazard and ill-defined way. Improvisation has perforce been the dominant motif”.

Collective Security, Peacekeeping and the UN

When the United Nations was formed in 1945, its primary purpose was the maintenance of international peace and security, with the Security Council as the organ primarily, though not exclusively responsible for this task. Of the 51 original signatories to the United Nations Charter, 4 were from Africa, these being Egypt, Ethiopia, Liberia and South Africa. The Security Council itself had an original 11 members, which was expanded by Charter amendment adopted in 1963 to 15 member-states in 1965. There are 5 permanent members of the Security Council, China, France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Russian Federation (formerly the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics), and there are 10 non-permanent members which rotate every two years. Of these non-permanent member-states, three seats customarily belong to Africa.

Chapter VI of the UN Charter relates to the pacific settlement of disputes and Chapter VII informs action with respect to threats to the peace, breaches of the peace, and acts of aggression; both of which form the corpus of norms and principles around which the Security Council acts. Collective security conceptually relied on “great power” unanimity, particularly on the definition of aggression and agreement on the course of action which to take. As noted by Kenneth W. Thompson, the chief practical obstacle to collective security is the political problem deriving from the conflict of independent foreign policies. This is to say, collective security both at the conceptual as well as the practical level is dependent upon a modicum of consensus regarding political and military action. Despite the laudable goals enunciated in the Charter, it was very quickly realized in the negotiations subsequent to its signing that this consensus did not exist, save in the minds of theorists. All attempts at establishing consensus on the principles governing the conclusion of agreements under article 43 of the Charter failed, thereby rendering the proposed Military Staff Committee ineffective. Without standing armies at the disposal of the Security Council, it was soon realized by the UN member-states and Secretariat that
alternate forms of military and political collaboration would be necessary in various degrees. Out of this necessity, peacekeeping was born.

Peacekeeping, quite clearly is not collective security, and interestingly, many of the principles and norms that have to govern peacekeeping operations are in many ways diametrically opposed to those of collective security. Peacekeeping in its traditional sense can be defined as, “the deployment of military and sometimes civilian personnel under international command and control, usually after a cease-fire has been achieved and with the consent of the parties”. There is no provision in the UN Charter for peacekeeping, and it is widely recognized as an innovative creation, involving the use of military forces in areas of conflict, but employing many of the norms and means associated with pacific settlement of disputes. This is why peacekeeping is often referred to as “Chapter VI and a half”. Over the years, since the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF1) was first deployed in 1956 in Egypt following the Anglo-French-Israeli attack on that country, a body of guiding principles have been developed which not only characterize, but distinguish peacekeeping from other forms of military action. The first principle is that of consent, which is very different from that of collective security which obviously does not require the consent of a belligerent party or parties in order to take action. Peacekeeping forces and observer missions require the consent of the various parties to a conflict prior to their deployment, and this is why, for example, peacekeeping forces are normally only deployed subsequent to a cease-fire agreement and only after consultation with the belligerents. This core principle of consent is informed by both theoretical and prudential considerations. If the organization were to deploy troops without the consent of the belligerent parties, this could be construed as a confrontational posture, transforming United Nations’ troops into belligerents themselves.

Flowing directly from the principle of consent is the principle of impartiality, also recognized as one of the central principles of peacekeeping. Marrack Goulding notes that this principle, “arose from the fact that peacekeeping operations were interim arrangements set up, as UNEF had been, without prejudice to the claims and positions of the parties”. Peacekeeping therefore was not intended to alter the balance of power that existed in a conflict situation, but rather to interpose forces in order to develop an enabling environment for peacemaking efforts to be established or re-established.

Peacekeeping operations also operated under the principle of the non-use of force, except in self-defence. Observer missions were generally unarmed, and when peacekeeping operations were armed, they were required to approach the use-of-force in this minimalist fashion. As Goulding points out, “the peacekeepers could perhaps win the firefight at that first roadblock. But in lands of vendetta, might they not find themselves out-gunned in the third or fourth encounter?”

Goulding further argues that peacekeeping operations are United Nations’ operations, and that it is precisely the United Nationsness which makes them legitimate in situations where foreign troops would not be acceptable. To a large
extent, and from an historical perspective this can be argued, but this is less and less so. Increasingly the UN is sharing or “farming out” responsibilities in the realm of peace and security and therefore this unique *United Nationsness* probably is a less compelling defining characteristic.

