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The United Kingdom and United Nations Peace Operations

Abstract

This article analyses the United Kingdom's approach to United Nations (UN) peace operations and whether Britain is prepared politically, bureaucratically, financially, and militarily to increase its contributions to them. The article begins with an overview of UK engagement with UN peacekeeping since 1956 before discussing the political issues that govern British decisions about peacekeeping. The third section then assesses several challenges that would need to be addressed in order for the UK's increased participation in UN missions to be effective. Finally, the article outlines the main factors pushing the UK towards greater engagement with UN peace operations, including opinions voiced by select domestic, international and institutional audiences.

Keywords

Peacekeeping, United Nations, United Kingdom, defence policy, foreign policy

Introduction

The United Kingdom (UK) government has recently made a series of declarations that it intends to increase its contributions to United Nations (UN) peace operations. At the Peacekeeping Leaders' Summit in September 2015, Prime Minister Cameron pledged to more than double UK military contributions to UN operations, with up to 70 personnel heading to the UN Support Office for Somalia (UNSOS) and between 250 and 300 to the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS).¹ In November, the new Strategic Defence and Security Review reiterated the UK's commitment to strengthen 'the rules-based international order and its institutions' and made three practical commitments to support UN peace operations.² First, the British military would prepare to 'conduct operations to restore peace and stability'.³ Second, in addition to increasing its military peacekeepers, the UK would deploy more law enforcement and civilian experts, and continue training foreign peacekeepers.⁴ Third, the government would create a 'cross-Whitehall joint UN Peacekeeping Policy Unit to maximise our military and civilian impact' and 'formulate UK policy on peacekeeping missions'.⁵ The UK subsequently agreed to host the next Peacekeeping Leaders' summit in September 2016 focused on the 'three Ps': planning of missions, performance of peacekeepers, and pledges made by existing and new troop-contributing countries (TCCs).

It remains unclear whether these declarations represent a short-term, pragmatic response to domestic and international trends, a response to an initiative spearheaded by its most important strategic partner (the United States), or part of a longer-term rethink of how the UK pursues its foreign and security policies. It is uncertain, in part, because the UK's

¹ Prime Minister's Office, 'PM pledges UK troops to support stability in Somalia and South Sudan,' 28 September 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-pledges-uk-troops-to-support-stability-in-somalia-and-south-sudan>

² HM Government, *A Secure*, p.29 and HM Government, *UK Aid*, p.13.

³ HM Government, *A Secure*, p. 29.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 60.

⁵ *Ibid*, pp.60, 84.

approach to UN peacekeeping has never been entirely clear. Historically, UK policies on UN peacekeeping were driven by pragmatic responses to particular crises, regardless of which political party was in power.

After providing an overview of UK engagement with UN peacekeeping since 1956 we discuss the political issues that govern British decision-making in this area. The third section then assesses several challenges that need to be overcome in order for the UK's increased participation in UN missions to be effective. Finally, we summarize the main factors pushing the UK towards greater engagement with UN peace operations, including opinions voiced by select domestic, international and institutional audiences.

A UK 'return' to UN peacekeeping?

Analyzing a UK 'return' to UN peacekeeping implies that the UK 'left', which is not the case. The UK has consistently engaged with UN peacekeeping through political, financial, and capacity-building activities as well as maintaining deployments of personnel. As a permanent member of the Security Council the UK has a major political role in influencing peacekeeping mandates, including as a 'pen holder'.⁶ Financially, the UK long provided just under 7% of the UN's annual peacekeeping bill, although in 2016 this dropped to 5.8% making the UK the sixth largest financial contributor behind the US, China, Japan, Germany and France.⁷ The UK also makes a notable contribution to the UN's regular budget, which funds the UN's special political missions, and makes additional voluntary contributions (either in cash or in kind) to support UN peacekeeping. It is also the leading donor to the UN's peacebuilding fund.⁸ Moreover, the UK has remained active in various oversight

⁶ A 'pen-holder' is the Security Council member that leads in drafting resolutions. The UK is pen-holder on peacekeeping operations in Cyprus, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Darfur, as well as the thematic areas of peacekeeping operations and protection of civilians.

⁷ See UN docs A/67/224/Add.1, 27 December 2012; A/C.5/69/17, 14 January 2015 and A/70/331, 19 August 2015, Annex III.

⁸ UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, *The Peacebuilding Fund*, <http://mptf.undp.org/factsheet/fund/PB000>

mechanisms, such as the UN's Military Staff Committee, as well as supporting initiatives such as the new UN Strategic Force Generation Cell.⁹

Nor did the UK's armed forces ever completely disengage from UN peacekeeping. They have provided significant 'back end' support capacities for peacekeeping and carried out bilateral assistance and capacity-building initiatives to support other contributing countries to UN and non-UN peace operations. These include programmes in Kenya, South Africa, Sierra Leone, and the Czech Republic. Britain has also recently provided strategic airlift for UN missions in Mali and South Sudan, supported several European Union training missions, including in Somalia and Mali, which have supported UN operations in these theatres, and provided short-term engineering assistance to the non-UN Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) in the Sinai.¹⁰ UK forces in Kosovo and Bosnia operating under EU and NATO flags have provided military personnel with experience in peace operations without donning blue helmets. The UK's deployment of 1,300 personnel (including a logistic ship, helicopters, engineers and medical personnel) to Sierra Leone in 2015 to assist in the international effort to combat Ebola is just one example of the UK forces' continued engagement in non-traditional military operations.¹¹

In this sense, we analyze a UK 'return' to UN peacekeeping by focusing on the prospects for the UK deploying more military personnel in UN missions. Our argument is not that the UK's contribution should be judged solely on the number of personnel deployed. Adding another company of troops to the UN mission in Cyprus, for instance, would increase the UK's position in the TCC rankings but have little strategic impact. Instead this article aims to contribute to the debate about how best UK military power can help enhance the effectiveness of UN peace operations at a time when, for the first time in well over a decade,

⁹ Interview, UK official, New York, June 2016.

