



Politics in the Driving Seat: Good Offices, UN Peace Operations, and Modern Conflict

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POLITICAL SOLUTIONS TO INTRACTABLE CONFLICTS

“Today’s conflicts are more intractable and less conducive to political resolution” (UN 2015, p. 2). This finding of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) recognises that modern conflict is increasingly complicated by the rising prominence of non-state actors, especially the growing influence of global terrorist groups and transnational criminal networks. Similarly, increasing involvement of regional players in intra-state wars and expanding illicit flows of money and materiel across national boundaries in places like the Sahel, the Great Lakes and the Middle East have contributed to an entrenchment of conflict and have complicated the search for sustainable peaceful outcomes (Bosetti and Einsiedel 2015). This evolution in conflict raises difficult questions about the traditionally state-centric approach of the UN, and how to effectively engage with a broader cast of characters at the local, national, regional, and international levels (Griffiths and Whitfield 2010).

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Modern conflict presents a particularly complicated terrain for the UN's political work, which the HIPPO places at the centre of conflict prevention and management. Today, the UN is called upon to engage politically in a far broader range of conflict settings and with a much more diverse set of interlocutors, with good offices mandates now specifically included special political missions in Afghanistan, Lebanon, Haiti, and Iraq, and peacekeeping operations in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Mali.¹ These cases have given rise to a new set of questions about the application of good offices in modern conflict. How can UN representatives—from the Secretary-General's level down to the deep field—employ good offices in situations where key players are resistant to traditional diplomatic tools of persuasion and pressure? How has the UN adapted good offices to address sub-national conflict dynamics and the lines of regional influence that cross state boundaries? To what extent is the UN well-placed to drive modern conflict situations towards sustainable peace, and what kinds of partnerships would help it meet new challenges?

The new Secretary General is calling for “surge in diplomacy for peace,” (UN 2017) placing good offices centre stage. But have we learned our lines, and who is the audience?

In this chapter, I briefly trace how good offices has evolved from early Secretaries-General through the expansion of UN peace operations in the 1990s. This lays the groundwork for a comparative analysis of modern applications of good offices in more recent conflicts, examining how the UN has attempted to reshape its political engagement to accommodate the changing nature of armed conflict. I argue that the inherently vague definition of the term “good offices” has helpfully allowed for entrepreneurial approaches to political engagement, and that in many cases this has aided the UN in effectively preventing and de-escalating violent conflict.

From these cases, I identify some of the key elements for the success of good offices, including: a sustained political presence on the ground; the ability to respond quickly to changing circumstances; a broad set of relationships; the effective use of both local and regional leverage; and often the personal credibility of the UN representative. But these

¹See Security Council resolutions 2277 (UN 2016a), 2299 (UN 2016b), 2274 (UN 2016c), 2039 (UN 2012). As discussed below, there is a school of thought which holds that all UN missions inherently possess a good offices mandate.

rarely come together, especially in large peace operations. In fact, I find a tendency for larger multi-dimensional missions to bifurcate their work into the operational and the political—often due to the enormous burdens of deploying and maintaining a large field presence—with the political work sometimes dropping in priority. This can result in incoherent, often contradictory approaches and missed opportunities to leverage the UN towards its political objectives. On this basis, I argue that the political shift encouraged by the HIPPO is best achieved by moving away from larger peace operations to focus on leaner, more nimble approaches for the future, with good offices more deeply embedded in regional and sub-national networks.

WHAT ARE GOOD OFFICES? AN OLD QUESTION WORTH REPEATING

“Good offices” is a widely-used term outside of armed conflict, present in a variety of international bodies (World Trade Organization 1994, art. 5; Vienna Convention 1985, art. 11), and in multilateral treaties preceding the formation of the United Nations (Convention for the Pacific Settlement of International Disputes 1899, 1907). Traditionally, the term described the role played by a state in mediating international disputes, such as Switzerland in a range of inter-state crises from the Suez to Afghanistan (Fischer 2002), or the Security Council’s establishment of a Good Offices Committee to help resolve a dispute between Dutch and nationalist forces in Indonesia in 1947 (Wainhouse 1966).