These principles which define peacekeeping in its traditional sense enabled the blue helmets of the United Nations to become a symbol, not only of the United Nations, but of peace. It was precisely in this realm of peacekeeping, given all the constraints of cold war Security Council polarization, where the UN gained an international image of credibility. Of course, like every good medicine, it was not without side effects. Peacekeeping operations were deployed only 13 times between 1945 and 1988, primarily due to this cold war rivalry and the need to satisfy the member-states of the Security Council that all the principles inherent to peacekeeping would be upheld. Some, including Shashi Tharoor, have argued quite correctly that the cold war peacekeeping operations, though effective, were safe bets. The Security Council, subject to the liberal usage of veto provisions by the permanent members, in particular the US and the USSR, could only afford to deploy operations around which a veto could be avoided. The blue helmets were symbols of a moral authority which was held above cold war politics.

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the subsequent warming of relations on the Security Council, a new thinking began to emerge in international circles about the possibilities of reviving the collective security apparatus of the United Nations as envisaged in the UN Charter, and more particularly of changing the nature of peacekeeping to reflect the new global realities of permanent cooperation with the United States as the only remaining “superpower”. As David Rieff argues, “within the Security Council both the United States and Russia had begun to look to UN peacekeeping as a way of winding up a whole series of conflicts that had been allowed to go on”. Following this was proposed was to expand the scope of activities for peacekeeping, to include more components with a civilian content, including election monitoring, the handling of humanitarian emergencies, administrative duties and the like. A second train of thought which emerged around 1992 concerned the changing nature of conflict from primarily inter-state to increasingly intra-state, and the fact that countries which had hitherto played the patronage games which had guaranteed them some form of military and economic assistance, increasingly were exposed and fragile from both external withdrawal and internal strife.

Gerald Helman and Steven Ratner in 1992 proposed the establishment of a UN “conservatorship” and in some cases direct UN “trusteeship” in order to save what they defined as “failed states”, many of which were located in Africa. The virtually defunct Trusteeship Council was seen by advocates of this persuasion as another appropriate vehicle to be revived in order to save these failed states; an idea which would have been viewed as preposterous and contrary to both the letter and spirit of the Charter was now gaining ground and currency in policy circles. Similarly, in the spirit of a renewed peace and security apparatus of the UN, John Mackinlay and
Jarat Chopra proposed the establishment of “second generation” multinational operations, informed by the changing nature of global relations. This second generation of peacekeeping was proposed to be based on new doctrinal principles and a more militaristic approach to issues of peace and security. “In reality,” they argued, “a second generation of UN military operations is already emerging, outside the parameters of traditional peacekeeping, to cope with new commitments of a more effective Security Council”. The publication of An Agenda for Peace, which amongst other things called for the establishment of peace enforcement units reflected this new spirit of optimism regarding the potential for decisive Security Council action. Was it not possible, many asked, for the United Nations to send peacekeepers, “on behalf of the people,” thereby overriding the sometimes sticky issue of consent? Should the questions of sovereign independence and domestic jurisdiction prevent the UN from intervening in crises?

These sentiments gave rise to what was, in my view, a very dangerous methodology where a virtually self-regulating Security Council could propose action in a vast array of circumstances with repercussions of a potentially very damaging nature. It is significant to note that the number of Security Council resolutions passed, the number of resolutions pertaining to Africa, as well as the number, scope, and expense of peacekeeping operations established increased dramatically in the early 1990s. By 1994 though, this expansionist trend had taken a decisive turn in the opposite direction, with both the number and scope of operations contracting significantly. The impact of both this flow and ebb in the Security Council has been felt significantly on the African continent, with widespread implications for the discourse surrounding peacekeeping.

**UN Peacekeeping in Africa**

The United Nations has deployed 14 peacekeeping operations in Africa, 3 of which are still in operation. The vast majority of these peacekeeping operations were established during the activist period subsequent to the end of the cold war, in the “second generation” scope of activities. The experience of the UN in Africa, particularly during this period of activism in the Security Council merits some discussion particularly at the conceptual level.

