

Notes for a Presentation by Paul Heinbecker*

Ten Reflections on Peacekeeping

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Check Against Delivery

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I. Introduction

Today, I would like to reflect on the nature of security, the realities of peacekeeping and the changes that are affecting both security and peacekeeping. I will discuss what peacekeeping used to be, what it has become, and where it might be going in the changing security environment. My thesis is optimistic—that we can and will adapt to our changing times and that United Nations peacekeeping, or at least UN-mandated or -authorized military operations, will continue to be a crucial instrument in generating security. As will the UN, itself, be. I will develop this argument largely indirectly, by making ten observations about peacekeeping and about the changing political/military context in which it is conducted and why and how it is changing. To make the argument in detail would require a book and so my approach will be impressionistic covering most points in very broad brush fashion, and drawing conclusions mostly by inference.

1. The Absence of Consensus on Political Issues

Despite the 60 plus years of existence of the UN, there has, at best, been imperfect agreement on the part of the members regarding the institution's purposes and priorities. For the great bulk of the membership, which both gained independence from colonial rulers and acceded to membership after the birth of the organization in 1945, the priorities of the UN are, or should be, economic and social development. For others, probably most of the founding countries of the UN, the world body exists first and foremost as an instrument to safeguard international peace and security, and

only secondarily to promote well-being. Even among those countries that see the UN primarily in collective security terms, there is disagreement whether the UN is the transcendent authority for governing international relations or just one body among several, a foreign policy instrument to be used pragmatically when doing so suits national purposes. With the end of the Cold War, such international consensus as existed about security began to evaporate. With the advent of the Iraq war, launched without Security Council authorization and over the objections of most of the international community, consensus on security largely vanished.

2. The Shifting Nature of Security

The very nature of what constituted security had begun to change. Where you stood on security had always depended famously on where you sat—and lived. But these realities have become ever clearer. Danger and vulnerability are different if you live in Kandahar or Cairo, in Tel Aviv or New York, or in Tyre or Toronto. With a few notable exceptions, most of them in this region, security is rarely anymore about nation-states. Security in this age is about the survival of people much more than about the survival of states.

Consider that:

- Natural disasters killed nearly 240,000 people in 2004, the vast majority in poorer countries.

- Small arms and light weapons killed at least 300,000 people last year, predominantly in the poorer countries.
- Intra-state conflict caused the deaths of 100's of thousands more, notably in Africa.
- Pregnancy-related complications killed more than 500,000 women, 99% of them in the Third World.
- Malaria killed one million people last year, mostly in the poorest countries, and
- HIV-AIDS killed almost three million people last year, again overwhelmingly in the Third World.

The failure of the world to come to the rescue of the innocent in Rwanda and Srebrenica led direct to the advent of the Principle of the Responsibility to Protect. Four short years after a Canadian-sponsored commission tabled its report on Intervention and State Sovereignty in December 2004, 154 heads of state and government and 38 other representatives endorsed its central principle at the 2005 UN summit. That principle holds that when a government cannot or will not protect its citizens from gross abuse, or is itself abusing them in a massive way, the responsibility to protect them migrates temporarily to the international community, presuming a UN Security Council authorization. Many of the poorer countries are apprehensive, fearing the emerging norm will mean too

much intervention while many UN staff fear the contrary, that in practice it will mean too little, as rich countries avoid volunteering the requisite forces and others denying the necessity of acting, at least militarily.

The point is not to minimize the catastrophic costs of the more classic inter-state conflicts, especially those in this region. Those costs are real and enormous, as a glance at any Iraqi newspaper attests. And, more generally, recourse to weapons of mass destruction would produce casualties that could dwarf those caused even by HIV-AIDS. The point is, nevertheless, that short of Armageddon, human security costs are going to be higher and unrelenting, and they are going to be real not just potential. So, it is not surprising in these circumstances that people in the poorer countries think the main issue they face is not the so-called “war on terror”, or even the proliferation of nuclear weapons, but their own survival. For most, their insecurity is rooted in their burgeoning numbers and in their poverty.