¹⁰ HM Government, 'Defence Secretary announces UK support to peacekeeping mission,' 25 February 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/defence-secretary-announces-uk-support-to-peacekeeping-mission>

¹¹ IISS, *The Military Balance 2016*, p.72.

it has started deploying two contingents of troops to new UN missions (in Somalia and South Sudan).

A Short History of the UK and UN Peacekeeping

Historically, the UK's relationship with UN peace operations has been driven principally by wider strategic national interests or concerns about stabilizing particular crises. When the UK directly engaged with UN operations, notably those in the Suez, the Congo, Cyprus, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Sierra Leone, its approach fluctuated between hostility, confused engagement, and supporting the UN's bureaucratic structures.

Cold War Missions

During the Cold War UN peacekeeping had relatively little influence on British foreign and defence policies and the relationship was often distinctly frosty to the UN missions in question.¹² Ironically, it was the British invasion of the Suez Canal that precipitated the UN's first armed peacekeeping operation, the UN Emergency Force (UNEF I). Here, the UK's intransigent policy towards the UN's attempts to create UNEF saw its diplomats veto successive Security Council resolutions that called for Israeli withdrawal from the invaded territories and the establishment of a peacekeeping force.¹³ Instead, the UK and France argued they could do the job themselves. Consequently, UNEF I was created through the UN General Assembly under its 'Uniting for Peace' resolution.¹⁴ UK policymakers still attempted to shoehorn UNEF's mandate into achieving the goals of the original invasion by proposing that the UN mission should be comprised of British and French soldiers. Instead, UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld (under considerable pressure from the United States)

¹² See Briscoe, *Britain* and Koops et al, *The Oxford Handbook*.

¹³ Ramsbotham and Woodhouse, *Encyclopedia*, p.262.

¹⁴ Briscoe, *Britain*, p.46.

prohibited UK and French forces joining UNEF, opting instead for peacekeepers from neutral countries.¹⁵ Even prominent members of the Commonwealth were excluded, including a contingent from New Zealand on the grounds that it was too ‘pro British’ (New Zealand had supported the British invasion). So was a Pakistani force. A Canadian battalion was put into reserve because it was feared that Egyptians would mistake them for British soldiers.¹⁶

UK actions in the Suez represented a discredited colonial approach to an increasingly post-colonial world whereas the UN stood for a ‘modern, and morally superior’ method of dispute settlement.¹⁷ Legacies of colonialism also influenced UK policy towards other peacekeeping operations, with policymakers often favoring the colonial system over the UN. In the debates leading up to the deployment of ONUC in the Congo in 1960, UK diplomats supported the Belgian government’s attempt to dismantle the newly independent state by deploying soldiers and administrators to support the secession of the mineral-rich Katanga province.¹⁸

It was in this context that a potential UN operation in Cyprus became a strategic concern for the UK. As the former colonial power, the UK had a degree of responsibility in managing the transition to post-colonial rule. But Cyprus was also important for maintaining a UK military presence in the wider Middle East.¹⁹ When the question of multilateral engagement in Cyprus was raised following increasing violence between Greek and Turkish Cypriots at the end of 1963, British forces deployed to assist in upholding a ceasefire. The UK’s preferred option was for a NATO mission, principally to safeguard against potential Soviet influence. Instead, British troops became a leading part of the subsequent UN mission,

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 47.

¹⁶ Harbottle, *The Blue Berets*, p.15.

¹⁷ Briscoe, *Britain*, p.47.

¹⁸ On the UK’s role in the Congo crisis see James, *Britain*.

¹⁹ Parsons, *From Cold War*, p.167. See also Briscoe, *Britain*, pp.173ff.

UNFICYP, established in March 1964. The UK also retained the forces already stationed in its Sovereign Base Areas on the island, a commitment that endures today.

While many other countries were finding allies at the UN to forge a more constructive approach to international conflict management, some of the UK's foreign policy commitments pushed in the opposite direction. Nevertheless, the Cyprus experience taught British foreign policy elites that UN peacekeeping also offered some constructive opportunities. For the rest of the Cold War, UK troops were hardly involved in UN peacekeeping activity. Perhaps the only other notable development was the 1988 publication of *Army Field Manual Volume V, Part I, Peacekeeping Operations*, produced to guide British troops through the intricacies of keeping the peace in situations of inter-state armed conflict.²⁰

Peacekeeping in the Balkans

After the Cold War, British engagement with UN peacekeeping was marred by a lack of agreement over the roles that UN operations should play in relation to UK policy. In the 1990s, it was how these debates played out in the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina that generated most of the tensions between UK policymakers and the UN.

It was as part of UNPROFOR that the UK had its largest, and most costly, experience in UN peacekeeping. In mid-1995, this engagement briefly made the UK the top UN TCC.²¹ UNPROFOR also had consecutive British Force Commanders (Generals Michael Rose and Rupert Smith). In contrast, UNPROFOR's dilemmas concerning how to keep the peace in an active war zone where levels of consent ranged from suspicion of peacekeepers to outright hostility, left UK policymakers and many senior military personnel with an abiding image

²⁰ Wikinson, *Sharpening the Weapons*, pp.1-2.

