
United Nations Peacekeeping at Fifty Looking Back, Looking Forward

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Table of Contents

About the Author	i
United Nations Peacekeeping at Fifty: Looking Back, Looking Forward	1
Recent Publications	inside back cover



About the Author

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United Nations Peacekeeping at Fifty: Looking Back, Looking Forward*

by

H.E. Madame Louise Fréchette
Deputy Secretary-General
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Thank you for that kind introduction. I am very pleased to be with you today, not only to be at home in my surroundings but also in my subject—neither of which is necessarily always true in my new position.

I would like to pay tribute to The Academic Council on the United Nations System. It is an indispensable institution and I congratulate you on your valuable work. This year, you have rightly chosen to focus your meeting on the 50th anniversary of UN Peacekeeping. Your chosen title, “Fifty Years of Peacekeeping: What Actors, What Roles, What Futures?” is particularly appropriate at this juncture.

The United Nations responsibility for the maintenance of peace and security is our cardinal mission—the first

* Due to inclement weather and travel delays, Madame Fréchette was not able to deliver this lecture in person at the 1998 ACUNS Annual Meeting. However, she has graciously accepted our invitation to publish her remarks in their entirety.

purpose declared in the Charter. How we carry out that mission will have a profound influence on our future and on the legitimacy and credibility of what we like to call “the international community.”

The United Nations, forged from the battles of two World Wars, was dedicated, above all, to the pursuit of peace and, in the enduring words of the Charter, to saving “succeeding generations from the scourge of war.” In the half-century since those soaring and hopeful words were endorsed by the nations of the world, UN “blue helmets” and “blue berets” have deployed in forty-eight operations on four continents in a wide variety of theaters.

They have patrolled interstate borders and contained intrastate conflicts. They have observed ceasefires and they have protected humanitarian convoys. They have saved tens of thousands of lives.

The evolution of UN peacekeeping from the traditional patrolling of buffer zones and ceasefire lines to the modern, more complex manifestations in the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere was neither smooth nor preordained. The early 1990s which witnessed an explosion in the number of peacekeeping missions, were indeed a period of constant experimentation. When global opinion called for the world to “do something” about a crisis, we became the “doers,” whether or not we were given the tools. Indeed, the task of managing peacekeeping in those days, as it expanded rapidly in both size and complexity, has been likened to

“changing a tire while driving the car at ninety miles per hour.” Not an easy task.

The result was conceptual confusions and inflated expectations, betrayed hopes and blemished reputations. It has made us review our responsibilities and question our most basic assumptions about the nature of war and the very high price of peace in the post-Cold War era.

Many lessons were learned in Bosnia and Somalia and Rwanda where the UN ran into major difficulties, but also in El Salvador and Cambodia and Mozambique where we were silently successful.

We have learned the dangers of vague or ambiguous mandates that leave those charged with planning and commanding these missions the unenviable task of filling in the blanks or resolving contradictions in Security Council resolutions. Ambiguous mandates that appeared to promise more than was actually intended (clearly the case for the safe areas of Bosnia-Herzegovina) damaged gravely the credibility of the United Nations.

We have learned the imperative necessity of providing peacekeeping missions with the right resources to do the job, both in terms of numbers of troops and types of equipment. Too often, proposals put forward by the secretariat were pared down by the Security Council on grounds that had more to do with costs than with requirements. In recent cases, Haiti in particular, troop contributors have chosen to

top up authorized ceilings at their own expense, rather than deploy in sub-optimal conditions.

Failures to match resources and mandates have had tragic consequences. Should we, in Rwanda, have done more to prevent the catastrophe? Should we have been able to eliminate the threat to the Tutsi population from the Hutu extremists when they began their campaign of genocide? Most certainly, yes. Should we, in Bosnia, have been able to prevent the safe areas from falling and protect the population of Srebrenica from terror and death at the hands of their enemies? Of course.

But *could* we, in either of these cases, have done so, with the means and mandate at hand? Clearly not. Any assessment of UN peacekeeping must begin with this recognition, if its credibility and legitimacy are to be restored.

We have learned that while impartiality is a vital condition for peacekeeping, it must be impartiality in the execution of the mandate, not just a blind impartiality between warring parties. And we have learned that in civil wars, humanitarian assistance can become part of the problem as much as it is part of the solution.

We have learned that the threat of the use of force—and the willingness to actually deliver on such threats—are key to the success of some missions and that an impressive show of force is sometimes the best way to avoid having to actually use it.