The Preparatory Commission for the UN Charter envisaged that the Secretary-General would have a “role to play as a mediator and as an informal advisor of many governments ... to take decisions which may be justly called political” (UN 1945, pp. 86–87). However, the UN Charter itself contains no direct reference to good offices or even this advisory role. The most relevant provision is Article 99, which allows the Secretary-General to bring to the attention of the Council any threats to international peace and security, and considered a basis for much of the Secretary-General’s authority.² As Kofi Annan has pointed

²See Chesterman (2011); see also Johnstone (2003) arguing that Article 99 was expanded under Resolution 1366 to allow the SG to also act in cases of serious violations of international law.

out, Secretaries-General have invoked this article “very sparingly,”³ but the provision does open the door for direct engagement with disputing parties. And the fact that the earliest General Assembly resolutions overtly called on the Secretary-General to employ his good offices to help Member States resolve disputes (UN 1988a, para. 20; UN 1982) affirms that they were seen from the outset as inherent to the job.⁴

The more difficult task is defining good offices. The UN Handbook offers a very restrictive and state-centric definition,⁵ but that is rarely, if ever, invoked in practice. Javier Pérez De Cuéllar simply referred to good offices as “quiet diplomacy” (Adams and Kingsbury 1994, p. 133). Boutros Boutros-Ghali more pragmatically described the term as “any diplomatic action taken to prevent disputes from arising between parties, to prevent existing disputes from escalating into conflicts, and to limit the spread of the latter when they occur” (UN 1992a). In a similar vein, Teresa Whitfield (2010a) has noted that good offices can mean “almost anything – from a well-timed telephone call by the Secretary-General, to exploratory conversations, or a full-fledged mediation effort conducted in his or her name.” In my view, Ian Johnstone’s (2010) concise but expansive definition captures modern usage nicely: “everything the UN can do of a diplomatic nature to help prevent, manage or resolve conflicts.” This is particularly convenient because it covers pre-conflict, conflict, and post-conflict settings, and includes mediation without being limited to it. However, good offices have not always been thought of so broadly, and a brief look at the evolution of the term from its early days is instructive in understanding how to implement the HIPPO’s politics-first agenda.

³Annan (2001); see also Chesterman (2011) (noting that the Secretary-General has only invoked Article 99 explicitly twice).

⁴Furthermore, the so-called “implied powers doctrine” would strongly indicate that good offices are inherent to the office. This doctrine is articulated in the International Court of Justice: “under international law, the Organization must be deemed to have those powers which, though not expressly provided by the Charter, are conferred upon it by necessary implication as being essential to the performance of its duties” (International Court of Justice 1949).

⁵“When States party to a dispute are unable to settle it directly, a third party, may offer his [or her] good offices as a means of preventing further deterioration of the dispute and as a method of facilitating efforts towards a peaceful settlement of the dispute” (United Nations 1988b).

THE EVOLUTION AND EXPANSION OF GOOD OFFICES

The first recorded uses of the Secretary-General's good offices underscore two facets of the role: initiative and independence. In response to the 1946 Soviet invasion of the northern Azeri region of Iran, the Security Council tasked the parties to report to Secretary-General Trygve Lie on troop withdrawal, placing the UN at the centre of inter-state conflict resolution (UN 1946). Perhaps more notable, however, was the fact that Lie had already begun talks with the parties prior to the resolution, indicating his willingness to employ good offices on his own authority. When Lie was again asked to provide good offices and report on the North Korean invasion of South Korea in 1950, he took a personal line in his reports, often at significant variance with the parties and members of the Council (Franck 1995, pp. 360, 384). In these early uses of good offices, Lie began to carve out an important space for the Secretary-General to manoeuvre independently.

Under the dynamic Dag Hammarskjöld, good offices arguably expanded more quickly than at any other time in the history of the UN. In the 1956 Suez crisis, for example, he took on the role of guarantor, restoring the parties' confidence through direct talks with them, and working to ensure the armistice arrangements were effective.⁶ Hammarskjöld was also willing to stretch his own terms of reference, as in 1960 when he invoked Article 99 of the Charter to recommend the deployment of peacekeepers to the DRC. The resulting Security Council resolution granted Hammarskjöld unprecedented breadth to engage with the parties and command UN assets in the DRC (O'Donoghue 2014).

