

Foreword: Civilian Involvement in Peacekeeping Operations in the Western Balkans

TOM WOODHOUSE*
*Professor Emeritus, Peace Studies Division
University of Bradford, UK*

Peacekeeping has come a long way since the basic principles which define it were laid down by Lester Pearson and Dag Hammarskjöld, to guide the deployment of the first full UN mission, UNEF I, in 1956. Since 1956, it has been generally accepted that peacekeeping is a function of the UN, but there are occasions when it has been used by international and regional organisations other than the UN, and there are operations which can be seen as early uses of peacekeeping which predated the formation of the UN in 1945. After the First World War, for example, multinational military bodies were used to establish and administer the new frontiers of Europe agreed by peace treaties after the war. Also after the First World War the League of Nations conducted activities which were comparable in some respects to peacekeeping. However, since 1945 peacekeeping has been the technique most frequently used by and associated with the United Nations to terminate conflicts and establish peace, so much so that the organisation was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its peacekeeping activities in 1988 and indeed Pearson and Hammarskjöld, the two people who ‘invented’ peacekeeping as a so-called chapter six and a half activity of the UN were also awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1957.

Although a number of the original principles defined by Pearson and Hammarskjöld have been contested and challenged over the years, particularly in the debate about the nature and efficacy of peacekeeping in post-Cold War ethnically driven civil wars, they proved durable enough over a period of thirty years for Brian Urquhart to describe the document in which they are defined as “a conceptual masterpiece in a completely new field, the blue print for a non-violent, international military operation”. Similarly, when Pearson delivered his acceptance speech (Hammarskjöld’s was awarded posthumously), he clearly regarded peacekeeping as part of and a first step towards a new and more peaceful global security architecture. In his speech he quoted the historian Arnold Toynbee: “The twentieth century will be chiefly remembered by future generations not as an era of political conflicts or technical inventions but as an age in which human society dared to think of the welfare of the whole human race as a practical objective.”

For all its faults and limitations, United Nations peacekeeping is a tangible and practical expression of the ideals expressed by Pearson, Hammarskjöld, and Toynbee. It is fitting in relation to the publication of this issue that the Balkans have been not only a testing ground for peacekeeping but an area in which it has also managed to adapt and develop. The first initiative contributing to the development of the UN’s peacekeeping framework, predating UNEF I, was the UN Special Committee on the Balkans (UNSCOB) established in 1947 in response to the civil war in Greece.

* *t.woodhouse@bradford.ac.uk*

Forty-five years after this early observer mission in the Balkans, a chain of conflicts in former-Yugoslavia presented UN peacekeeping with unrivalled challenges, illustrating more than ever the complexities involved in responding to post-Cold War conflict. Initially authorised in February 1992 to monitor a cease-fire, to provide support for a political peace process, and to support the provision of humanitarian aid in Croatia, the United Nations Protection Force in former-Yugoslavia (UNPROFOR I) found itself drawn into an ever-increasing complex and volatile situation overseeing the disintegration of a state and the emergence of stable new states. Its mandate was, firstly, extended to Bosnia and Hercegovina (UNPROFOR II), under Chapter VII arrangements, to monitor the humanitarian situation. The UN then took the innovative step of deploying a preventive peacekeeping force in Macedonia (initially called UNPROFOR III, then UNPREDEP). With its constantly changing and often ambiguous mandate, UNPROFOR was a classic example whereby the line between second generation (peacekeeping) and peace enforcement operations has become blurred. UNPROFOR was, at the time, the largest and most expensive peacekeeping mission deployed by the UN. Subsequently, UNPROFOR has been one of the most controversial peacekeeping operations. The continuation and escalation of the conflict has led to severe criticism by the UN, the international community, and the parties to the conflict related to, for example, the role of third party intervention in civil wars (e.g., issues of impartiality, consent) and availability of resources).

What is remarkable about peacekeeping is not that it has failed or underperformed in these and other conflicts – given the complexity and relative lack of resources for peacekeeping it would be surprising if it were otherwise (Rwanda and Somalia amongst others have presented similar and even greater challenges). The positive feature about the continued durability and relevance of peacekeeping to contemporary conflict is that it has continued to adapt and evolve. This is partly due to the fact that it was not defined and bound within a dogmatic doctrine of what it should be and how it should function. Also, it has been continuously reviewed and evaluated by post-mission reports from peacekeepers in the field, and by occasional strategic reviews commissioned by the UN (the reports on Srebrenica and Rwanda for example, and the Brahimi Report of 2000). This process of continuous review has enabled peacekeeping to adapt to the ever changing context and challenge of armed conflict. Critical assessments of peacekeeping by academic researchers also suggests that peacekeeping is effective, reducing the risk of a return to war overall from between 50% to 75% or 80%. One of the key ways in which peacekeeping has evolved is the way in which civilian expertise has been blended in most contemporary missions with the work of military peacekeepers.

For all these reasons special issue of the *Journal for Regional Security*, “Mapping Western Balkans Civilian Capacities for Peace Operations”, is a more than welcome addition to the literature. The Balkans as a region was in at the beginning of peacekeeping. It is also an area that severely tested one of the main missions ever deployed, and with this study it will ensure a role in understanding the ways and means by which peacekeeping will continue to progress, with enhanced civilian capacity, to provide what the founders aspired to – even more effective non-violent (or, at least, less violent) conflict resolution.