But a glance at the defence and development budgets of any developed country, let alone the most powerful country, is enough to see that the richer countries do not view things that way. And this, despite the fact, as the response of Indonesians to American assistance during the Tsunami shows that the next dollar spent on humanitarian assistance at the margin buys the donor more security than another dollar spent on defence. These differing, indeed polar opposite perspectives on security are part of the reason that the UN appears so enfeebled. The North versus South debate at the UN is a struggle for the institution’s soul, as much as it is for power.

3. The Faltering Faith in International Institutions and Treaties

PM Mahatir probably spoke for many Muslims and many others when he questioned what good the UN was. He said,

The United Nations is today collapsing on its feet ... it is helpless to protect the weak and the poor. It can be ignored, pushed aside, gesticulating feebly as it struggles to be relevant....Its organs have been cut out, dissected, and reshaped, so that they may perform the way the puppet masters want."

President Ahmedinajad of Iran "got evident traction" at the UN when he said at the UN in September, 2006

"If the governments of the United States or United Kingdom...commit aggression, occupation and violation of international law, which of the organs of the United Nations can [hold] them to account?"

The unilateral character of the Bush administration's foreign policy and its open skepticism about the utility of international organizations and treaties, have also undermined confidence in multilateral institutions. The intractability of the Palestine-Israel dispute, the strong US support for Israeli positions, the monopoly of US diplomacy and the sidelining of the UN is eroding whatever confidence there was in the UN's capacity to bring about an outcome satisfactory to all. The contempt for the UN of senior administration officials and their Neo-Con advisors such as, Richard Perle and Ambassador John Bolton, despite the failure in Iraq has also taken a toll on attitudes toward the UN around the world. Mud sticks.

The struggle over UN management reform—a zero sum game

between the Global South and the Global North for the UN's soul-- is similarly undermining confidence in the organization. The struggle is especially destructive in the budget committee of the UN where-cut-off-your-nose-to-spite-your-face decisions are an all too frequent outcome.

This indispensable instrument for preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons is being weakened by double standards in its implementation. The approach of the international community to the nuclear weapons programs is anything but consistent and very selective. The U.S concludes a strategic agreement with India, accepts Pakistan's nuclear program, de facto, because it needs Pakistan's cooperation on terrorism and turns a blind eye to Israel's nuclear program. Meanwhile, the international community led by the US bends every effort to stop North Korea's nuclear program and to prevent Iran from acquiring the ability to produce nuclear weapons. At the same time, the P5, especially the US, support selective interpretations of the NPT that ignore the Treaty's central bargains, especially their end of the bargain, disarmament.

Nevertheless, the public worldwide remains positive about the UN. In a poll of 37,572 people conducted for the BBC World Service by GlobeScan and the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland in January 2006, things are less bleak. In 30 of the 32 countries polled, a majority (23 countries) or a plurality (7) rated the United Nations as having a positive influence. On average 59 percent rated the United Nations as having a positive influence (US 52%), while just 16 percent rated it as having a negative influence. However, the percentage giving the U.N. a

positive rating is down an average of 10 points from a previous poll by the same firm.

4. The Growth in UN military Missions

One of the great ironies of the United Nations is that whatever doubts the members have about the organization as a whole, they continue to task the organization heavily. Military operations are, literally and figuratively, booming! When the UN peacekeepers collectively accepted their Nobel Prize in 1988, there had been 16 UN peace missions in approximately 40 years. In the 20 years since, there have been over 40 missions. Today, there are 18 missions staffed by more than 93,000 people in the field. Once the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and the UN Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT) complete their full deployment, (and if the UN Mission in Sudan [UNMIS] expands its operations in Darfur as authorized), then there will be over 140,000 blue helmets, police officers and civilian staff in place. The cost of running so many operations with such enormous numbers of staff is scheduled to top \$6 billion, with \$7 billion a near term prospect. Clearly, whatever doubts there are about the institution, its military security functions are booming.

5. The Complexity of Contemporary Missions

The first commander of UNEF, General Burns, would likely not recognize what the UN is trying to do today although he would likely approve. As a general rule, peacekeepers in his day and for many years afterwards were deployed when a ceasefire was in place and the parties to the conflict had

given their consent. They were usually lightly-armed and not expected to fight fire with fire. Now things are very different, of course. Missions are larger and more complex. They deal increasingly with intra-State conflicts, sometimes where there are several protagonists, and where some at least are still fighting.

