POLICY BRIEF 2017:4

Reflections on the Challenges Facing Leaders of UN Peace Operations

Background details

The Annual Forum 2017 was held in Istanbul, Turkey, 8-10 October. It was hosted by the Center for Strategic Research of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey.

The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Challenges Forum Partnership, Secretariat or hosts of the meeting.

The United Nations (UN) is tasked with finding solutions to the world's most intractable conflicts. Sometimes the UN is seen as the natural choice to try to solve a problem, the first resort, sometimes it is brought in when all else has failed. It makes little difference though - by the time the UN Security Council has mandated a mission, the situation will be difficult and probably very violent.

In trying to resolve a conflict, the leadership of a UN peace operation has to deal with a range of complex and intertwined issues set out in the mission's mandate. And these days that mandate is likely to reflect a high sense of expectation of what the UN should do, as the international community has learned from dozens of post-conflict interventions that creating lasting stability in a country requires a multifaceted approach. The mandates given to missions such as the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) have always presented a long list of tasks and aspirations. And of course, in order to drive down costs, there is a constant desire to produce a solution in the shortest possible time.

In addition to a sound understanding of the situation in their country of assignment, leaders of UN peace operations need a broad range of skills, knowledge and competencies to do their jobs well. Specifically, they need a good understanding of what they can and cannot do, and a clear vision of what they should be trying to do. Thirdly, they need to know what are, and how best they can use, the tools at their disposal. And lastly, mission leaders need a good understanding of what is expected by all who look to them for leadership, and how to maximise their own

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strengths in a highly pressurised environment.

This paper looks at each of these four areas, and makes recommendations on how to ensure that leaders of peace operations have the tools to do their jobs well.

The Foundations

At the most basic level, leaders of UN peace operations need to know the parameters within which they must work - broadly speaking, the legal framework but also certain political imperatives. These parameters are defined in part by the mandate of the mission, set out in UN Security Council Resolutions, and by international treaties and charters. A sound understanding of international humanitarian law (IHL) and of human rights is essential, as is a basic understanding of other aspects of international law. In a situation where a state may be highly dependent on a mission, it is also important to have a grasp of the concept of sovereignty, often so difficult to define except when someone, and probably your hosts, judges that the mission has overstepped the line: a mission leader needs to know if, when and how to push back.

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A critical question for the leadership of a UN peace operation is how far a mission can go in using force, and when it is right to do so. While the grounds for the use of force are likely to be fairly well defined in the mandate (usually in terms of the need to protect civilians, probably also to protect the mission and humanitarian actors, and to defend the mandate) and reflected in the military Concept of Operations and Rules of Engagement, much will depend on the interpretation of, for example, what constitutes a threat to civilians, or when it is justifiable for a mission to defend its mandate by force. For example, in MINUSCA, when certain ex-Seleka groups were threatening to march on Bambari, the second biggest city in the Central African Republic (CAR), earlier this year the mission decided that its protection of civilians mandate meant that it could set "red lines" beyond which armed groups would face the use of force. When some rebels breached those red lines the mission justified air strikes in terms of protecting civilians. That was about as far as a UN force can go (without the specific offensive mandate given to the Force Intervention Brigade in United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, MONUSCO): a UN peace operation must not be a party to the conflict, and the International Committee of the Red Cross(ICRC), which acts as the guardian of IHL, were clear that the airstrikes would have compromised the mission's status were it not for the specific warnings given that this was how we would interpret our protection of civilians (PoC) mandate. It was important for MINUSCA to have thought through the implications and consequences of the airstrikes. These questions of interpretation are likely to arise during a crisis situation and a mission leader may have little time to decide what

they can do. So having a sound understanding of the limits, and indeed of how far those limits can be stretched, is essential.

Combating sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) also falls within the parameters under which the leaders of UN peace operations have to work, and the experience of MINUSCA in the early days of the mission showed how serious the consequences could be if a leader fails to get this right. While dealing with SEA may not usually be a matter for international law – since UN military and police contingents are subject to their national jurisdictions, and UN international staff to internal procedures and possibly criminal charges - SEA is firmly on the agenda of the Security Council, not least following the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2272. Every mission leader needs a very clear understanding of their responsibility to prevent SEA, and that means knowing the measures that all missions should be putting in place in order to ensure a zero tolerance culture, and what to do if cases occur.

Leaders need to set out a holistic picture of how the mission will implement its mandate and how each part of the mission contributes.

Implementing the Mandate

From the moment they arrive in a mission, leaders need to know what actions they are going to take to implement the mandate. Much of the broad outline for mandate implementation will be contained in mission planning documents including for example the Mission Concept and the annual resource-based budget. These basic planning documents will reflect UN policies and best practice on issues such as Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR), security sector reform (SSR), gender, elections or justice. It is important for mission leaders to have a broad understanding of UN best practice, which is based on lessons learned from decades of post-conflict interventions, in order to understand why a particular course of action is advocated.