Perhaps the most important element of Hammarskjöld's use of good offices was his willingness to contradict other UN organs. In the context of a crisis involving US aircrew hostages held in China, the General Assembly presented Hammarskjöld with a deeply biased resolution, condemning the Chinese action as the basis for the Secretary-General's good offices mandate (UN 1954). Hammarskjöld openly distanced himself from this resolution and reassured the Chinese government that he had an independent basis for negotiating the issue. This so-called "Peking Formula" rests on Hammarskjöld's vision that the Secretary-General

⁶See UNSC Resolution 118 (UN 1956a) on a complaint by France and the United Kingdom against Egypt, and Resolution 119 (UN 1956b) on a complaint by Egypt against France and the United Kingdom.

should foremost follow “the principles and purposes of the Charter which are fundamental law and accepted by and binding on all States” (Jacobson 1979, p. 137). Drawing authority directly from the Charter, the Secretary-General is able to act nimbly, to initiate political engagement and take positions at odds with other UN organs.⁷

The intractable Cyprus conflict—which has required a UN operation from 1964 to this day—captures key points along the trajectory of good offices over roughly the next 40-year period. U Thant’s involvement with Cyprus in 1964 followed directly from a request by the Council, and was initially limited to his appointment of a mediator to work with the parties (UN 1964). In 1974, after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus, Kurt Waldheim adopted a more intrusive approach and proposed a common framework for negotiation between the parties (Waldheim 1980, pp. 70–71). Boutros-Ghali took it a step further, initiating intensive direct talks with the parties to generate proposals, rather than simply focusing on the forum and framework for negotiations (Michael 2009, p. 132). Annan went further still by proposing a final settlement to the parties, and attaching an ultimatum that failure to agree would put the plan to a referendum for Greek and Turkish Cypriot populations. As Annan (UN 2004) himself stated, this “enlarged the role foreseen for me, from completing any unfinished parts of the plan ... to resolving any continuing and persistent deadlocks in the negotiation.” It was also the first time the Secretary-General’s plan for conflict resolution would directly involve affected populations, rather than solely state-level representatives.

Cyprus is but one example of a broader trend over the development of the UN’s good offices role: Secretaries-General increasingly saw themselves as active participants in conflict resolution with the ability to proffer substantive proposals, push the parties with external tools, and even engage outside the state-to-state framework by communicating with populations.⁸

⁷This formula has been used since, including by Javier Pérez de Cuéllar to get around problematic General Assembly resolutions on Afghanistan in 1980, see UN (1980).

⁸The 1983 decision of Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar to partner with the Secretary-General of the Organization of American States and a broader Contact Group to resolve several entrenched disputes in Latin America is another example of increasing use of points of leverage outside of the UN. See O’Donoghue (2014).

KEY SHIFTS: DELEGATION, REGIONALISATION, EXPANSION

Immediately after the Cold War, the rates of negotiated settlements of international conflict increased, and by the end of the 1990s the number and intensity of armed conflicts globally had dropped significantly, continuing to do so into the early 2000s despite major exceptions like Afghanistan and Darfur (Griffiths and Whitfield 2010). Renowned experts might have been justified in assuming that the need for good offices would eventually dry up.⁹

However, while armed conflict dropped during this period, the use of good offices did not in fact dissipate. Instead, there was a rapid increase in the establishment of peace operations through the 1990s, with 21 UN operations established between 1991 and 1995 alone.¹⁰ Unlike the Cold War period, where the Secretary-General tended to address conflicts personally with Member States, the good offices function quickly began to spread across operational contexts and various representatives of the Secretary-General, requiring engagement with a broader range of non-state actors.¹¹ This reflected the post-Cold War optimism that the UN

⁹Thomas Franck (1997, p. 180) predicted that the good offices function would “stagnate” in the light of these conflict trends.

¹⁰The United Nations Iraq-Kuwait Observation Mission (1991); United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (1991); United Nations Angola Verification Mission II (1991); United Nations Observer Mission in El Salvador (1991); United Nations Advance Mission in Cambodia (1991); United Nations Protection Force (1992); United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (1992); United Nations Operation in Somalia I (1992); United Nations Operation in Mozambique (1992); United Nations Operation in Somalia II (1993); United Nations Observer Mission Uganda-Rwanda I (1993); United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (1993); United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia (1993); United Nations Mission in Haiti (1993); United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (1993); United Nations Aouzou Strip Observer Group (1994); United Nations Mission of Observers in Tajikistan (1994); United Nations Angola Verification Mission III (1995); United Nations Confidence Restoration Operation in Croatia (1994); United Nations Preventive Deployment Force (1995); United Nations Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1995); United Nations Transitional Administration for Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium (1995); United Nations Mission of Observers in Prevlaka (1995).