²¹ Williams, 'The United Kingdom', p.93.

that UN peacekeeping was deeply problematic and generally to be avoided where there was no clear peace to keep.²²

But the UK government was not simply a passive recipient of UN peacekeeping policy. The UK's permanent seat on the Security Council gave it an important role in crafting the UNPROFOR mandates and hence partial responsibility for the problems it lamented.²³ Specifically, the Security Council passed a total of sixty-seven resolutions in the space of forty months on the wars in former Yugoslavia.²⁴ Often, these resolutions pushed UNPROFOR deeper into the quagmire of managing several actively warring parties. A particular source of controversy revolved around whether peacekeepers should use force to ensure humanitarian assistance made it to so-called 'safe areas' in spite of the fact that this ran directly counter to the war aims of several of the belligerents. This led some parties to 'wreak revenge on UNPROFOR'.²⁵

It also generated confusion among British troops within UNPROFOR as to how to deal with belligerent groups. At times, commanders would use sophisticated networks of liaison officers to negotiate the delivery of humanitarian aid.²⁶ At other times, they would attempt to enforce the Chapter VII nature of the mandate by using robust force to simply drive through any obstacle put in the UN's way.²⁷ Others described a bleak situation:

We did what we could but we were constantly hampered by the mandate and the lack of clear statement of exactly what we were there to do. We did not have the backing, or the teeth, to peacekeep and the locals knew this. Most of the time, we were powerless to stop the killing and the standing of the UN fell to an all time low...²⁸

²² See, for instance, Smith, *The Utility of Force*, pp.336-337; Stewart, *Broken Lives*, p.325, Goodwin, *The Military*, p.170.

²³ For details, see Simms, *Unfinest Hour*.

²⁴ Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy*, p.180.

²⁵ Goulding, *Peacemonger*, p.327.

²⁶ Stewart, *Broken Lives*, p.319.

²⁷ Rose, *Fighting for Peace*, pp.52-53.

²⁸ Kent-Payne, *Bosnia Warriors*, pp.352-353.

It took until 1994 for the UK to warm to the use of robust force against Serb forces, when NATO air power was used more regularly, alongside the development of a 'well-armed and mobile' Rapid Reaction Force, comprised of British, French, and Dutch soldiers.²⁹ It was in August 1995 under UK Force Commander Rupert Smith that the NATO-led *Operation Deliberate Force* was used to target Bosnian Serb forces. However, this came only after Serb-led troops massacred some 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys in the UN mandated 'safe area' of Srebrenica in July, and launched a mortar attack on a Sarajevo marketplace in August.

Although Bosnia attracted most political and public attention in the UK, these tendencies and problems were more widespread. For example, as the civil war re-started and the genocide unfolded in Rwanda from April 1994, and with the UK providing no peacekeepers to the UNAMIR operation there, its representative on the Security Council, David Hannay, argued against reinforcing the UN mission or giving it a more robust mandate. Taking the opposite approach to UK policy in Bosnia, Hannay argued that 'peacekeeping was not appropriate for civil war and where fighting factions were unwilling to cooperate'.³⁰ Once again, the UK government blamed incoherent peacekeeping mandates without acknowledging its own role in shaping those mandates. Unsurprisingly, after UN peacekeepers faced similar challenges in Somalia, Angola and elsewhere in the early 1990s, the UK was part of the subsequent general international retreat from UN peacekeeping.³¹

The Sierra Leone Experience

The return to UN peacekeeping began in 1999 with new missions in DR Congo, East Timor and Sierra Leone. It was the latter case that would feature heavily in British debates about the

²⁹ Leurdijk, *The United Nations*, p.71.

³⁰ Melvern and Williams, 'Britannia Waived the Rules', p.10.

³¹ Bellamy and Williams, *Understanding Peacekeeping*, chapter 4.

new 'ethical' foreign policy touted by Tony Blair's New Labour government. Specifically, in 1998, Blair's government became embroiled in a diplomatic controversy over its role in supporting the return of ousted Sierra Leonean President Ahmed Kabbah, including through the use of military supplies in breach of a UN arms embargo on the country.³² After being forced to take over from a Nigerian-led ECOWAS enforcement operation after Nigeria withdrew, the UN mission in Sierra Leone, UNAMSIL, was attacked by the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF).³³ UNAMSIL suffered similar challenges to its predecessors ranging from how to uphold a weak peace agreement (that the UK helped formulate³⁴) and how to use force when faced with increasingly confident rebels committing atrocities against civilians. In May 2000, rebels kidnapped some 500 UNAMSIL peacekeepers, sparking a major crisis in New York.³⁵ It was with this breakdown in the UN mission and the resulting instability as well as the desire to support President Kabbah's government that were the primary drivers of UK military intervention.³⁶

Codenamed *Operation Palliser*, British troops worked in parallel with but outside of UNAMSIL to achieve their first objective: the evacuation of UK citizens and other entitled personnel.³⁷ British troops also helped UNAMSIL create a secure zone in and around Freetown, which provided a stable base for expansion. The UK's role gradually evolved from an evacuation force, to a stabilization force, to a combat search and rescue force, and then, finally, to a training body for Sierra Leone's national armed forces after the war.³⁸ British troops are credited with tipping the psychological balance of the war against the rebels, especially after the major battle that occurred during the rescue of British hostages in

³² House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee, *Second Report on Sierra Leone*.

³³ Olonisakin, *Peacekeeping*.

³⁴ Williams, 'Fighting for Freetown', pp.147-53.

³⁵ CDS, *A Review of Peace Operations*, p.75.

³⁶ Williams, 'Fighting for Freetown', pp.153-4.

³⁷ CDS, *A Review of Peace Operations*, p.73.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p.77.