Consent of all parties is sometimes unattainable, with the risk that the UN becomes just another protagonist. Mandates go well beyond inter-positioning to include outright combat, the protection of civilians, the disarming of combatants, the re-establishment or the actual creation of government institutions, the reform of the security sector, the fostering of the local economy, the administration of justice, the guarantee of human rights, etc. That is not to say that classic peacekeeping is dead—UNMEE along the border of Ethiopia and Eritrea and in some respects UNIFIL on the Israel-Lebanon border are more classical peacekeeping operations, although the latter's mandate has robust elements. Peacebuilding has been added to the lexicon, both in recognition of its centrality to peace and to give the UN forces an exit strategy. Forty-six years later, UNFICYP is still in Cyprus in part because peace-building was not a priority, at least in the early days.

6. The Retreat of the Rich Countries

For a variety of reasons—including overstretched forces and reductions in defence budgets, the rich countries have gone AWOL from Blue helmet missions. The poorer countries provide the lion's share—partly out of a sense of responsibility, partly for the prestige, partly for the money. President

Obassanjo commented on the contemporary idea that in African conflicts only African troops should be used, saying that he thought international security was supposed to be everyone's responsibility. In any event, there is not a single western industrialized country among the top 10 nations contributing troops to the UN. Canada currently (October, 2006) ranks 61st with 124 soldiers and police officers abroad on Blue Helmet missions. Even if contributions to Afghanistan were counted, Canada would not make the top ten contributors list. Egypt ranks 22nd with 936 troops on UN missions.

For a variety of reasons, Western military leaders prefer coalitions and shy away from UN leadership. The reasons are a mix of the reasonable and the questionable:

- The missions are more complex and dangerous and are thought to be best run by a single, militarily competent lead country, rather than a UN-anointed command structure.
- Military relationships with the Pentagon are an important factor
- Interoperability is better in NATO-based coalitions
- Hospital services are better if the US military is participating

The Canadian military strongly prefers operating in cooperation with the Americans, too. But while there are strong tactical reasons for doing so there are also strategic considerations. Creating the impression that Canada is at the disposition of the US in wars abroad can only affect the world's view of Canada.

7. Peacekeeping, Combat Operations, What?

In Canada, people have been confused by the myths have grown up about peacekeeping that ought to be dispelled. Some Canadians prefer peacekeeping to more robust forms of military action because they think it is not dangerous, the many posthumous UN medals awarded to Canadians who died in the UN's service notwithstanding. Many Canadians see peacekeeping as a UN duty and prefer it because the US does not dominate it. The debate in Canada on peacekeeping versus combat is a proxy for our larger debate about the appropriate relationship with the UN and the US.

It is time to change the discourse and update the vocabulary of peacekeeping. Whatever else the UN military forces are doing abroad, most of them are not just keeping the peace. The experience in complex emergencies in Sierra Leone and Bosnia, the current realities in Afghanistan and what many of us believe UN forces should be doing in Darfur shows that peacekeeping as originally conceived scarcely exists anymore. "Peacekeeping" is in any case a misnomer for these combat and near combat missions. It confuses our publics and confounds our goals. Why not call these missions what they are: UN-mandated military operations?

8. Globalization and Peacekeeping

Thanks to the great ease of modern travel and the pervasiveness of television, our publics are much more aware than they used to be of what is happening in the world. We used to speak of the "CNN Effect", by which we meant the impact of television on policy decisions, especially American policy

decisions. CNN's coverage of international events was the first time that many normal citizens could see what was happening in distant corners of the globe and could bring pressure to bear on their governments to do something. CNN had a substantial influence on the UN decision to involve itself in Bosnia.

To some extent the CNN Effect has been replaced by the Al Jazeera Effect. The difference between the two is a consequence of the policy context and cultural sensitivities of the communities in which the networks originate. Western outlets tend to give their own governments the benefit of the doubt, are very sensitive about the foreign policy context in which they operate and tend to shield their viewers from harsh realities. Al Jazeera also has its political and cultural influences but it does not shrink from covering the harsh realities. For example, when innocent life is lost in conflict, either through military or insurgency actions, CNN tends to show its audience twisted steel and rubble and Al Jazeera tends to present broken bodies and death.