Post-conflict situations are however inherently unstable, and nothing will go entirely to plan. And in practice, working out how best to implement your mandate is an interactive process, one which involves constant dialogue between the mission and UN Headquarters (UNHQ) informed by dialogue with key partners on the ground, in response to the evolution of the political process and of the conflict. A mission leader needs to be able to work with their team on how to respond, but also to have a clear idea of what needs to be done: a peace operation cannot be left in a state of limbo. A leader also needs to be able to speak with authority to UNHQ and others if and when plans have to be adjusted to take account of ground truth, not least to inform discussion on the development of the next mandate, a process which may start months before the discussion in the Security Council. Mission leaders have to be strategic thinkers, and have a broad idea of where the conflict may be heading at least over the next 12-18 months, of what the mission can achieve and what resources will be needed.

Throughout mandate implementation, a mission leader needs to be able to challenge their team, to get them to think through problems: while UN missions are full of capable individuals, silo-working is a risk, and there may in practice be very few people in a mission who can see across the piece. Leaders need to set out a holistic picture of how the mission will implement its mandate and how each part of the mission contributes. They need to build up synergies between the different aspects of mandate implementation, and equally avoid divergences – and even occasionally in-mission competition - which could undermine the chances of success.

Lastly, peacekeeping and post-conflict stabilisation are developing sciences, and while a leader and their team should emulate best practice, there should be a cautious approach to assuming that if a solution has worked in one theatre it will work in another. A mission is in some senses a laboratory where doctrine is further tested and developed, and leaders sometimes need to question orthodoxies, and challenge their teams to be innovative and creative in seeking the best solutions.

The UN as an organisation has to ensure that the mission can carry out its mandate, often at the heart of a conflict, while at the same time also protect its staff. It is a role that requires skill and judgement, and not all incoming leaders of peace operation missions will have any comparable experience.

Resources

The third main area of knowledge for mission leaders is knowing how to manage the tools at their disposal – the people, material assets and the money. Some aspects of this will be familiar to those who have already occupied other senior management positions: leaders of any organisation need to understand their responsibilities with regard to finance and material assets, towards their staff, including ensuring fair recruitment and performance management practices. Building up a good understanding of UN policies in these areas will take some time: UN financial and staffing rules and procedures are sometimes arcane and cumbersome as the organisation seeks to modernise its systems and to be transparent and fair. But it is critical to make this investment because getting things wrong over finance or mishandling staffing issues can and too often does cause major problems for mission leaders, absorbing much time and energy.

There are also some aspects of the role of a mission leader which are more or less unique to UN peace operations. Mission leaders are responsible for the safety and security of their staff, and specifically a Special Representative (SRSG) as the UN's Designated Official, will be responsible for the security of all UN personnel in a country. While there may be some similarities with other leadership roles in post-conflict countries or those prone to instability – for example, as British Ambassador to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) I had a level of responsibility for the safety and security of the 200 or so staff employed by the British government in Kinshasa - UN peace operations are, by their nature, in some of the most dangerous places in the world, they are on a far

larger scale than other entities, and they are likely to have staff in many different locations, some of them precarious. The UN as an organisation has to ensure that the mission can carry out its mandate, often at the heart of a conflict, while at the same time also protect its staff. It is a role that requires skill and judgement, and not all incoming leaders of peace operation missions will have any comparable experience.

Perhaps the biggest distinguishing feature for leaders of UN peace operations as opposed to those in other senior overseas roles is that they need to know how to use their military assets. It is of course for the mission's Force Commander and his deputies to give the commands. But a mission leader needs a solid understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of their military, and also of what a UN force can and cannot be expected to do. Above all, they need to know how to work well with the military, and how also to challenge them when necessary. This is not always easy, not least when you consider that mission leaders and Force Commanders can come from almost any of the 193 states of the United Nations and they may have different understandings of the authority that a civilian leader can have over the military. And while it is critical for the mission leader to respect and preserve the authority of the Force Commander, it is ultimately the Special Representative who sets the end-state or desired outcome, and is accountable for the success of the mission. The mission leader and Force Commander must therefore have a good understanding of each of their roles built on mutual respect and trust. For the mission leader this may be the first time that they have had authority over a military force, and it is a position for which there is little preparation.

Personal Qualities

Mission leaders are selected based on their competences, and while many are experienced in leadership, heading up a UN peace operation will almost certainly be their biggest challenge to date. UN mission leaders play to a very wide audience, and this is a role for which individuals need to be highly self-aware, consciously able to adjust their performance in order to have the impact they need. Everybody in the mission looks to them for leadership, and so do the national authorities, opposition leaders, civil society, armed groups, and the wider population for whom the UN mission may be the last and best hope. Mission leaders must act with the utmost integrity: almost everything they do is visible or will eventually become known, and their leadership must inspire trust and confidence in themselves and in the United Nations.