September 2000.³⁹ The UK's aggressive stance persuaded many RUF fighters that cooperating with the UN was a better option than fighting British troops.⁴⁰

Although the UK's presence certainly helped stabilize Sierra Leone, the main public justification for the operation was not to improve UN capacities to undertake robust peacekeeping. Overall, therefore, the UN's lessons learned report on UNAMSIL commended the deterrence value of the UK's 'over-the-horizon' force but noted that it would have been preferable 'if UNAMSIL itself had been provided with the necessary capabilities and assets'.⁴¹

The Domestic Politics of the UK's Peacekeeping Decisions

As with other areas of its foreign policies, it is difficult to pinpoint a formal process that consistently produces British decisions on peace operations. The decision to deploy UK military forces rests with the Government of the day. There is no legal requirement for Parliament (through debate and/or vote in the House of Commons or Lords⁴²) to be involved in approving the deployment of armed forces, since the Royal Prerogative grants the Prime Minister authority to direct the armed forces without recourse to Parliamentary scrutiny.⁴³

It was the winding down of the Cold War and increased UK engagement that brought wider reflection about the role of UN peacekeeping within UK foreign and security policies. The debates revolved around UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's 1992 definition of peacekeeping as the 'deployment of a United Nations presence in the field, hitherto with the consent of all the parties concerned'.⁴⁴ For those skeptical of UN engagement, it was the

³⁹ Dorman, *Blair's Successful War*, chapters 6-7.

⁴⁰ Keen, *Conflict and Collusion*, pp.272-273.

⁴¹ UN, *Lessons Learned*, pp.40- 41.

⁴² The Lower House of Parliament, consisting of 650 elected Members of Parliament; the 'upper house' is the unelected House of Lords.

⁴³ Strong, 'Interpreting the Syria vote', p.1123.

⁴⁴ Boutros-Ghali, *An Agenda*, p.11.

use of the word ‘hitherto’ that was most important because consent was now likely to be a variable and problematic factor in peacekeeping deployments. The 1993 Foreign Affairs Select Committee’s report on the UN and UK foreign policy summed up this concern in the following manner:

There are good reasons why UN troops, even when mandated to use force if they are obstructed by factions on the ground, do so only rarely. The United Nations needs to maintain its impartiality even though the effects of its activities might be regarded by one of the parties as partial; it needs the continued cooperation of the parties if it is to be successful no matter how frustrating the barriers put in its way to prevent peace-keeping troops quickly executing their mission; the troops are not equipped to fight their way through – they have been armed on the expectation that the parties will honour their commitments – therefore their wisest choice is to negotiate their way through.⁴⁵

The report raised a series of questions about the UN’s capacities, and concluded that the Security Council must be persuaded that not all proposals for peacekeeping operations can be put into effect successfully. Consequently, the UK should ‘use its influence in the Security Council to ensure that peacekeeping operations... are entered into only when there is a realistic prospect of their objectives being achieved’.⁴⁶

While the Foreign Affairs Select Committee cautioned against UN peacekeeping in active civil wars, the UK’s Defence Select Committee issued a June 1993 report that concluded as a permanent member of the Security Council the UK had a special duty and responsibility to provide peacekeepers – a theme reiterated in the recent High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations.⁴⁷ It also showed that the UK could use peacekeeping

⁴⁵ House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *The Expanding Role*, p.xxi.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p.xxvi.

⁴⁷ HIPPO, *Uniting Our Strengths for Peace*, para.199.

operations to maintain its international reputation and influence on the international stage. ‘If the increase in United Nations peacekeeping operations is not matched by at least something approaching a commensurate increase in UK participation’, the report argued, ‘the United Kingdom’s voice in international affairs will lose authority, and the operations themselves will be less likely to succeed.’⁴⁸ The Committee also concluded that UK forces should participate only in missions that require their particular skills and where there was a serious chance of a successful outcome.⁴⁹ Notably, the report was published after British peacekeepers had deployed in UNPROFOR but stated that these criteria had been met.

When UK troops deployed to Sierra Leone in 2000, parliamentary approval was not sought and UK policymakers were unwilling to publicly justify *Operation Palliser* as a mechanism to support the failing UNAMSIL operation, instead emphasizing the need to rescue UK citizens in peril rather than make the case for strengthening the UN mission. The first that the UK public heard of the decision to send a ‘spearhead force’ to Sierra Leone came one day before the British High Commissioner for Sierra Leone instigated the evacuation of UK nationals, and the start of the operation.⁵⁰

Since *Operation Palliser*, successive governments offered proposals to give Parliament greater say in the deployment of ‘significant, non-routine’ UK military operations.⁵¹ During the Conservative-Liberal coalition government (2010-2015), it was acknowledged that although Parliament had no legal reason to discuss military operations, a ‘convention’ had emerged whereby the House of Commons would have the opportunity to debate the deployment of UK forces, as occurred concerning Libya (2011), Syria (2013), and Iraq (2014).⁵²

⁴⁸ House of Commons Defence Select Committee, *United Kingdom Peacekeeping*, p.xxii.

⁴⁹ *Ibid* p. xxiii.

⁵⁰ Williams, ‘Fighting for Freetown’, p.161.

⁵¹ Mills, *Parliamentary approval*, p.17.

⁵² *Ibid*, p.6.

Deployments in UN peacekeeping operations, however, did not generate the same level of Parliamentary interest as these forcible military interventions. As the House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee concluded in 2014: ‘We do not... want the Government to be required to consult with or seek approval from the House on peacekeeping or training missions.’⁵³ The Committee argued that there must be definitional boundaries for what is discussed in the House of Commons, specifically whether Parliament should debate any deployment of UK forces, or just deployments where UK forces would play a combat role. The current convention was said to be ‘dependent on a shared understanding between Parliament and the Government’ that Parliament only discusses situations where UK armed forces are deployed with the intention of engaging in combat.⁵⁴ UN peacekeeping operations were deemed to fall outside this category.