¹¹See, e.g. the UN Observer Mission in El Salvador which was mandated to use good offices to resolve a conflict between the Government and the liberation movement FMLN (UN 1993); see also the UN Mission in Mozambique, mandated to oversee implementation of a peace agreement between the Government and the resistance movement (UN 1992b).

could work more constructively with Member States to resolve conflicts, but also the growth of complex intra-state conflicts that required UN intervention to prevent spill-over into the surrounding regions. The delegation and expansion of good offices—implicit in the appointment of a Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) or Special Envoy—was a dominant story of the 1990s.

A second development in the 1990s was the dramatic growth of the so-called “groups of friends,” established by Member States to support or work in parallel with UN peacemaking efforts. Between 1990 and 2009 the number of groups of friends ballooned from only four to more than 30.¹² While these groups were not mandated by the Security Council to provide good offices (in fact they have operated almost entirely outside Security Council mandates), their functions were largely to facilitate political agreements between conflicting parties, and to support the UN operations when a unified effort of particular Member States was necessary. Similar to the growth of UN operations, the rise of groups of friends resulted from post-Cold War global dynamics, but also from a recognition that the UN alone was often not capable of resolving the more complex conflicts of the day.¹³ As such, the good offices work of the UN was not only delegated to more UN actors, but it was more entwined with these support groups and increasingly reliant on tailored constellations of Member States.

Following the downturn in violent conflict in the 1990s and early 2000s, there was a tripling of intra-state conflicts between 2004 and 2014, a parallel tripling of battle-related deaths, and a strong tendency for relapse into conflict by countries that had recently emerged from war (Einsiedel 2014). This trend was driven by significant changes in the nature of armed conflict, including a rise in the influence of non-state actors, the growing impact of transnational organised crime on state fragility and conflict, increased impact of global jihadi networks, and deepening linkages between regional conflicts and sub-national ones (Bosetti and Einsiedel 2015; Einsiedel 2014). The Arab Spring and US interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq were major watershed moments that fed into these conflict dynamics, particularly the tendency of regional players to become involved in conflicts within states. Other factors, such as

¹²Whitfield (2010b). For a comprehensive study of groups of friends, see also Whitfield (2007).

¹³Whitfield (2016), providing a history of the groups of friends following the Cold War.

food prices, climate change, demographic shifts and water scarcity have combined to create new drivers of conflict and a complex terrain for international mediators.

These changes in the nature of armed conflict have contributed to further shifts in how good offices are employed today. Firstly, the increasing regionalisation of intra-state conflict—by which I mean the role of regional states in affecting the trajectory of conflict within a given country—has led the UN to rely more heavily on regional partnerships and structures to resolve conflict. Examples of innovative partnerships include the AU/UN/Humanitarian Dialogue mediation support to Kofi Annan in Kenya in 2008; the joint mediation for Madagascar in 2009 bringing together the AU, SADC, the UN, and the Organisation de la Francophonie (Whitfield 2010c); and UN support to AU-led mediations in countries like the DRC where a more direct UN role may be counter-productive (UN 2016d). Another form of partnership with a lower likelihood of repetition is the so-called “hybrid” operation, such as the AU/UN operation in Darfur (UNAMID).

The UN’s regional focus and partnerships have become more institutional as well, most significantly with the 2002 establishment of the UN Office for West Africa (expanded in 2016 to include the Sahel), the 2007 creation of the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia, the 2010 establishment of a UN/AU office in Addis Ababa, and the 2012 UN Regional Office for Central Africa. With each of these offices granted a clear political mandate, good offices have been spread more broadly, and linked more closely with regional actors.