We have learned that the more complex and dangerous missions absolutely require extensive and professional support. Gone are the days when the UN could maintain peacekeeping missions around the world without a functioning operations center to support them on a twenty-four hours a day basis and when military uniforms were rarely seen in the hallways of the secretariat. Words like “intelligence” are no longer taboo and we now know that peacekeeping missions must make use of the most potent instrument of public information if they wish to avoid being crippled by the propaganda of those on the ground who wish them to fail.

We have learned about the crucial importance of coherent, comprehensive strategies to address the multiple facets of conflicts. The mere deployment of peacekeeping troops without parallel action to lay the foundation of a durable peace will lead, at best, to long drawn out missions where the presence of troops only serves to freeze the situation on the ground. At worst, it may embroil peacekeepers in fresh outbreaks of fighting.

Finally, we have learned that conflict prevention is worth every effort we can put into it and that a united international community speaking with one voice, stands a better chance of influencing the course of events. These lessons were learned the hard way. It is, therefore, not surprising that a period of retrenchment set in, with less and less of an appetite among member states to engage in risky

peacekeeping challenges. And where those challenges *were* assumed, they were seized increasingly by new actors—regional and military alliances replacing traditional UN peacekeeping forces.

Contrary to public perception, the number of peacekeepers around the world are still at roughly the same levels they were at the peak of UN peacekeeping in 1994. A distinguishing characteristic that most of them today do not wear UN blue: they keep the peace under the banner of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), or the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), or the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in partnership with the United Nations.

The Security Council has favored increasingly co-deployment in places where the domestic situation is unstable; in these cases, a peacekeeping force is provided by a regional or subregional arrangement, or an ad hoc group of states, while the United Nations deploys a smaller and usually unarmed, operation to carry out monitoring and/or capacity-building functions. This kind of cooperation can help United Nations missions operate in difficult situations, and can bring the world organization's expertise to more places.

Co-deployment undertaken with a force that is based around a local organization can also pair the motivation and knowledge of local actors with the legitimacy, expertise, and resources of the world organization. The potential for

close working relationships with regional organizations is, therefore, obvious, but experience has also demonstrated certain limitations:

- Many regional organizations and arrangements do not have the capacity to conduct peacekeeping operations, though they may be able to deploy small observer missions.
- The successful deployment of regional or sub-regional operations from developing countries often requires major logistical, financial, and political support from developed countries.
- Political problems may arise as a result of the concerns of the host government. There is always a risk that a regional organization may perpetrate or promote a new regional hegemony, whereas the United Nations traditionally deploys troops from member states half a world away from the conflict in which the governments of the UN peacekeepers have no direct stake.
- Co-deployment may also result in the UN being associated with and held responsible for activities over which it has no control.

There is thus both promise and peril in too much reliance on the ability of regional organizations to carry out tasks that a United Nations force—mandated adequately and equipped, as well as universally authorized—could carry out better and more effectively.

Many proposals have been put forward to enhance the United Nation's rapid reaction capability, including the establishment of a standing multinational deployable headquarters unit. This arrangement would improve significantly the UN's capability to move quickly into high gear, under the leadership of officers and staff who would bring cohesion and professionalism to operations where time is almost invariably of the essence.

It is my fervent hope that our member states will be ready to invest the resources necessary into preserving the expertise that was acquired earlier in this decade and continue to build a modest but effective capability to respond to crisis situations such as was faced in Rwanda.

Capability and expertise are, of course, only one part of the equation. The other is the will to act. The readiness of the international community to use all means necessary in the parlance of the Security Council to stop aggression and gross abuses of human rights cannot be assumed, as we know only too well. It cannot ever be assumed when the task at hand is less daunting but significant resources are required. Political leaders admittedly face difficult decisions and no government can decide lightly to put the young men and women of their armed forces in harm's way. But the images of Bosnia and Rwanda continue to haunt the conscience of the international community.

Kosovo is the latest test ground of our will to act. There, a pattern too shockingly similar to what happened in Bosnia is repeating itself.

Already the shellings, the “ethnic cleansings,” the indiscriminate attacks on civilians in the name of “security,” are taking place. Already, tens of thousands have fled and thousands more seem about to follow.

This time, however, the international community has not been surprised, neither by the means employed nor by the ends pursued. This time, ethnically driven violence is being seen for what it is—from the outset. Most importantly, NATO leaders have declared their determination to prevent another Bosnia and to do so, if necessary, by force.

A great deal is at stake in Kosovo today—for the people of Kosovo themselves, for the overall stability of the Balkans, and for the credibility and legitimacy of the international community. If we cannot apply our lessons there, if our half-century of keeping the peace cannot make a difference there, it cannot make it anywhere.