The first UN operation in Africa was the United Nations Operation in the Congo (Zaire), known by its French acronym ONUC, from July 1960 until June 1964. ONUC was established initially at the request of the incumbent government of Congo in order to guarantee a smooth transition to the status of independence, as well as to ensure the withdrawal of Belgian troops. ONUC was given a mandate to use force, declaring the situation in the Congo as a “threat to the peace” by the Security Council, and thereby involving UN peacekeepers in what came to be one of the largest, most expensive and most controversial of UN peacekeeping operations during the early period. An atmosphere of mistrust developed as UN peacekeepers were utilized in order to put down a secessionist movement in the province of Katanga. Indeed the Declaration on the Inadmissibility of Intervention was passed...
in the General Assembly soon thereafter, in 1965, and as Clement Adibe notes with reference to ECOWAS, like many African states since the failure of ONUC in the 1960s, ECOWAS member-states have tended to avoid UN involvement in their affairs.\footnote{13}

The next series of UN operations in Africa began in 1989 at the beginning of the warming of relations on the council. Resolutions 626 and 629 covering Angola and Namibia, respectively, were employed to rectify long-standing anomalies in the Southern African sub-region. The United Nations Angola Verification Mission (UNAVEM I) was established in order to verify the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola, whereas the United Nations Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) was established in order to oversee the implementation of resolution 435 of 1978, guiding the electoral process and the transition to independence, as well as the withdrawal of South Africa from Namibia. Although some criticism of these operations has been offered, particularly concerning the small size of UNTAG and its inability to control military clashes in the initial stages of the transition process, these two operations are generally viewed in a positive light. The fact that UNAVEM I completed its mandate early in particular has won much praise for these linked operations.

The successor to the first Angolan operation, UNAVEM II, had a markedly different result than its predecessor. Established by resolution 696 in order to oversee the implementation of the “Acordos de Paz” between the government of Angola and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), UNAVEM II and to a large extent the follow-up operation UNAVEM III, were hampered by both the intransigence of the signatories to the peace accords, and by the institutional rigidity of the UN itself. Despite ample evidence concerning the continued stockpiling of weaponry and the failure by UNAVEM II to ensure that UNITA in particular, but also the Angolan government had honoured the portion of the agreement concerning disarmament and demobilization of combatants, the UN insisted on holding the elections in the time frame mandated by the organization. After the rejection by UNITA of its loss at the polls and its determination that the UN was far from impartial in its attempted mediation, UNITA recommenced the civil war. To a large extent a similar argument can be made pertaining to UNAVEM III and its recent transition to an observer force, MONUA, following elections stipulated by the Lusaka Accord, which the government won decisively. Again, despite all evidence that UNITA is re-arming its combatants, the UN has scaled down the Angolan operation significantly during a period of unease.

The UN Operation in Mozambique (ONUMOZ), similar to UNAVEM II, was established by resolution 797 in order to oversee the implementation of the General Peace Agreement between the government of Mozambique and the Mozambique National Resistance (MNR). Interestingly, ONUMOZ, with very uncertain beginnings seemed to benefit from the UN institutional memory concerning UNAVEM II, and the implementation of critical portions of the peace accords was postponed, but the overall peace process rescued.
The United Nations Aouzou Strip Observer Group, established by resolution 915, was established for a period of only 40 days to observe the implementation of a peace agreement between Libya and Chad over a long-standing territorial dispute. The United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara, established by resolution 690, is still in operation. Its primary mission, extended several times, is to oversee the holding of a referendum on the question of self-determination for the population of Western Sahara.

Perhaps the most controversial of UN peacekeeping operations have been those associated with Somalia, in particular the United Task Force (UNITAF) and UNOSOM II. The first United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM I) was established in April of 1992 with a traditional mandate. The continuing deterioration of the security and humanitarian situation in Somalia, with a claim by some non-governmental organizations that two million people were at imminent risk of starvation, and the subsequent claim by the UN that all attempts to deliver humanitarian assistance to internally displaced persons were blocked, led in 1992 to the new type of thinking regarding “second generation” operations. The Security Council on 3 December 1992, passed resolution 794 which authorized a United States-led multilateral intervention which, “under chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations authorizes the Secretary-General and member-states cooperating … to use all means necessary to establish as soon as possible a secure environment for humanitarian relief operations in Somalia”. Resolution 814 of 26 March 1993 also acting under Chapter VII of the UN Charter returned command and control of UNOSOM II to the United Nations, and called for political settlement and national reconciliation. The Somalia operations in many senses were test cases for the UN. It was the first time that an ostensibly humanitarian operation was authorized under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, widening the interpretation of a “threat to the peace” as outlined in article 39 of the Charter.