Perhaps the most important shift, however, has been the growth of large, multidimensional peacekeeping operations between the mid-1990s and today. Whereas traditional peacekeeping tended to be confined to monitoring and reporting on ceasefires and troop withdrawals across international boundaries, multi-dimensional operations are far more intrusive and complex. Sometimes, though not always, deployed to support the implementation of a peace agreement, large operations, such as those currently deployed in the Central African Republic, the DRC, South Sudan, Mali and Darfur, have sprawling mandates covering disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration, security sector reform, justice sector reform, extension of state authority, support to institutional development, protection of civilians, human rights monitoring, policing, support to humanitarian operations, local conflict resolution, technical support to democratic processes, and *also* a political/good

offices function. With mandates that are based in whole or in part on Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the largest of these missions typically have thousands of soldiers and police, dozens of field offices in remote locations, military aviation and ground assets, and annual budgets of over one billion dollars.¹⁴ They are often deployed into situations of ongoing hostilities, where civilians are actively at risk of further violence, and where states are frequently the source of political intransigence and insecurity. At the same time, the missions often have extremely ambitious political objectives, such as to facilitate credible elections, help to resolve longstanding national-level disputes, support the establishment of accountable institutions, or implement complex regional peace agreements with little local buy-in.¹⁵

These shifts—proliferation of UN entities with a good offices function, increasing reliance on regional approaches, and the growth of multi-dimensional peacekeeping—combine with serious ramifications for the good offices of the UN. On the one hand, the UN has far more points of contact across the globe than it had forty years ago. With regional offices and large missions employing thousands of national staff in often conflict-prone areas, the UN is in principle able to keep its finger directly on the pulse of societies. And there is evidence that this has made the UN better at identifying the early tremors of conflict, if not necessarily acting immediately upon them.¹⁶ Deepened partnerships and more sustained presence has also improved the UN's knowledge and relationships with key actors involved in preventing and managing armed conflict. As the next section will describe, this has resulted in some successes for UN good offices in high-risk situations.

But there are strong downsides to these shifts as well, particularly in the growth of the multidimensional peacekeeping mission. Heads of these missions are not only the chief political actor empowered to

¹⁴UNMISS' budget for 2016–2017 is roughly USD 1.1 billion (UN 2016e); UNAMID's is just over USD 1 billion (UN 2016f); and MONUSCO's is USD 1.2 billion (UN 2016g).

¹⁵See, e.g. Security Council Resolution 2277 (UN 2016a) and 2295 (UN 2016h).

¹⁶See International Crisis Group (2016); see also Zenko and Friedman (2011), arguing that there are a huge number of points of contact for gathering information, but criticizing the UN for failing to have a comprehensive method of bringing it together.

employ the good offices of the UN in country,¹⁷ they are also managers of complex, expensive operations with troops, police, and civilians often spread out over huge territories. As a result, heads of large peacekeeping missions tend to be faced with two fairly bad options. Either they can immerse themselves in management, diving deep into the budgetary, human resources, asset deployment, and structural configuration of the mission. This may make for well-managed operations, but it often leaves very little bandwidth for engagement with domestic political actors. Alternatively, an SRSG can leave the mission management to a deputy and focus instead on the political activities required by the mandate, splitting the mission into essentially a special political office of the SRSG and a peacekeeping operation. The first option leaves the political mandate unattended; the second tends to bifurcate the mission into a political and an operational component. There are of course ways to tie these two elements of peacekeeping together, but there are few clear success stories in recent history where a large mission was able to achieve meaningful political traction. Instead, there is some evidence arising from the cases considered below that good offices may be best provided by smaller, more agile configurations, embedded in regional structures, rather than large peacekeeping operations.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS FOR SUCCESS: WHERE MODERN GOOD OFFICES WORK, AND DON'T

If good offices are successful, violent conflict is averted before it escalates, or active violence is reduced rather than perpetuated. It is difficult to measure success in this counterfactual situation: how much worse would the violence have been in the absence of an intervention, or how good would the election have been without the UN's engagement? Nonetheless, by comparing a variety of recent cases, it is possible to identify key elements for successful political engagement, and some of the outcomes when these elements are not present. The essential elements are: (1) an in-depth understanding of the conflict based on sustained contact and relationships on the ground; (2) timing of the

¹⁷By definition, the Special Representatives of the Secretary-General are empowered to represent him, and thus provide his good offices.

intervention; (3) leverage over the key conflict actors; and (4) credibility of the mediator.¹⁸