This conclusion highlights two difficulties.⁵⁵ First, ‘peacekeeping’ deployments escape scrutiny by elected officials. For instance, the Coalition Government’s 2013 decision to deploy forces in Mali – including a surveillance aircraft, up to 40 military personnel to the EU training mission, and the ‘potential deployment of up to 200 military personnel for the training of Anglophone forces in the UN-mandated African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA)’⁵⁶ – was not debated in Parliament on the basis that UK forces would not be engaged in combat. Although ministers argued that the convention would be followed ‘were troops to be committed to conflict’, it led to criticism that ministers, the civil service and political parties interpreted the convention too narrowly.⁵⁷ Second, the minimal oversight mechanisms for peacekeeping deployments indicate how poorly prepared UK

⁵³ House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, *Parliament's role*, p.17.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p.17. The UK Parliament does not scrutinize all foreign deployments of British special forces, including those engaged in combat.

⁵⁵ Written evidence from Professor Nigel White, at:

<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/political-and-constitutional-reform-committee/parliaments-role-in-conflict-decisions-an-update/written/2838.pdf>

⁵⁶ Mills, *Parliamentary approval*, p.25.

⁵⁷ Weir, “Not in our name.”

parliamentary structures are for scrutinizing policymakers in the event that UK forces deployed into non-permissive peacekeeping environments suffered casualties. The committee's view seems to imply that UN peacekeeping will always be viewed as a more benign activity than other UK military deployments. This is a highly debatable point in volatile theatres such as Somalia and South Sudan where the UK has now deployed uniformed personnel.

Explaining the UK's Peacekeeping Contributions

Since the conclusion of UNPROFOR, UN peacekeeping has clearly not been a central consideration in the UK's policymaking processes. By 1999, Blair's Government seemed to conclude that it was NATO not the UN that could deliver favourable results for the UK. Speaking at NATO's 50th Anniversary, Blair said that in Bosnia, British forces deployed under the UN 'could only deal with the symptoms of the problem'. 'It was NATO', on the other hand 'that brought serious force to bear and gave the desperately needed muscle to end the war', as well as underpinning the post-Dayton peace and creating the 'conditions in which Bosnia can rebuild'.⁵⁸ Indeed, until 2010, the UK remained militarily engaged in the Balkans through NATO, assisting with the standby force reserve, and in 2008 reinforcing the mission with a battalion of about 600 soldiers to help maintain 'public order'.⁵⁹

The experience in Sierra Leone saw UK forces remain outside the UN operation, primarily because the Ministry of Defence (MOD) was skeptical of UN competence and its command and control mechanisms.⁶⁰ The MOD had argued that in order to effect a major change in UNAMSIL's fortunes the UK would have to become a major contributor to the

⁵⁸ Tony Blair, speech, 8 March 1999, <http://www.ukpol.co.uk/2015/12/17/tony-blair-1999-speech-at-natos-50th-anniversary/>

⁵⁹ Richard Norton-Taylor, 'New Mission for British Troops in Kosovo,' *The Guardian*, 25 April 2008.

⁶⁰ Dorman, *Blair's Successful War*, p.88.

mission and perhaps take on the force commander role, which was a non-starter politically.⁶¹ As a result, British troops worked in parallel with but not as part of UNAMSIL in Sierra Leone; their first objective being the evacuation of UK citizens, not supporting the floundering UN operation.⁶²

After Sierra Leone, the US-led ‘global war on terror’ and the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq pushed any discussion of contributing to additional UN peacekeeping operations firmly off the political agenda. The UK’s political and military involvement in both Afghanistan and Iraq were a combination of war-fighting, counter-insurgency and more recently stabilization operations rather than robust peacekeeping of the UN variety. Stabilization operations resembled some modern UN peacekeeping operations, being defined broadly as involving a combination of civilian and military approaches with a focus on re-establishing state authority in ‘failed states’, including provision of ‘legitimate’ state authority, institution-building, and delivery of key state services. In this view, stabilization is supported by the use of military force, bordering on counter-insurgency, and predominantly aimed against non-state actors who challenge the state’s monopoly on violence.⁶³ The UK’s costly campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq led to cuts elsewhere, including to existing UK commitments to UN peacekeeping, with UK army reserves taking the place of regular forces in UNFICYP in 2008.⁶⁴

Taken together, these decision-making structures and historical experiences coalesced to keep British engagement with UN peacekeeping mainly of a political and financial nature, bolstered by various capacity-building initiatives to support other contributing countries deploy on UN missions. Cyprus remained the exception. This has been described as

⁶¹ Ibid, p.88 and Williams, ‘The United Kingdom’, p.110.

⁶² CDS, *A Review of Peace Operations*, p.73.

⁶³ See Jackson and Haysom, *The search*, p.9; Gordon, ‘The United Kingdom’s,’ p.S383; and Curran and Holtom, ‘Resonating, Rejecting, Reinterpreting’.

⁶⁴ Williams, ‘The United Kingdom’, p.108.

‘economy of effort’ whereby the UK can influence UN peacekeeping without having to expend significant resources.⁶⁵

Within this overall context, three main factors are likely to shape the level of UK personnel deployments in UN peace operations: whether UN peace operations deploy to areas of UK strategic interest; concerns that operational challenges are increasing the risks to UN peacekeepers; and how far the UK is prepared to deploy more troops to UN peace operations.

Misaligned strategic priorities

Since 1999, the majority of new UN peacekeeping operations – eight out of the ten largest – and a large majority of UN peacekeepers were deployed in sub-Saharan Africa. This region is not a primary strategic concern for the UK. Especially after the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq it was difficult for any British government to justify additional ‘out of area operations’. Any future operations would need to be ‘operationally feasible and have broad international support’, and show clear net benefits for the UK.⁶⁶ The UK thus shared the position of most other Western states not to provide many UN peacekeepers.⁶⁷ Some critics challenged as shortsighted the West’s ‘outsourcing’ of conflict management on the African continent, where African personnel were trained and equipped to ‘bear the burden’ of complex operations.⁶⁸ Although the UK made a token contribution to the EU’s Operation Artemis in the DR Congo for a few months in 2003 and was an important player in developing the concept of expeditionary EU battlegroups, to date, these battlegroups have not deployed and the UK shunned other EU-led military operations in the DR Congo, including the 2006 EU force. In late 2008, the UK refused to deploy its troops as an EU battlegroup to help the UN’s

⁶⁵ Interview with UK official, New York, June 2016.