Mission leaders need to be able to communicate within the mission, externally to national stakeholders, the press and the population, and occasionally to an international audience too. They need to be able to flex their leadership styles, sometimes adopting a consultative style in seeking creative ideas from staff on how best to tackle a particular

problem, at other times using a more directive style to instruct their team on what to do. Within the top leadership team, it is important for the individuals to work together, to recognise that no-one can do everything and that each has an important role to play in contributing to the whole. It is also important for mission leaders to understand the different cultures within their mission, and that what works with one set of people may not work with another. The UN is extraordinarily diverse, which brings great strengths but also some challenges.

Mission leaders need to be able to exercise good judgement in situations where sound information may simply not be available, and they must also be able to live with the possible consequences. They must also be able to cope with crises, and sometime (as was the case in CAR) with multiple crises in quick succession. Perhaps the greatest requirement for a mission leader is resilience, both physical and mental, to cope with great political pressure and often personal criticism from the hosts, armed groups, politicians, the local and international press, and sometimes also from international community representatives on the ground or in the Security Council in New York. It can be a very lonely job.

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Reflections and Recommendations

The above constitutes an outline of what leaders need to know to do their job well, and there is much more detail that could be included. The likelihood that a mission leader will have all of this knowledge before they go to their mission is slim, and indeed, the level of knowledge of mission leaders may vary quite widely. Leaders may come from very different backgrounds: some may be from the UN and have headed up other missions, others may come from UN agencies, while many may have been diplomats or ministers, or come from other international organisations.

Covering all of the areas outlined above would take some time, and nothing prepares you for a mission quite as much as being on the ground. In addition, missions work in volatile environments, and new missions often start because a crisis has erupted and it is imperative to do something fast. The Security Council will want the mission leadership to be on the ground, and quickly, to deal with the problems.

It is however essential to ensure that mission leaders have a good enough level of knowledge for when they arrive in the mission, and that they are supported once in theatre. Putting anyone other than an experienced leader into a new mission, or one facing a series of crises, may carry serious risks. Leaders need a solid understanding of the scale of their responsibilities in assuming a senior UN role, and an incoming leader needs to inspire confidence from day one. So core briefing and training should be done before arriving in mission, and there should be a programme to complete all mandatory training as soon as possible, and preferably outside the mission area – trying to fit in training while

a leader is in mission is very difficult. And one important observation: there should be no assumption that because a leader has been within the UN system for several years they necessarily know enough about UN best practice or the policies that should guide how they should do their jobs. Very often a challenge for leaders, and not just those new to the UN, is working out just what it is you do not know.

Some training courses are already available to UN leaders, and these are very useful in pulling together briefings by key experts on UN policy and the latest developments in a relevant area, and where to go for more advice. The courses are also useful for setting up networks between leaders. A further source of expertise comes from the UN's Policy Evaluation and Training Division (DPET) which maintains a database of policies, best practice and lessons learned, and publishes bulletins regularly to all UN staff. Moreover, the new leadership compacts between Special Representatives and the Secretary General, and Deputy SRSGs and the SRSG, set out in broad terms some of what is required of mission leaders.

But what is missing to date is a formal set of requirements of the knowledge that a leader should have, and a syllabus which sets out those requirements, available in an online resource format. All leaders need to be very clear on what is expected of them, and of the values and approaches that they are expected to uphold. And leaders need to be given time to learn this.

There is also a need to improve the mechanisms to support mission leaders while they are in the field, and this is particularly important for leaders who are new to the UN. While a regular dialogue with New York can be very valuable in offering support and guidance, there needs to be dedicated support from day one in the mission in the form of an experienced Special Assistant who can advise on where to get guidance, who to consult, whether there are precedents for a particular course of action or situation etc. While the UN has a roster of Special Assistants, this does not at present mean that a mission leader can get a high-quality candidate in place quickly. That needs to change: an experienced Assistant is critical to the leader's effectiveness.

The UN already has a system of mentors for mission leaders, and it should be expanded. For example, although I joined MINUSCA with extensive diplomatic experience, a reasonable understanding of the UN, and had worked in post-conflict countries in the region, including on issues such as SSR and DDR, I found a mentor invaluable. My mentor helped me to establish what it was I needed to know, where to get the guidance I needed, and how to deal with various issues. I was better prepared not only to do my job, but also to challenge, including on occasion to point out where the mission was not complying with UN policy.

Over the last few decades, most organisations have taken a much more structured approach to leadership development. And while the UN is a unique organisation, it is nevertheless dependent for its success on the

same ingredients as all other organisations, and above all on its people. And the UN is currently doing what it can, within the means available. It is important for all of those who support UN peace operations to recognise how a small investment could make the leadership of UN peace operations more effective, and to support the UN Secretariat in its efforts to provide what is needed. Just as in other organisations, it is the leaders who set the standard. If the UN is to maximise the chances that a mission will be successful, it needs to invest in those who lead its peace operations, and give them sound preparation and ongoing support and training so that they can do their jobs to the best of their ability.