Knowledge and Relationships

In-depth understanding of the situation, and relationships with the conflict actors are critical to any successful political engagement, and are often the result of a sustained presence on the ground. During the 2009–2010 crisis in Guinea following a military coup, the UN’s Special Representative, Said Djinnit, conducted 45 missions to the region, meeting with all actors, including the military junta. His ground game and clear commitment to engaging with a broad array of stakeholders were viewed as crucial for the success of the mediation effort.¹⁹ Similarly, the UN Office for West Africa (UNOWA) SRSB Ibn Chambas was present in country ahead of, and frequently during, the electoral crisis that gripped the Gambia in 2016,²⁰ and Special Envoy Jamal Benomar was lauded for having spent time in different locales in Yemen to better understand the players and dynamics during the 2011 crisis (Day and Fong 2017). Former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo’s success as a UN envoy in brokering a ceasefire in eastern DRC in 2008 was in part due to his deep experience in the region and broad set of relationships (Bright 2011).

Where there are limited relationships, diplomatic efforts are often stymied. The UN’s experience in Darfur is one such example where, from 2007–2010 the Government’s reluctance to engage on a meaningful

¹⁸The configuration of elements used here is drawn from Day and Pichler (2017). More broadly, the elements are included in a wide range of analysis of UN political engagement. See Babbitt (2012), focused on leverage and access as key elements; Chesterman (2017, p. 100), describing cases where leverage and legitimacy were key elements; Gowan et al. (2010), arguing that elements for success of diplomacy include anticipatory relationships, good understanding of elite actors, ability to anticipate political inflection points, and sufficient leverage; Lund (1996), identifying several factors for successful preventive diplomacy, including timing, support from major players, multifaceted action, and moderate leadership.

¹⁹United Nations (2011, para. 55); UN Department of Political Affairs internal report on Guinea intervention, on file with author.

²⁰UNOWAS (2016); UN Department of Political Affairs internal report on Gambia intervention, on file with author.

political process with the rebel groups resulted in limited access for the AU/UN mediation with key state actors.²¹ The fact that the joint AU/UN mediation was structurally separate from the peacekeeping operation and based almost entirely out of country with infrequent visits to Darfur also curtailed the day-to-day knowledge of the situation and the possible range of relationships. This is a typical shortcoming when the good offices function is located out of country: the Geneva-based Syria mediation, for example, has suffered since 2011 with a lack of granular knowledge, limited access to key players, and little credibility on the ground.²²

The establishment of regional offices like UNOWA and the United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA) has boosted the UN's ability to maintain strong relationships and deep knowledge of conflict-prone areas.²³ The use of well-respected envoys with an established track record in the region has also bolstered the UN's relationships in conflict settings.

Timing

It is particularly helpful for timing if the key parties to the conflict are ready for the UN to play a role. There are several examples where this has led to relatively successful outcomes, including the request by the Government and opposition for UN mediation support in Sierra Leone in 2009; the willingness on the part of the Maoists and the Nepalese Government for the UN to play a good offices role from 2003 (Einsiedel 2012); a request by the Malawian Government in 2011 for the UN to broker a deal with the opposition; and the willingness of both the DRC and Rwanda for the UN to broker a ceasefire with the CNDP—National Congress for the Defence of the People, a rebel group active in both countries—in 2008 due to the very poor relationship between the countries at the time.

The ability of the UN to respond quickly when there is an opportunity to engage diplomatically is essential to the success of its good offices (International Crisis Group 2016). Again, regional presence and

²¹ Guéhenno (2015), Chapter 8 on UNAMID.

²² Hinnenbusch and Zartman (2016), noting that the UN mediation for Syria suffered from a lack of access, consent on the ground, and credibility with key actors.

²³ See United Nations (2011), describing the successful interventions based out of the UN's regional offices.

partnerships have played an increasingly central role in recent years. For example, UN/ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) joint missions to Guinea in 2008 and to Burkina Faso in 2014 produced a clear and forceful reports on the likely deterioration of the situation in the period to follow and positioned the UN to be ready to act when the crisis struck.²⁴ Similarly, in responding to the 2010 crisis in Kyrgyzstan, the proximity of the UNRCCA facilitated early contacts as the situation developed, quick establishment of a new in-country office, and the rapid deployment of a senior reconciliation adviser (UN 2011, para. 23). Being present in the neighbourhood does not guarantee timely response by the UN, but it appears to help.