⁶⁶ Dorman, ‘The United Kingdom’, p.246.

⁶⁷ Bellamy and Williams, ‘The West,’ and MacQueen, *Europe and Peacekeeping*, p.3.

⁶⁸ Gowan and Witney, *Why Europe*, p.3.

MONUC mission defend the town of Goma in eastern DR Congo despite being the lead state of one of the EU battlegroups that was supposed to be on call at that time.⁶⁹ As Balossi-Restelli suggested, such a deployment faced significant opposition within the British military, which argued an EU deployment would place ‘serious strain’ on its already stretched forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁷⁰

Over the same period, the UK also reduced significantly its contributions to UN policing.⁷¹ The reduction of UK civilian peacekeepers drew criticism that the UK pursued a ‘neglectful’ approach to international policing as a whole, and the work of the UN DPKO’s police division in particular.⁷²

The challenge of strategic misalignment still affects the recent British attempts to provide UN peacekeepers. When pledging to commit British peacekeepers to Somalia and South Sudan in September 2015, Prime Minister Cameron couched the pledge in terms of advancing UK national interests not peacekeeping. ‘What happens in Somalia,’ Cameron said, ‘if it’s a good outcome, it’s good for Britain, it means less terrorism, less migration, less piracy; ditto South Sudan.’⁷³ Regardless of the dubious links between South Sudan’s conflict and piracy, migration and terrorism threats in the UK, the UK Government’s press release was notable for not stating the pledge was part of an effort to create a sustainable future for UN peace operations.⁷⁴

The risk factor

⁶⁹ Gowan, ‘From Rapid Reaction’.

⁷⁰ Balossi-Restelli, ‘Fit for What?’.

⁷¹ UN, *The Blue Helmets*, pp.689-777 and UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/resources/statistics/>

⁷² Written evidence from Professor Alice Hills, 29 April 2013, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmaff/86/86vw06.htm>

⁷³ Rowena Mason, ‘UK to deploy troops to help keep peace in Somalia and South Sudan’, *The Guardian*, 27 September 2015.

⁷⁴ Prime Minister’s Office, ‘PM pledges’.

Senior figures in UK politics remain concerned about the limited operational capabilities available to most UN missions. For example, at a 2015 workshop organized to discuss a possible European ‘return’ to UN peace operations, MOD officials pointed to significant UN gaps in the types of support capacities that the UK requires in order to deploy its forces. These included shortfalls in contingency planning, health and safety, and logistical support. From this perspective an increase in UK military contributions would also require additional support units. The alternative view was that while deployment on UN missions should come with different expectations to unilateral or NATO deployments, the deployment of more troops and specialist capabilities by Western states, including the UK, would raise standards in UN operations.⁷⁵

Such concerns are particularly pertinent given the current risks to personnel in many UN’s peace operations. In 2015, Under-Secretary General for Peacekeeping Operations, Hervé Ladsous stated that the number of ‘hostile acts targeting peacekeepers, including by small arms fire, IEDs ... and ambushes, has more than doubled each year over the last three years.’⁷⁶ The UN mission in Mali (MINUSMA) has become one of the most deadly UN peace operations ever.

This debate is significant for the UK because of strong domestic pressures on policymakers. Studies of public opinion in the wake of conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan show that deploying ground troops in an overseas combat role is ‘inhibited by public, political and media skepticism [sic] about the utility of force’.⁷⁷ For example, Clement’s assessment of public opinion and military intervention in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya found that an increasing number of UK casualties in Afghanistan led to a ‘growing wariness in

⁷⁵ Curran, *The UK*, p.8.

⁷⁶ Hervé Ladsous Statement to the Fourth Committee, 30 October 2015, <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/documents/HL%20statement%20to%204th%20CommitteeAS%20DELIVERED30Oct2015.pdf>

⁷⁷ IISS, *The Military Balance 2016*, p.72.

domestic opinion' towards the campaign as a whole.⁷⁸ In turn, this has had a negative impact on public opinion to wider questions of whether the UK should intervene in conflicts in the Middle East.⁷⁹ In addition, Gribble et al concluded that after Iraq and Afghanistan the British public would show an increasingly strong preference for 'military force to be used only to address clear and present threats to the UK or increased support for a less active role for the UK in international affairs'.⁸⁰ Future interventions, will hence require a 'stronger case for involvement' to gain approval from the public, as missions 'whose reasons seem irrelevant or ambiguous, particularly if there is a perception that they may result in another prolonged campaign' would receive little support.⁸¹ With over half of all UN peacekeepers deployed in theaters where the UN has had a presence for over ten years the task of justifying greater engagement to a skeptical public will be difficult. Such concerns may explain why in July 2016 the UK secretly withdrew its two police officers deployed in UNMISS in South Sudan, prompting the UN to disbar the UK from becoming a police-contributing country to that mission.⁸²

Is the UK well prepared?

Larger British military contributions to UN peace operations should only be conducted if the UK is well prepared, militarily and politically. One issue is how to ensure sufficient force protection for peacekeepers but there are other concerns, such as the lack of an effective bureaucratic structure. Another relates to career progression in the British military where peacekeeping deployments are not considered a major opportunity to gain promotion. It remains to be seen what form the proposed cross-Whitehall peacekeeping policy unit will

⁷⁸ Clements, 'Public Opinion,' p.119.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p.130.

⁸⁰ Gribble et al, 'British Public Opinion,' p.141.

⁸¹ Ibid, p.141.