Another new phenomenon affecting the context in which peacekeeping happens, is the Internet. The Internet liberates its users from government efforts to control information and from the biases of the mainstream media, regrettably introducing some of its own biases in the process. Nevertheless, neither governments nor media can any longer control what citizens are reading about given conflicts. That, of course, can undermine the ability of governments to maintain the support of the population for policies people would not support if they knew what was being done in their names. This will have a profound effect on ongoing conflicts. It's too early to tell how significance of blogging is for foreign policy. But it seems very likely that the

emergence of YouTube, battlefield bloggers, webcams and cell phone cameras will make it impossible for governments to control the narrative of given events (as the subsequent hanging of Saddam Hussein soon demonstrated).

9. The Pendulum of Public Opinion

The US decision to go into Iraq has become a fiasco, as many including Egypt warned it would. The US's conflating the Iraq conflict with the ill-considered war on terror, the Arab-Israeli conflicts and the democracy project has made the management of US foreign policy an unenviable job. It was made all the more difficult by the world's reaction to Guantanamo, Abu Graib, transgressions of the Torture Convention, the US Military Commissions Act, the practice of extraordinary rendition, and disappearances. The US mid-term elections indicate that a turning point has been reached. Democracy, the great stabilizer of American policy, has begun to pull US politics back to the centre of the political spectrum. It takes time for a population of three hundred million people to reach consensus on anything but once that consensus is reached politicians have very little latitude to ignore it.

Despite the aspirations of the Neo-Cons, Americans do not see themselves as an empire. They do the right thing, as Churchill said, once they have exhausted all the alternatives. And it is clear that they disapprove of US Middle-East policy. That does not mean that the US will change directions sharply. The President has two years left, Vice President Cheney appears to be undaunted by the Middle East imbroglio and the Neo-Cons, who have been such a powerful intellectual influence on the formulation of US foreign policy,

remain a formidable danger. President Bush will need a major success if his legacy is to be remembered positively. It is not yet clear whether that might entail a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, as President Clinton tried to achieve in his final days in office, or a broadening of the Iraq war to include Iran, or both.

10. The Renaissance of the UN?

Overlooked in all the recriminations about the UN is the fact the institution has substantially re-invented itself. Innovations from peacekeeping to peace enforcement and peace-building, to international criminal justice systems, to sustainable development, to refugee protection, to humanitarian coordination and food relief, to democracy and electoral support, to human rights conventions, to health protection, to landmine removal, to managerial accountability and oversight, have permitted the organization to change, and to equip itself to acquit its increasingly demanding responsibilities, albeit to the full satisfaction of neither the general public nor of member countries nor of secretariat staff. The Security Council has transcended the Iraq experience and is once again at the centre of deliberations on major international political issues such as North Korea, Iran and Lebanon. Further, the Council is innovating and has passed anti-terrorism “legislation” compelling compliance by all 192 UN members. Even management reform is possible if the effort is well thought out and narrowly conceived as former Algerian foreign minister Lakhdar Brahimi showed on peacekeeping reform. Ongoing improvements generate less opposition than radical overhauls do.

II. Conclusion

The nature of security has changed. Poverty and disease are more immediate threats to the well-being of more people than inter-state wars are. Human security is a more pressing problem in reality than national security is, at least for most people. At the same time, peace-keeping has had to adapt to changing circumstances. The number of UN missions has grown enormously, as has their complexity, dangerousness and cost. The public in some countries prefers the old myths about peacekeeping to the current dangerous realities. There are very few classical peacekeeping missions left and it is perhaps time to call them what they have become—UN authorized military operations. The Responsibility to Protect has created a new principle on which all agree—that the innocent merit the protection of the international community when their own governments cannot or will not protect them from massive abuses. But practice has a long way to go to catch up to theory, as some countries ignore their responsibilities to act and others turn a blind eye to the suffering that is all too evident. Technology is changing the context of security and in some ways is liberating citizens to see what is happening in ways that previous generations could not. The UN has been able to reinvent itself to cope with other circumstances over the years and there are sufficient grounds to believe that it will continue to do so.

The US is more cognizant of the UN's value than it has been since 2,000.

The international public still supports the idea of the UN, albeit less strongly, and a renaissance is possible.