Leverage

Leverage is the most important of the factors, and perhaps the most elusive given that the UN “often appear[s] unable to do more than encourage contacts to behave responsibly” (International Crisis Group 2016, p. 18). Instead, the UN must rely more upon soft-power techniques, corralling international actors around common messages, finding pressure points via bilateral relations, and offering hesitant leaders discreet ladders to climb down from conflict (Wallenstein 2015; Ramsbotham et al. 2016, pp. 199–212).

However, often even the most well-coordinated messaging can fail to gain leverage by itself. In Gambia, SRSR Chambas was working to pressure incumbent President Jammeh to accept the results of the 2016 election, and during a single month Jammeh was made to receive similar messages from the King of Morocco, the presidents of Liberia, Mauritania, Chad and Nigeria, as well as from the Organization of Islamic Conference, the UN, and the AU.²⁵ But even this exceptionally well-coordinated approach did not appear to change Jammeh’s calculations, and it was only when ECOWAS demonstrated its willingness to use force to back up its message that he agreed to step aside (Al Jazeera 2017). In terms of preventing major escalation, sometimes diplomacy backed by threat of force is necessary (Johnstone 2003).

²⁴UN Department of Political Affairs internal report on Burkina Faso intervention, on file with author.

²⁵UN DPA internal assessment of Gambia intervention, on file with author.

Short of use of force, other sticks can generate leverage when combined with diplomacy. In Burkina Faso, the threat of sanctions by the AU, along with suspension of AU membership and united messaging from the Security Council (Reuters 2015), together contributed to the leader's decision to step down and avoid further violence. In contrast, the AU's imposition of sanctions on the military junta in Guinea in 2009 appeared to have no impact; in fact, the incumbent head of state reportedly entrenched his position immediately following the sanctions.²⁶ There is no magic formula to gain leverage, but the combination of sustained international messaging, combined with something more coercive, has shown some success.

Often, a major bilateral actor or combination of actors can dramatically increase the leverage over a reluctant principal. In 2015, US Secretary of State John Kerry broke protocol and flew to see incumbent Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan, urging him to respect the outcome of the elections (Shapiro 2015). There is anecdotal evidence that this may have played a role in Jonathan's decision to stand down. Richard Holbrooke's famous role in pushing Slobodan Milošević to accept the 1995 Dayton Accords is another such example, which also demonstrates the importance of threat of force behind diplomatic action (Holbrooke 1998). The growth of groups of friends described above in fact reflects the efficacy of getting the right constellation of Member States around a particular conflict setting, one of whom often possesses outsize leverage (Whitfield 2007).

A united Security Council is one of the most authoritative sources of leverage and, when it speaks with one voice, there is a far higher chance of success. But even a united Council cannot necessarily deliver. Strong, well-coordinated messaging on the need for both Presidents Kabila and Nkurunziza to step down in DRC and Burundi, respectively, have fallen on deaf ears, even in the face of widespread violence. And the Council has become increasingly notorious for its paralysis on key conflicts, most importantly Syria, but also arguably in its failure to place Myanmar, Ukraine, and Zimbabwe meaningfully on its agenda in recent years, thwarted by the use of a Permanent Member's veto. A united Security Council is often necessary, but seldom sufficient, to achieving leverage (Gowan 2017).

²⁶UN DPA internal assessment of Gambia intervention (Day and Pichler 2018).

Finally, it is worth considering the potential leverage provided by the presence of large peacekeeping operations, which often deliver significant programmatic funds, deploy troops, and engage with a range of actors on the ground. While this kind of presence should ostensibly generate leverage for the UN, experience has if anything underscored the extremely limited political sway of even the biggest peacekeeping operation. The 2008 deployment of nearly 20,000 AU/UN troops into Darfur had no apparent impact on the Government's or rebels' positions with respect to the peace negotiations (which are unresolved nine years later). Nor did UNMISS' very large presence in South Sudan in 2013 appear to give it much influence over the protagonists of the civil war, and the 2016 relapse into open conflict there has shown the lack of leverage of the UN in brokering a political solution there. Likewise, MONUSCO's sprawling presence across the DRC and significant state-building support programs have not positioned the UN as a central player in the ongoing negotiations over the electoral process.²⁷ As the former Chief of the Department of Peacekeeping lamented, large missions like those in Darfur and the DRC frequently fail to use their presence as a fulcrum for gaining influence in country, due to "a lack of understanding of the political nature of peacekeeping, as if the conduct of military operations and the military posture could be divorced from the politics of the situation" (Guéhenno 2015).

