

United Nations Peace Operations in a Changing Global Order

Cedric de Coning · Mateja Peter
Editors

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FOREWORD

It is amazing now to recall that when Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon announced in June 2014 that he intended to commission a review of peace operations, it came as a surprise—indeed, so far as the Secretariat’s Departments of Peacekeeping Operations and Political Affairs were concerned, as an unwelcome shock. In retrospect, as this book shows, it is clear that the radical changes in context that had taken place in the fourteen years since the Brahimi report made a further review if anything overdue.

Yet the timing of the review by the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) posed a problem. (When its Chairperson, José Ramos-Horta, said that he did not want our report to follow the Brahimi report in being named after him, he did not envisage that it would forever be dubbed HIPPO.) By the time the report was published, the end of Ban’s term would be fast approaching; while some changes could be hoped for, major reform would inevitably have to await the leadership of the next Secretary-General and new department heads. Yet a new Secretary-General might not want to be associated with a predecessor’s initiative, and the initial impact of a review on member states is not easily sustained.

Nearly four years on, however, the analysis and recommendations of the HIPPO report have continued to be valued as the framework for developments and debate regarding UN peace operations. Its recommendations having been largely accepted by Ban, modest reforms were set in motion in 2015–2016 before his term came to an end. Member

state reactions to the report were generally positive, inevitably with some cherry-picking; and its analysis narrowed—while it did not resolve—the tension between traditional peacekeeping espoused by many troop-contributing countries and the trend towards more robust mandates adopted by the Security Council. The HIPPO’s thinking, along with that of the other two major reviews published in 2015—regarding peacebuilding architecture, and women, peace and security—featured prominently in the public exchanges between member states and candidates to be the next Secretary-General. The early initiatives of Secretary-General António Guterres manifested his intention to improve strategic analysis and planning by the Secretariat, and to restructure its peace and security departments—described by the HIPPO as “hampering the effective assessment, design and conduct of peace operations”—as well as to further strengthen measures to address sexual exploitation and abuse, which have so damaged the reputation of UN peacekeeping.

The HIPPO’s insistence on the primacy of politics—that “lasting peace is achieved not through military and technical engagements, but through political solutions”, and therefore “politics must drive the design and implementation of peace operations”—is now widely emphasised, including in the Security Council itself. In this, the HIPPO was giving necessary reinforcement to the Brahimi report’s critique of the strategic weaknesses of the Secretariat and the Security Council. But it is not always noted that in another respect, the HIPPO report went in the opposite direction from the Brahimi report: while the latter gave strong endorsement to the model of the large multidimensional peacekeeping operation with extensive peacebuilding functions, HIPPO’s keywords are prioritisation and sequencing, which together with its emphasis on conflict prevention may point to smaller missions.

When Ban decided to launch the review, the most recent new missions were MINUSMA in Mali (April 2013) and MINUSCA in the Central African Republic (April 2014)—and Mali in particular had displayed the failures of UN planning, mandating and deployment at their most acute, for which peacekeepers have paid with their lives. Worsening conflicts in South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo have shown how difficult it is to adapt the established configuration of large peace operations to changed circumstances, as the Secretariat and the Security Council are now trying to do more systematically through a series of strategic reviews. The HIPPO’s emphasis on context-specific mission

design, avoiding templates and its recommendation for a two-stage mandating process at the outset of a mission, have been widely supported in principle; but the ability to plan better in the future remains untested, as no new peacekeeping operation has been mandated since 2014.

The one new peace operation, launched in the positive context of a peace agreement at the request of both parties, has been the special political mission in Colombia, the design of which was most strongly influenced by its predecessor in Nepal. The HIPPO urged the abandonment of a binary distinction between peacekeeping operations and special political missions—it has become a cliché to note that peacekeeping operations often now have “no peace to keep”, and (as I once entitled an article) “all missions are political”. We advocated thinking instead in terms of a flexible spectrum of peace operations, the logic of which was accepted by Ban and is reflected in Guterres’ proposals for a restructured Department of Peace Operations. But resistance to this terminological and conceptual shift remains strong in the Security Council and the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations; and the permanent members of the Council cling to the irrational funding of large special political missions from the UN’s regular budget, rather than moving to a single assessment for all UN peace operations, open too to the funding of peace operations of regional organisations authorised by the Security Council.

The HIPPO’s strong emphasis on partnerships with regional organisations was an endorsement of a trend already under way, and has found overwhelming acceptance—except when it comes to funding arrangements. It is now enshrined in the Joint United Nations-African Union Framework for Enhancing Partnership in Peace and Security, but the warm collaboration at the top of the organisations has yet to be consistently reflected in country contexts. It is at the country level, too, that the rhetorical embrace of the call for a people-centred approach in peace operations must be implemented and assessed.

The first year of new leadership in the Secretariat and a new administration in Washington saw a welcome thrust for strategic reviews of individual operations—but a completely non-strategic approach to the peacekeeping budget. The deep difficulties of the UN’s largest missions, in Mali, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic and South Sudan, compelled further introspection. Thus, in early 2018, the Department of Peace Operations drew up an action plan on improving the security of peacekeepers, and Secretary-General

Guterres announced a new initiative he dubbed “Action for Peacekeeping”. His call for streamlined mandates, political solutions, partnership with regional organisations, improved training and preparedness of peacekeepers, alignment of human and financial resources with mandates, and member state influence to sustain the consent of host countries, should see further momentum for implementation of key HIPPO recommendations.

The Secretary-General’s ambition to bring together all partners and stakeholders to develop a new set of mutually agreed principles and commitments requires recognition of trends well analysed in these chapters, both as regards conflict challenges and the geopolitics of multilateralism. The rise of China as an increasingly important peacekeeping actor and funder, and (in the words of the editors), “the rebalancing of relations between states of the global North and the global South”, mean that the latter will not meekly accept decisions dominated by the former. In the Security Council, what Guterres has called the return of the Cold War is making consensus on issues of intervention and sovereignty harder to find. Yet if there is one common interest which cuts across these divides, it is surely how to be effective in a world of violent extremism and fundamentalist non-state actors.

The process of consultation carried out in 2014–2015 by the HIPPO was notable for the way in which it brought closer together peace operation practitioners and researchers, including the authors in this volume, and this valuable interaction has continued through subsequent debate and implementation. It is a landmark feature of this book, which is thus a major contribution to continuing efforts to adapt the UN’s peace operations to a changing and increasingly challenging context.

London, UK

Ian Martin

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Cedric de Coning
Mateja Peter

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