

Why UN Peacekeeping is central to a Canadian Defence and Security Policy for the 21st Century¹

- by Peggy Mason, President of the Rideau Institute

Much has been written over the past two years on the budget constraints facing the Department of National Defence (after steady increases during the years Canada was fighting in Afghanistan), and about the seemingly endless litany of bungled procurement (leaving a virtual bow wave of deferred spending on the books) and about the now almost complete irrelevance of the Harper government's [Canada First Defence Strategy](#), enunciated in 2008. While I agree with the Liberal desire to turf what is surely the biggest of the procurement boondoggles, the F-35 fighter jet, surely the first step must be to determine the policy framework, goals, objectives and priorities in relation to which the funding decisions are to be made.

I argue that there is an urgent need to update Canadian defence policy for the 21st century through a long-established Canadian democratic practice almost entirely abandoned by the Harper government – the issuance of a Green Paper on which broad public and expert consultations are based, followed by a White Paper, firming up the government's position in light of these consultations. (And to be fair to the NDP, Liberals and Greens, all three have called for some sort of Defence Review with the NDP seemingly closest to promising a full parliamentary and public process).

I further argue that a central theme to be explored in the Green Paper should be whether it is time for a rebalancing of Canada's focus on NATO (and coalitions of the willing) in favour of UN-led peace and security initiatives. The public consultation

¹ This article elaborates on recommendations in the [chapter on Defence](#) of the CCPA Alternative Federal Budget 2015. They were first presented to the [CDA-CDAI 2015 Conference on Defence and Security](#). Note that I have used links to provide sources but I have also included footnotes to elucidate certain points further.

document would include a proposed Canadian policy framework of guiding principles and considerations for Canadian intervention in military operations abroad. And in that regard, I note that the Group of 78 in its 2013 Conference on lessons from the Afghanistan intervention, developed such a [policy framework](#).

A parallel review should also take place regarding our national security policy and whether to re-orient the current counter-terrorism strategy to focus much more on rule of law and governance solutions, and correspondingly less on chiefly military responses. In this regard, let me recall the following:

[UN Security Council Resolution 1373](#), passed unanimously in the wake of the September 11th attacks on the United States, unambiguously treats terrorist acts as criminal activity. A companion [declaration](#), also adopted unanimously, affirms the need for a “sustained, comprehensive approach” “in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and international law” and including “efforts to broaden the understanding among civilizations and to address regional conflicts and the full range of global issues, including development issues...”.

Despite this laser focus on a criminal justice response in full accordance with international and domestic law and an equally clear recognition of the broader, inter-related issues to be addressed, the “war on terror” launched by President George W. Bush in the wake of the September 11 attacks was primarily a military effort and remains so to this day. President Obama has replaced American military boots on the ground with [drone strikes](#) and [air campaigns](#), although he has also frequently articulated the need to situate the military effort within a much broader [political framework](#) that addresses the governance failures and political exclusion that fuel terrorism. Against this backdrop of mainly highly [counter-productive military efforts](#) and lip service to addressing root causes, it is imperative that we develop a comprehensive approach to confronting violent extremism.

In a nutshell, then, my central point is that, in response to violent conflict, giving priority to UN-led peace and security initiatives is the best way to pursue comprehensive, sustainable *political* solutions to essentially political problems, albeit generally with an important *supporting* security dimension.

To emphasize this point a bit more, I would refer to the reaction when I made this pitch at the 2014 CDA-CDAI Defence and Security Conference. In question time, the first went to me and was along the following lines: “When we have so many serious issues confronting us, why should anyone give a ‘rat’s ass’ about the UN and altruism?”. My reply was that my argument has nothing to do with what used to pejoratively be called ‘bleeding heart liberalism’ but has everything to do with finding *effective solutions* to the global issues we confront.

To repeat: my central point is that, in response to violent conflict, giving priority to UN-led peace and security initiatives is the best way to pursue comprehensive, sustainable *political* solutions to essentially political problems, albeit generally with an important *supporting* security dimension. And note that I said “UN-led” not just UN-authorized – the latter being the bare minimum condition to be *legal* under international law but *insufficient* to get the job done.

Why UN Peacekeeping?

The UN has learned a lot about conflict resolution since the first military forces were deployed [in UNEF 1](#) in 1956 to serve as a buffer between the Egyptian and Israeli troops and to provide impartial supervision of the ceasefire.