As has been well documented, this carte blanche approach to the use of force by peacekeepers led to human rights abuses on an unprecedented scale by peacekeepers including the deaths of an estimated 6000 Somalis. Although the vast majority of these deaths occurred after the UN assumed control of the UNOSOM II and after clashes with the belligerent faction of General Mohammed Farah Aideed, as African Rights has stated quite correctly, “human rights abuses by the international forces in Somalia have occurred with disturbing regularity since the arrival of the first UNITAF contingents in December (1992)”.

Perhaps the most paradoxical aspect of the series of UN operations in Somalia, as pointed out by Mohammed Sahnoun, is that approximately 2 billion dollars was spent on peacekeeping in order to protect about 50 million dollars worth of relief supplies. The UN pulled out of Somalia in March 1995, after sustaining 83 fatalities while embroiled in civil strife. To date Somalia is still without a central government and continues to be consumed by internal strife.

The series of UN operations in Rwanda were to a large extent casualties of the institutional memory of Somalia. Subsequent to the signing of the Arusha Accords,
between the then-government of Rwanda and the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), the UN in collaboration with the Organization of African Unity (OAU) which already had the Neutral Military Observer Group (NMOG) in Rwanda, adopted resolution 872 establishing the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR). Following the outbreak of violence and mass killings in April of 1994, of which the UN had been alerted to but chose not to act, the Security Council authorized a withdrawal from Rwanda. When the killings continued through June of 1994, France was given a mandate by the Security Council resolution 929 to intervene in Rwanda, in what was known as Operation Turquoise. UNAMIR II was re-established eventually, but after losing a significant amount of credibility, for lack of action.

The United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL) was established through resolution 866 in order to monitor and verify the implementation of the Cotonou peace accord, under the supervision of the ECOWAS Military Observer Group (ECOMOG). UNOMIL was predicated on the functioning of ECOMOG as a sub-regional peacekeeping cum peace-enforcement operation—an assertion which can be questioned.

**Emerging Concepts**

The first issue to emerge in the recent years of peacekeeping efforts in Africa is that of legitimacy. Whether through militaristic peace enforcement, or through neglect, the UN has suffered in a very short period of time a severe blow to its image and credibility as an instrument of peacekeeping. With respect to peace enforcement, it is significant to note that the enthusiastic response to *An Agenda for Peace* was under speedy review in the *Supplement to An Agenda for Peace* where Boutros Boutros-Ghali noted that the UN does not have the capacity to embark on peace enforcement. In addition, he noted that the delegation of peace enforcement to coalitions of member states had significantly affected the statement on UN reform echoes these sentiments stating, “the United Nations does not have, organization’s credibility as an impartial arbitrar. Kofi Annan in his most recent policy at this point in history, the institutional capacity to conduct military enforcement measures under Chapter VII”.  

Annan notes, though, that ad hoc member coalitions may be the only feasible effective deterrent of aggression in the age of UN “overload”.

The Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations has noted that the inability of the UN to embark of peace enforcement has little to do with its military efficiency, and more to do with its political capacity. The committee further has noted the necessity for a code of conduct to be developed for peacekeepers, as well as the universalization of standards for peacekeeping whether by the UN, regional organizations, or willing coalitions.  