⁸² Michelle Nichols, 'UN memo questions Britain's Security Council veto power', *Reuters*, 21 July 2016, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-southsudan-security-un-idUKKCN10109M>

assume and how far it can address some of these issues. In financial terms, austerity is hardly conducive to selling plans to increase military contributions to UN missions that would undoubtedly cost British taxpayers despite the UN's financial reimbursement mechanisms.⁸³

Militarily, with the exception of Cyprus – arguably one of the least demanding of all UN peacekeeping operations – the British armed forces have had a long hiatus of direct experience in more robust UN missions. A significant number of senior British officers are familiar with some of the UN's peacekeeping missions of the early 1990s but very few have experience of the organization's big missions of the 2000s and 2010s. Importantly, the MOD has recognized the necessity of increased 'immersion' into contemporary peacekeeping practices should UK personnel be asked to deploy on UN operations. Moreover, troops identified for deployment must have the 'requisite training, capability, and understanding of peacekeeping operations to be effective'.⁸⁴ While there is some overlap, this will not be identical to that required for the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Attempts to re-orientate some of the UK's armed forces to the demands of UN peace operations will not be a quick-fix, particularly if resistance emerges from those who believe that peacekeeping is not an appropriate use of the British army's war-fighting capabilities. This is a longstanding debate. In 2001, for example, Chief of the UK Defence Staff, General Sir Charles Guthrie argued against becoming 'too focussed on the 'softer' end of the conflict spectrum', because more peacekeeping deployments would result in 'misuse of personnel and equipment, and an inability to execute operations towards the high-intensity warfighting end of the spectrum'.⁸⁵ Without a large deployment of British troops in a non-permissive UN peacekeeping theatre, it is hard to test Guthrie's assertion. It is notable, however, that some

⁸³ Curran, *The UK*, p.8.

⁸⁴ UK MOD, *Joint Doctrine Note 5/11*, p.1-10.

⁸⁵ Gurthrie, 'The UK's armed forces'.

European powers have recently deployed significant numbers of troops to the UN's most deadly mission in Mali.⁸⁶

Opportunities for Increasing British Peacekeeping Contributions

The challenges outlined above are real but not insurmountable. In examining the opportunities for increased involvement, changing domestic perceptions of UN peace operations, along with international persuasion may create momentum in UK policymaking. Additionally, although they have been out of UN operations for some time, the training and learning capacities of the UK military suggest the armed forces could cope with the tasks and help make UN missions more effective.

Changes at home

First, although there is skepticism about international military engagement, the British public retains a relatively favourable opinion of the UN and peacekeeping. A Pew poll found that 6 in 10 saw the UN in a 'favourable light'.⁸⁷ A 2015 YouGov/Chatham House survey found 68% of respondents agreed that the UK has a 'responsibility to maintain international security' while 58% agreed that the UK should provide more troops for international peacekeeping.⁸⁸ More think tanks are also exploring potential options and the utility of greater UK engagement in UN peace operations.⁸⁹

Until recently, few establishment figures were making the same case but this has started to change. In December 2013, General Sir Nicholas Houghton, Chief of the Defence Staff, argued that the UK must 'be far more pro-active in our investment in UN

⁸⁶ Karlsrud and Smith, *Europe's Return*.

⁸⁷ Pew Global, Survey report.

⁸⁸ Raines, *Internationalism*, p.7.

⁸⁹ See, for example, Johnson, 'Back in Blue?'; Chatham House, *Strengthening Britain's Voice*, p.13; Curran, *The UK*; and Reeve, *Cutting the cloth*, p.21.

Operations'.⁹⁰ In September 2014, then UK Permanent Representative at the UN, Mark Lyall Grant, stated that as UK forces 'draw down in Afghanistan, we are looking actively at how we can increase our existing contribution [to UN missions], particularly in ... niche-enabling areas.'⁹¹ In its 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review, the Government committed to 'Joint Force 2025,' which set the baseline number of regular British Army personnel at 82,000, and included the reconfiguration of a 'number of infantry battalions... to provide an increased contribution to countering terrorism and building stability overseas'.⁹² Debate continues over how these battalions will be used, including whether they should focus on countering Mumbai-style attacks on the UK homeland or counter-insurgency abroad. As part of the UK's restructuring, the House of Commons Defence Committee called for more flexible deployment capabilities.⁹³ Examining the development of UN peace operations in theatres such as Mali, the Committee argued that the MOD should re-examine 'the successes of Sierra Leone and Bosnia, and ask what capabilities might be required to improve the chance of success in current crisis zones such as Libya, Yemen, Ukraine or Iraq'.⁹⁴ It is notable that the Committee linked these developments to earlier UN missions and conflict zones that might end up hosting a UN operation.

The mainstream UK political parties have also warmed to UN peacekeeping. Alongside the series of commitments made by the Conservative-led government, the Labour Party has offered similar policies towards UN peacekeeping.⁹⁵ This could herald a period of relative cross-parliamentary consensus that the UK should deploy more troops and other personnel to UN missions.

⁹⁰ Houghton, lecture, RUSI, 18 December 2013, <https://rusi.org/event/annual-chief-defence-staff-lecture-2013>

⁹¹ *Statement on Strengthening United Nations Peace Operations*, New York, 26 September 2014.

⁹² HM Government, *A Secure*, p.31.

⁹³ House of Commons Defence Committee, *Future Army 2020*.

⁹⁴ House of Commons Defence Committee, *Re-thinking defence*, p.35.

⁹⁵ Benn, 'The case'.