The great tragedy for Canada is that, having been such a pre-eminent UN peacekeeper for so long, our disengagement from UN Blue Helmet operations post [UNPROFOR](#) in former Yugoslavia in 1995 (when we began to commit the bulk of our forces to NATO-led operations and less and less to UN peacekeeping) has left us,

institutionally, almost completely unaware of the transformation in the planning, conduct and management of UN-led operations since then. [Fundamental reviews](#) have been carried out and key lessons identified. New command and control structures and sophisticated integrated planning mechanisms and field support structures for missions have been put in place. Sadly, the message has not gotten through to the military and foreign policy structures of many NATO member states, removed as they have been from this vital UN activity.

Specifically the UN has learned that peacebuilding is a complex, long-term process of helping the conflicting parties to create the necessary conditions – political, economic, security – for a sustainable peace. At the centre of this effort is the peace process. Complex political problems lie at the heart of violent conflict and require *political* solutions, negotiated and agreed to by the parties. A robust security element may be essential in both the negotiation and the implementation phases but it is a *supporting* element nonetheless. As the Afghanistan debacle has so dramatically and tragically illustrated, no amount of military “robustness” and professionalism on the part of international military forces can make up for the lack of a [credible peace process](#).

And to drive this point home, I hearken back to something I stated to the hapless [Manley Commission on Afghanistan](#)² (2008): The [then] current ‘whole of government mantra’ for Afghanistan is “no security without development” and “no development without security” but it should be manifestly obvious to all that there can be *neither* security nor development without ending the war, and this could not be done by military means, but only through a comprehensive peace process³.

² A link is provided to the Manley Report with trepidation as it is replete with errors.

³ For my views on exactly what this means in the Afghanistan context, see “[The UN – the Indispensable Peace Facilitator for Afghanistan](#)”, (Group of 78 Annual Policy Conference 2012). It is also worth recalling the original formulation of the “mantra” in the seminal UN document, Agenda for Peace: “There can be no peace without development, no development without peace and neither without human rights”.

We now have a potent new tool in the arsenal of evidence on how useless the resort to military force really is when it comes to ending violent conflict. I refer of course to a wonderful new book by Ernie Regehr, *Disarming Conflict: Why Peace Cannot be Won on the Battlefield*⁴. I quote:

Once started, the overwhelming majority of wars, 85 per cent in the past twenty-five years, cannot be settled on the battlefield; instead most are fought to hurting stalemates....Of the 15 per cent that are won or lost on the battlefield, rebel forces, in the case of civil wars, win as often as do governments.

...

In other words, governments managed to defeat insurgents militarily in only 7 per cent of the wars they fought against their citizens.

....

The wars of the past quarter century have been singularly incapable of driving constructive political outcomes that overcome the conditions and conflicts that led to war in the first place.

With the primacy of the peace process in mind, today's multidimensional UN peacekeeping operations are therefore called upon not only to help maintain peace and security and to promote the rule of law, but also to facilitate the political process and support the establishment of legitimate and effective institutions of governance. Increasingly mandates, like that for [MINUSMA](#) in Mali, also include security assistance to the transitional government in reasserting its authority nation-wide, in concert with support for the national political dialogue and reconciliation efforts. (Note that the knowledge gained from continued French engagement in UN peace ops led them to insist on a comprehensive follow-on Blue Helmet PKO as a condition of their participation in an initial, short-term, military stabilization effort for Mali.)

For a collective enterprise of this magnitude to succeed⁵ – as UN peacekeeping does more often than not [more often than not](#) - the international effort must be perceived

⁴ Between the Lines, publishers (2015)

⁵ Examples of some of the cases where UN peacekeeping has worked to reduce the risk of renewed conflict so the long term peacebuilding process could take root include El Salvador, Nicaragua, Namibia, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, Cambodia, East Timor, Eastern Slavonia, Bosnia and Kosovo. The last two involved NATO-led military missions but they were well-embedded in large UN political missions.

as legitimate and impartial by all or most of the parties to the conflict. And it must have the broadest possible international support within a coherent legal and operational framework⁶.

Only the UN Security Council can mandate such an operation and only the UN Organization can even notionally lead it, if only because there is simply no other single entity acceptable to the international community. Headed by a civilian in the role of the Special Representative of the [UN] Secretary-General (SRSG), with all the other components, *including the military and police* reporting to him or her, the very structure of the UN PKO reflects the centrality of the peace process. This stands in sharp contrast to NATO-led missions, authorized by the UNSC to assist in stabilizing a conflict where the military mission is a completely separate one from the UN political/diplomatic/humanitarian/development and governance mission.