Credibility

There is no formula for achieving credibility in a diplomatic process, and frequently it is highly personality-based. In some cases, the respect afforded to a seasoned official with a history of success in the region bestows credibility on a process. Here, the particular status of Djinnit in Guinea, Obasanjo in eastern DRC, and Ibn Chambas in Gambia and Nigeria have been cited as critical to the success of the diplomatic effort (Hara 2011). But even the most seasoned and respected officials are not always capable of delivering if the conditions are not right. Kofi Annan was highly successful in Kenya in 2008, but made very little progress as the Syria Envoy in 2012. Lakhdar Brahimi brokered major breakthroughs in Afghanistan, but he too was stymied by Syria. What is clear

²⁷In fact, the SRSG of MONUSCO has been largely limited to a supportive role to the AU-led mediation on the elections crisis.

is that a lack of credibility will undermine the process, particularly if the mediator is seen as an unwanted intervention or too dependent upon biased actors. Here again, as described above, embedding mediation processes in regional structures like UNOWA and the UNRCCA may have had a salubrious effect on the UN's credibility to address recent conflicts.

TOO BIG, MAY FAIL: RECOMMENDATIONS TOWARD NIMBLE, EFFECTIVE GOOD OFFICES

The nature of violent conflict has radically changed since the inception of the UN in 1945, and the UN's role in preventing and resolving it has had to evolve as well. As the UN has become more deeply involved in intransigent civil wars, increasingly reliant on a broad range of international, regional, and local actors, and heavily invested in large peace operations, good offices have become only one of several tools available to peacemakers. In many ways, the waters of diplomacy have been muddied. But, as the HIPPO points out, the political work of the UN is *primus inter pares*, and political solutions must be at the heart of modern conflict prevention and management.

A crucial step in this regard is to build strategies based on the successful elements of past efforts, looking to deepen knowledge and key relationships, identify ripe moments when diplomatic intervention will have the most impact, and connect all the points of leverage into a coherent approach. The cases described above have demonstrated that the vaguely defined notion of good offices has allowed for innovative, entrepreneurial approaches and some tangible stories of success. The establishment of lean, relatively responsive regional offices has especially helped deliver diplomatic interventions in a flexible and bespoke fashion, and could be usefully replicated in regions including North Africa and potentially the Middle East.²⁸

At the same time, it appears that the growth of multidimensional peacekeeping has not contributed substantially to politics-first approaches. In fact, the heavy administrative burdens and competing tasks of large missions may well have had a deleterious effect on SRSGs' capacity to focus on the political work of the mission. With much to lose and little demonstrable leverage, large missions appear to tend to become

²⁸See Gowan et al. (2010), noting that the UN Secretariat had proposed the establishment of additional regional political offices for East Asia and Latin America, which had not been approved by Member States.

practical hostages of the host government, often sacrificing leverage and independence when the time comes to press for political outcomes. Perhaps ironically, it seems that missions mandated to build state institutions and capacity—such as in the DRC, South Sudan, and Mali—may have had the least success in gaining political traction in country. Further down the size scale, and considering missions such as those in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Mozambique, East Timor, and El Salvador, there may be instances where missions were able to employ their good offices more effectively. But there is little evidence that size matters when it comes to achieving political solutions in peace operations.

All of this leads to the conclusion that the UN's good offices appear best employed in a flexible, nimble fashion, unencumbered by overly ambitious peacekeeping mandates, and able to find leverage points outside of the UN, especially via regional players. In an era of paralysis within the Security Council and deepening divisions in many of the most fragile regions in the world, independent, entrepreneurial diplomats in the vein of Dag Hammarskjöld are sorely needed to carry out the demanding political work of the United Nations. In order to do so, protecting the good offices functions as “almost anything” (Whitfield 2010a) is perhaps more important than ever.

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