

# Wandering in the Void

## Charting the U.N.'s New Strategic Role

*John Gerard Ruggie*

The United Nations has entered a domain of military activity—a vaguely defined no-man's-land lying somewhere between traditional peacekeeping and enforcement—for which it lacks any guiding operational concept. It has merely ratcheted up the traditional peacekeeping mechanism in an attempt to respond to wholly new security challenges. The result is that the majority of the nearly 70,000 blue-helmeted peacekeepers now out in the field serve in contexts for which peacekeeping was not intended. Even as the demand for these U.N. troops increases almost daily, they continue to function under rules of engagement and with equipment frequently inadequate to their missions. Moreover, they depend for their effectiveness and sometimes their very survival on a U.N. infrastructure that is increasingly not up to the task.

This growing misuse of peacekeeping does more than strain the United Nations materially and institutionally. It has brought the world body to the point of outright strategic failure. Indeed, in

Bosnia that line has been crossed already. The U.N. peacekeeping forces there have performed a valuable humanitarian role, to be sure. Nonetheless, having been deployed in a security environment for which the peacekeeping mechanism was not designed, they have ended up deterring, not ethnic cleansing, nor the dismemberment of an internationally recognized state, but the international community itself from undertaking more forceful action to arrest these acts. The Europeans thus opposed President Clinton's proposed air strikes against Serbian artillery positions because they have peacekeeping troops on the ground that are highly vulnerable to retaliation. Yet those troops—because of their small numbers, limited military capability and quasi-peacekeeping rules of engagement—were neither intended nor able to produce the military stalemate from which a political settlement could have emerged.

Governments must move quickly to assess the constraints and opportunities facing U.N.-sanctioned forces. If the

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JOHN GERARD RUGGIE is Dean of Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs.



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*U.N. forces, off-track in Bosnia.*

United Nations continues on its present course, its newly constructed house of cards will collapse and take traditional peacekeeping as well as humanitarian intervention down with it. Recent developments in U.S. policy, culminating in the Clinton administration's Policy Review Document 13, indicate a greater willingness in this country than at any time past to explore what the U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Ambassador Madeleine K. Albright, has dubbed "assertive multilateralism." To date, however, the notion lacks any corresponding expression in military doctrine and operational concepts. And President Clinton, in his September 25 speech to the United Nations,

struck a decidedly cautious stance.

The international community must define the new domain of collective military activity that lies between peacekeeping and enforcement and figure out if and how its military requirements can be meshed with the national military capabilities and doctrines of those states that are able and willing to make a meaningful contribution to it.

**FAMILIAR TERRAIN**

Over the years the United Nations has evolved a well-articulated and widely recognized operational concept for peacekeeping. Brian Urquhart, who was present at its creation and presided over the activity for many years, has

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described peacekeeping as follows:

the use by the United Nations of military personnel and formations not in a fighting or enforcement role but interposed as a mechanism to bring an end to hostilities and as a buffer between hostile forces. In effect, it serves as an internationally constituted pretext for the parties to a conflict to stop fighting and as a mechanism to maintain a cease fire.<sup>1</sup>

Toward that end, U.N. troops observe and report. They carry only light arms and shoot only in self-defense. And because they lack any constitutional basis in the U.N. charter, peacekeeping forces are sent only with the consent of the country or countries in which they are stationed. Unlike combat units, peacekeeping forces are not designed to create the conditions for their own success on the ground; those conditions must pre-exist for them to be able to perform their role. In short, theirs is essentially a non-military mission, carried out by military personnel. Accordingly, the combat effectiveness of such units and the adequacy of U.N. headquarters operations that support them have not had to be a major issue of concern in the past.

Enforcement is primarily a legal, not a military, term. It refers to actions authorized under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter. An aggressor is collectively identified and punished by an escalating ladder of means until its aggression is reversed. Ultimately, enforcement involves flat-out war-fighting—for exam-

ple, the "all necessary means" of Resolution 678, authorizing what became Operation Desert Storm. War-fighting of that sort is everything that peacekeeping is not—doctrinally, in terms of on-the-ground assets, as well as in its command and control requirements. As defined by the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, the doctrines and rules governing U.S. troops in Desert Storm and similar campaigns are antithetical to standard U.N. peacekeeping practice: the decisive, comprehensive, and synchronized application of preponderant military force to shock, disrupt, demoralize and defeat opponents.<sup>2</sup>

The United Nations does not have an institutionalized military enforcement capability, and it is exceedingly difficult to imagine how it could come to acquire one. Proposals for a U.N. standby force or an international volunteer force are likely to generate more debate than funding, facilities or troops. Large-scale U.N. military enforcement, therefore, will in the future remain episodic and, when it occurs at all, consist of U.N. authorization and general political oversight together with execution by ad hoc coalitions of states.

**A NEUTRALIZING FORCE**

It is in the gray area between peacekeeping and all-out war-fighting that the United Nations has gotten itself into serious trouble. The trouble stems from the fact that the United Nations has misapplied perfectly good tools to inappropriate circumstances.

<sup>1</sup>Brian Urquhart, "International Peace and Security: Thoughts on the Twentieth Anniversary of Dag Hammarskjöld's Death," *Foreign Affairs*, Fall 1981, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup>*A Doctrinal Statement of Selected Joint Operational Concepts*, Washington: Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, U.S. Department of Defense, Nov. 23, 1992.

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The ill-fated U.N. peacekeeping mission sent to Somalia prior to Operation Restore Hope (UNOSOM I) is a case in point. Gen. Mohammed Farah Aidid, so-called Interim President Ali Mahdi Mohammed and the other warlords did not create domestic anarchy in Somalia absentmindedly. The insecurity of the Somali population was their very objective, the basis of their power and revenues. Those hapless 400 Pakistani Blue Berets confined to Mogadishu airport were the only lightly armed contingent in the country. When international humanitarian assistance personnel wanted to move about they had to hire armed thugs to protect them, thereby reinforcing the very system that had created the human tragedy that brought them to Somalia in the first place.