How can the military effectively *support* the peace process under a separate command structure? My ten years of training exercises with Senior NATO commanders (preparing for their deployments to Afghanistan, Bosnia or Kosovo) have demonstrated time and again that a *divided* command structure at the operational level is a recipe for an *ineffective* command structure. And further note that, while the NATO-led mission is typically mandated by the UNSC to “co-operate” with the UN mission, its political guidance comes from the political lead in NATO – the North Atlantic Council – which then has to coordinate with the UN Secretary-General. So the *political* leadership at the strategic and operational levels is divided as well. So in other words, when push comes to shove, “cooperation” means the Commander does what he (or his immediate political masters) want, not what the UN SRSG believes is necessary for the good of the overall peacemaking and peacebuilding effort.

⁶ On the other hand, where the UN Security Council fails to heed the most basic Brahimi lesson - that peacekeeping is not a substitute for politics - and authorizes a mission in [Sudan](#) against the implacable opposition of the host government, we see very poor results indeed.

There is another stark problem with NATO-led stability operations: they lack the perceived legitimacy, impartiality and basic fairness of UN-led operations precisely because their political and military leadership represent a very specific set of countries and interests, UN authorization and the presence of some non-NATO countries within the coalition notwithstanding. This not only undermines coherence in the international effort, but also is a gift to spoilers on the ground decrying “foreign occupation.” Of course narrow national interests are still in play in the capitals of UN troop contributors, but the *structure* and *composition* of a UN peacekeeping mission at least works to mitigate this tendency in both perception and reality. (I might add that this problem of lack of broad legitimacy and vested interests also plagues other missions with a regional military component, notably the AU. But I have no direct experience of how that works in practice.)

As recent UN review efforts have underscored, there is also a complete misperception by advanced militaries about how UN command and control operates versus that of NATO. An integrated mission under the overall authority of the SRSG allows UN command and control to be decentralized to the operational level in contrast with the completely centralized, top-heavy and cumbersome command structure operating in NATO. Thus the main problem for UN command and control is the relatively narrow one of how to ensure appropriate *strategic oversight*, particularly with a view to maintaining the ongoing support of member states. In contrast, NATO *operational* command and control is stymied both by the reporting *up* requirements before action can be taken and the limitations to those actions being carried out at the tactical level due to national caveats⁷.

And recall that I said earlier that political guidance is coming to NATO commanders from the North Atlantic Council, mainly deliberating at the Ambassadorial level,

⁷ National caveats refer to restrictions or limitations that individual nations place on the actions that their forces can perform within the overall mandate as interpreted by NATO.

with twice yearly regular meetings at the Ministerial level and ad hoc meetings and summits as required. This is hardly a body that can provide effective *day to day* oversight of a military mission in contrast with an SRSG on the ground, providing that day to day oversight of the entire mission including the military component. She or he reports the Under-Secretary-General of the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), a department that provides ongoing HQ-level oversight and assistance, and the SRSG also has the authority to communicate directly with the UN Secretary-General, should the circumstances require it. The lack of such a supporting structure at NATO with respect to day to day mission oversight results in delegated authority to the NATO joint force commander, reducing the *political* oversight accordingly.

To recap, the main comparative advantages for UN peace operations are (1) its integrated command structure under civilian authority, which in turn reflects the primacy of the peace process and which facilitates unity of purpose, and (2) the fact that the UN is the only organization through which the forces of the [P5](#) and all major powers (including the rising and regional powers) can jointly participate. Only the UN therefore offers the option of a politically diverse and operationally capable mission – but if, and only if, the P5 and other major powers invest in UN operations⁸.

The demand for UN Blue Helmets has never been greater. Sixteen missions are currently underway, comprising over 130,000 military, police and civilians. Of these 90,000 are blue helmets – although Canada as of June 2015 contributes only 26 troops or military experts (military personnel) and 85 police. As the World Federalist Movement-Canada document in their annual [“Canada and UN Peacekeeping Fact Sheet”](#) and I quote:

Canada now ranks 66th in personnel and contributions to UN peacekeeping even though public opinion measurements continue to demonstrate strong support from Canadians for peacekeeping as a top priority activity of their military.