Changes abroad

Current international debates about UN peacekeeping occur in a context of a concerted US-led initiative over the last three years to increase European contributions to UN peace operations.⁹⁶ At the first High-Level summit on ‘Strengthening United Nations Peace Operations’ in September 2014 the UK’s intervention was the last speech and offered very little in the way of concrete steps and commitments.⁹⁷ Since then, however, at the 2015 leaders’ summit the UK pledged to roughly double its troops in UN operations from about 300 to about 600, as well as host the follow-on summit (noted above). This has forced the UK to play a significant behind-the-scenes role in drumming up and sustaining support for UN operations. This would have been easier to do if the UK had fully delivered on its 2015 pledges.

Military debates

Among the British armed forces, UN peace operations still occupy at best an ambiguous niche. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to conclude that the armed forces have completely ignored UN operations. Historically, there have been some interesting and detailed reflections by UK officers.⁹⁸ Even after the UNPROFOR operation, which generated very negative attitudes throughout large sections of the British army, high profile UK military personnel engaged in debates over the future role of UN peacekeeping.⁹⁹ Moreover, British engagement in the Bosnian war was the principal reason for the publication of *Wider Peacekeeping*, the

⁹⁶ See, for example, Samantha Power, ‘Remarks on peacekeeping in Brussels’, 9 March 2015, <http://usun.state.gov/remarks/6399>

⁹⁷ Curran, *The UK*, p.9.

⁹⁸ See Harbottle, *The Blue Berets*; Harbottle, *The Impartial Soldier*; and International Peace Academy, *The Peacekeeper’s Handbook*.

⁹⁹ For example, Mackinlay, ‘Improving Multifunctional Forces’; Mallinson, ‘No Middle Ground’, p.19; Mackinlay (ed.), *A Guide*; General Sir Michael Rose, *Annual Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives Lecture: A Liddell Hart Approach to Peacekeeping*, Kings College London, 18 January 1999.

UK's first peacekeeping doctrine specifically designed for personnel deploying into intra-state armed conflict.¹⁰⁰

The UK military has also maintained an important role in training for peacekeeping. The UK's military officer training programme, for instance, incorporates a range of topics, including on negotiation skills and techniques for military personnel.¹⁰¹ This is supported by research and development into doctrine undertaken by the Doctrine and Concepts Centre, and supported by other groups that have developed specialized capabilities to work with civilian organisations in the context of stabilisation operations.¹⁰² The UK has also begun to prepare its armed forces for peacekeeping, including potentially looking towards models of co-deployment with other European states.¹⁰³ In January 2015, for example, the UK and Ireland agreed to enhance cooperation to support the UK Armed Forces engagement in peacekeeping operations.¹⁰⁴ It is also entirely plausible that the UK's new deployments to Somalia and South Sudan will generate significant, positive lessons learned.

Depending on how similar debates unfold in other NATO states, one outstanding question is the extent to which future UN peace operations will resemble the counter-insurgency and stabilisation operations that characterised the UK's campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. If this does turn out to be the trend, then while the risks to personnel will be considerable the need for the UK to re-learn UN peacekeeping as involving a separate set of skills might be diminished. As outlined above, the UK has had about fifteen years of significant experience of stabilisation and this has undoubtedly influenced the military's doctrine, training, and operational planning. Interestingly, in mid-2015 the NATO Allied

¹⁰⁰ UK MOD, *Army Field Manual*.

¹⁰¹ Goodwin, *The Military and RMA, An Officer and a Problem Solver*, p.2.

¹⁰² See, for instance, the UK's Military Stabilisation Support Group, <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/military-stabilisation-support-group>, and the UK Government Stabilisation Unit, <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/stabilisation-unit>

¹⁰³ For details of co-deployment options see Daniel, Williams and Smith, *Deploying Combined Teams*.

¹⁰⁴ *Memorandum of understanding between the Ministry of Defence of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Department of Defence Ireland*, London/Dublin, UK MOD/DoD Ireland, 2015, p.5.

Joint Doctrine superseded the UK Doctrine and Concept Centre's only doctrine note on peacekeeping.¹⁰⁵ This may indicate that the UK will follow a NATO model of 'Peace Support Operations' in the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

With the winding down of British military commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan, a UN peacekeeping system under record pressure, and the spectre of more and more challenging UN peace operations on the horizon, a debate has emerged over what future roles the UK should play to support effective UN peace operations. With a few exceptions, during the twenty-first century British troops have not been called on to deploy as UN peacekeepers. Instead, the UK's main contributions to UN peacekeeping came through its strategic influence at the UN Security Council, its financial contributions to the budget, and its efforts to train other countries' peacekeepers. This changed somewhat with Prime Minister Cameron's September 2015 pledge to send British troops into UN missions in South Sudan and Somalia.

For greater British participation in UN peace operations to be useful for both the UN and for the UK, British policymakers need to clearly articulate where and how UN peace operations fit within their broader foreign, security and defence policies. The post-Cold War historical track record is not particularly positive. However, as a permanent member of the Security Council, a new stream of work on this issue being produced by British institutions and think tanks, and its commitment to host the 2016 high-level summit on peacekeeping, this is an opportune time for the British government to clarify how and where UN peace operations fit into its wider foreign policy goals and commitments.

¹⁰⁵ UK MOD, *Joint Doctrine Note 5/11* was replaced on 11 June 2015 by *NATO standard AJP-3.4.1*.

The anticipated creation of a cross-Whitehall joint UN Peacekeeping Policy Unit might help answer these questions. And with armed conflicts spreading across North Africa and the Middle East, the European neighbourhood could well be the next theatre for multiple UN peace operations. Indeed, discussions have already started about how the UN might be a part of post-conflict international engagement in the wars in Yemen, Libya, Syria, and even potentially Ukraine. If some or all of these conflicts generate UN operations, the UK would need to use its political influence to ensure the most effective missions possible. It might also decide that it should provide some peacekeepers. The time is therefore right for the UK policy community to assess the utility of UN peace operations and how the UK can help make them a sustainable and robust mechanism to undertake international conflict management and resolution.

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