The same is true in the former Yugoslavia. From the start, as Aleksa Djilas has recently written in these pages, "Milošević counted on war, the ultimate condition of fear, to unite Serbs around him." There was no peace to be kept in Bosnia. And the displacement of Muslims in Bosnia is not an incidental by-product of the war, but the Serbs' very objective. Therefore, deploying a U.N. humanitarian mission to Bosnia by definition meant that its personnel would not be considered impartial and that they would, therefore, become potential pawns in the conflict. Seeking to protect them with peacekeepers only added to the number of potential international hostages on the ground.

Alas, the domain between peacekeeping and enforcement is a doctrinal void. Its core strategic logic can nonetheless be grasped by comparison to the traditional

U.N. functions. Peacekeeping essentially attempts to overcome a coordination problem between two adversaries: the peacekeeper seeks to ensure that both parties to a conflict understand the agreed-upon rules of the game and that compliance with or deviation from these rules is made transparent. Enforcement, on the other hand, is akin to a game of chicken: the international community, through escalating measures that ultimately threaten war-making and military defeat, attempts to force an aggressor off its track.

Strategically, the United Nations' new domain resembles a suasion game: because there is no clear-cut aggressor, U.N. forces, by presenting a credible military threat, seek to convince all conflictual parties that violence will not succeed. International force is brought to bear not to defeat but to neutralize the local forces. The political objective is to prevent local force from becoming the successful arbiter of disputes and to persuade combatants that they have no viable alternative but to reach a negotiated settlement. The military objective of the strategy, then, is to deter, dissuade and deny (D<sup>3</sup>).

Ideally, the timely show of sufficient international force would deter the local use of force altogether; a flotilla of warships off the coast of Dubrovnik, firing warning shots when the Serbs first shelled the city, might have gone a long way toward arresting armed conflict in the former Yugoslavia. If the time for deterrence has passed, or should deterrence fail, international force would be deployed in the attempt to dissuade local forces from continuing their military activities; Operation Restore Hope was

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an attempt—if not entirely successful—to accomplish that end. As a last step, international force would seek to deny military victory to any side in the dispute, thereby creating the military stalemate on which negotiated settlements often depend; President Clinton's "lift and strike" proposal for Bosnia would have been an instance had it been adopted.

To achieve any of these objectives, international forces above all must be militarily credible. Neither their size nor their technological and operational capabilities can be defined generically, but will depend foremost on the nature of their missions. At the high end of the spectrum, such a force might be indistinguishable from war-fighting units in all respects except its rules of engagement and its military as well as political objectives. The air-strike component of President Clinton's Bosnian "lift and strike" proposal would have exemplified that feature. But even at the lower end, as is illustrated by the current U.N. operation in Somalia, such forces require more extensive training than traditional peacekeepers, as well as heavier equipment, greater operational flexibility and mobility, access to more sophisticated communication and intelligence systems, and tactical direction by a viable field command.

Even if the proposed D<sup>3</sup> strategy were satisfactorily refined and adopted as policy by governments, however, a number of practical problems would have to be resolved before it could be successfully instituted.

**TOWARD COLLECTIVE SECURITY**

First, any move in this new direction would increase the international military

presence of the major powers of the United Nations. Relatively few countries have the military capabilities to implement the strategy in any but minor conflicts. And those countries that do can hardly be expected simply to turn over their forces to the international body. Greater military involvement by the major powers would go a long way toward closing the U.N. military infrastructure gaps. But it would also increase the constant tension between the competing desires for U.N. versus national control over field operations and extend that struggle to headquarters operations. A mutually acceptable relationship would have to be devised.

Second, neither the capabilities nor the willingness would exist under the new arrangement any more than under the old to right all wrongs, even the relatively small number of wrongs that are deemed to warrant international action. Hence any such collective security system is bound to lack universal coverage. But that need not necessarily be a fatal flaw. The chief defining attribute of multilateralism, including collective security arrangements, should be construed not as universality but as nondiscrimination. Great care would have to be taken, therefore, to minimize geographical, ideological or any other bias. For any such bias would undo this mode of collective security, politically by reducing its legitimacy and militarily by reducing its deterrent effect.

Third, a doctrinal clash would have to be overcome between the U.S. military, in particular, and the United Nations. For the U.S. military, the D<sup>3</sup> strategy at first blush is likely to conjure up concepts of gradual escalation and limited war,

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discredited by and discarded after Vietnam. True, under the new strategy the political and military objectives of the deployment of international force would be limited. But there is no reason why those objectives could not be coupled with maximum military strength geared to the situation at hand. The United Nations, however, as both a collection of governments and an institution in its own right, is averse to the deployment of force and, once it is deployed, instinctively favors gradual escalation. The United Nations, therefore, would have to appreciate the classic distinction between the utility of force and its actual use.

Finally, the relationship between this new mode of collective security and traditional peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance would have to be worked out. On paper, the transition from Operation Restore Hope to UNOSOM II looked good. In practice, it has not been smooth or entirely effective, largely because the military mission of the former was underspecified and inadequately executed.

Despite these problems, the United Nations must move in this new direction: U.N. peacekeeping has already been pushed too far, and U.N.-sanctioned military enforcement will continue to be a rarity. The domain of a potentially enhanced U.N. military role occupies the space between those two. The major challenge for the international community is to define that domain, and to mesh it effectively with national military capabilities and doctrines. Only then will the international community be able effectively to persuade local combatants that the use of force to resolve disputes will not succeed. ②