These observations are significant in the sense that they express perhaps the fact that peacekeeping has allowed practice to jump ahead of theory, thereby allowing a situation to develop in recent years where the ad hoc nature of peacekeeping has become increasingly dangerous, particularly for the organization’s credibility and legitimacy.
The concept of farming out of peacekeeping, both to regional organizations and to willing coalitions of member-states, then, is gaining ground in the debate over the future of peacekeeping. Regional arrangements, as outlined in Chapter VIII of the UN Charter and many subsequent UN policy statements including the most recent one on UN reform, have a significant role to play in the maintenance of international peace and security. In Africa, peacekeeping is an area in which various regional and sub-regional organizations such as the OAU, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the like, have displayed keen interest and preparedness. This containment of conflict on the continent has also informed the controversial African Crisis Response Force. There is a tension though in many of the continental initiatives. On the one hand, African countries have often expressed reticence about United Nations involvement in peacekeeping on the continent for several reasons. First, as outlined by various state contributions to the debate concerning peacekeeping, there is no international consensus on the future of peacekeeping, and in particular, as was exposed by enforcement initiatives, there is indeed much contention about the development of peacekeeping. Second, African countries have recognized, as was the case with Liberia and Rwanda, the international community as represented by the Security Council will not always act in crisis situations, and therefore neighbours must of necessity have the capacity to engage in peacekeeping. The thoughtful devolution of responsibility by the United Nations to regional organizations with the requisite support therefore would be a desirable development, if done with the requisite care and seriousness of purpose.

On the other hand, African countries have always maintained that they are sovereign and equal members of the United Nations, and that crises in international peace and security are of necessity a United Nations’ problem, not an African problem as it were. There is the fear that the relegation of African conflicts to the exclusive sphere of Africa not only does a great injustice to the nature of these conflicts, but exempts the Security Council from its legitimate responsibility. The OAU in calling upon the UN to assist with finance and logistics for peacekeeping on the continent has consistently made this point. Similarly, as the ECOMOG experience in Liberia has amply demonstrated, neighbouring states are not always the best-suited to peacekeeping given the interests and stakes involved, and therefore a more detached international presence is at times a more preferred option.

The question of Security Council reform is attached directly to the question of legitimacy. The UN now is comprised of 185 member-states, with a recognition being made that there is a great imbalance in the representativity of the Security Council. Again, without a more equitable and balanced Security Council, particularly at the level of permanent membership, tension will persist between the countries which authorize (or block) peacekeeping, and the countries which are the subjects. There appears to be an emergent consensus on the inclusion of Japan, Germany, and three respective representatives of Africa, Asia and Latin America as permanent members, but many questions still remain, particularly surrounding the veto provision and the method of regional choice.
The Security Council and its method of operation has also been subject to questioning in recent years, in particular by troop-contributing countries to peacekeeping operations. Africa supplies about 12% of all peacekeeping troops. These include troops from Ghana, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Namibia, Egypt, and lesser numbers from Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, Tunisia, Guinea Bissau, Algeria, Togo, Congo, Tanzania and Guinea. The closed-door manner of informal consultations of the whole have led troop-contributing countries to demand more accountability from the Security Council in the realm of peacekeeping.

The expansive definition of threats to the peace has also been a subject of great concern and increasing controversy, as Chapter VII operations have been authorized more liberally. Are there no limits to the discretion and authority of the Security Council? In other words, can the Security Council authorize operations and undertake responsibilities for which there is little direct authority in the Charter?

The United Nations’ main asset in the sphere of peacekeeping has been its political impartiality. As pointed out by Olara Otunnu, “the effectiveness of peacekeepers is dependent not on their ability to impose their will by overwhelming force, but on the moral authority conveyed by their multilateral presence”. If peacekeeping is to regain the legitimacy which once defined it, there must of necessity be a re-examination of some of the more recent applications of peacekeeping in practise, or as David Rieff puts is, “what is needed on Turtle Bay is a period of reflection and redefinition”. This is, of course, not restricted to UN operations in Africa, although some of the more poignant examples of UN failure, as well as UN possibilities have been exemplified in the various post-cold war operations discussed. The collective aspect of collective security necessitates a recognition that the political organs of 1945 require reform in both depth and scope, or they risk trivialization.

Notes

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6 Whereas the official view of the United Nations is that the United Nations Truce Supervisory Organization (UNTSO) was the first UN peacekeeping operation, it is generally agreed that the guiding principles of peacekeeping are best encapsulated in UNEF1, the “second” UN peacekeeping operation.

Ibid., p. 455.

Ibid., p. 454.


Some do not include UNITAF amongst UN peacekeeping operations because, although mandated by the Security Council, it involved a coalition of member-states led by the United States to implement its provisions.


Rieff, p. 15.

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