⁸ The USA is virtually alone in objecting to placing its forces under UN command and in espousing the belief that the civilian and military commands should be kept separate.

And Canada is not alone. EU member states now provide fewer than 7% of the overall UN peacekeeping forces, down from a high of more than 40 per cent. The top 10 contributors today comprise troops from South Asia and Africa.

UN peacekeeping cannot begin to live up to its potential to assist countries in transition from civil war to stable governance unless it has the resources to do the job. The almost wholesale withdrawal of Western forces from UN peacekeeping, in favour of NATO-led missions in the Balkans and then Afghanistan, occurred even as UN peacekeeping mandates required increasingly capable and well-equipped military components, operating under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. To repeat, because this seems largely unknown in Ottawa, the vast majority of the current 16 UN-led peacekeeping operations have “robust” military mandates under [Chapter VII](#) of the UN Charter.⁹

But the times it seems they are a’changing when we consider the renewed support for UN peacekeeping now underway, even if Canada remains missing in action:

In March, US Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power announced that President Barack Obama would hold a world leaders summit on peacekeeping during the opening of the 70th session of the UN General Assembly in September “to help catalyze a wave of new commitments”¹⁰. The Toronto Star reported in a March 29, 2015 article by Mitch Potter that, in preparation for this Summit, the Americans hosted senior military brass from over 100 countries but Canada’s then Chief of Defence Staff General Tom Lawson was not among them.

⁹ There are two points being made here, the first relating to the level of armament and type of military tasks now included in UN peacekeeping mandates and the second relating to the potentially coercive nature of the military activities. The UN will insist on consent at the “strategic” level of all or most of the conflicting parties as a condition of the force deployment. However, a Chapter VII mandate allows the PKO to continue to operate despite a breakdown in consent by one or more parties at the tactical level.

¹⁰ See the World Federalist Movement-Canada [Special Election Edition](#) of Mondial at page 6. I am indebted to the WFM-Canada for most of the section on the High Level Panel Report and the USA Peacekeeping Summit.

And in June, the UN Secretary-General received the report of the [High level Independent Panel on Peace Operations](#) chaired by Jorge Ramos-Horta. The panel's report is due to be considered by governments this fall. Among the panel's many recommendations are a number of ideas Canada has championed in the past – like a rapidly deployable military headquarters, a vanguard force and other measures for more rapid deployment of peacekeepers.

The leaders' summit hosted by President Obama is intended to build support for improved peacekeeping, particularly by addressing the three core needs that were identified in the high-level panel report: (1) closing gaps in existing peacekeeping missions (for example, the need for specific transport and other equipment); (2) new commitments of rapidly deployable personnel; and (3) a broader set of forward-looking personnel commitments to staff future missions and fill gaps in current operations.

The 2015 WFM – Canada fact sheet on "[Canada and UN Peacekeeping](#)" cited earlier documents significant personnel shortages, below levels mandated by the UN Security Council, in five current UN peacekeeping missions: in Abyei (Sudan), Central African Republic, Darfur (Sudan), Mali and South Sudan.

The current shortage of peacekeepers was prominent in discussions earlier this year when U.S. Ambassador Power went to Brussels to lobby European countries (and Canada?)¹¹ to increase their commitments of personnel as well as medical capacity, military intelligence, and the provision of helicopters and other vehicles.

Another important issue is the use of technology. In a recent report by the Expert Panel on Technology and Innovation in UN Peacekeeping it was noted that, "despite

¹¹ Such is the state of government secrecy under Harper, it is not actually known whether Canada attended this meeting. What is known, however, is no commitments have been forthcoming from Canada.

the omnipresence of advanced technology and applications in our daily lives, United Nations peacekeeping remains well behind the curve.”¹²

Significantly, some NATO countries, including Italy (1,106), France (918), Spain (624) and the Netherlands (520) are now contributing greater numbers of personnel and advanced military capabilities. It is time for Canada to do the same. The only way out of the Libyan and Syrian quagmires is through UN-facilitated, internationally backed peace negotiations.

And without those peace deals in [Libya and Syria](#), there is no sustainable solution in Iraq either.

- 30 -

¹² The source of this information is once again the excellent WFM-Canada Election Issue of Mondial. Note also that, two days after this presentation was given, the USA Peacekeeping Summit was held, the results of which can be found by clicking [here](#).