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An Italian U.N. peacekeeping soldier on a road near a U.N. post along the Lebanese-Israeli border. An Italian U.N. peacekeeping soldier looks through binoculars on a road that leads to a U.N. post along the Lebanese-Israeli border, in Naqoura, Lebanon, May 4, 2021 (AP photo by Hussein Malla).

For U.N. Peacekeeping, Smaller Is Looking Better—Again

Richard Gowan Tuesday, July 5, 2022

Can we predict the future of United Nations peacekeeping by looking back at its Cold War origins? Over the past two decades, the U.N. has prioritized large, complex blue helmet operations in countries like Mali and South Sudan. But these missions seem to be in slow decline. The Security Council last mandated a big blue helmet force in 2014, in the Central African Republic. The U.N.'s largest operation, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, is very gradually winding down after more than two decades.

In parallel, some experts on peacekeeping are taking a fresh interest in the organization's longstanding missions in places like Cyprus and the Golan Heights. These missions tend to be quite small—the U.N. has just over 1,000 personnel in Cyprus, compared to nearly 18,000 in South Sudan—and focus on observing cease-fire lines rather than trying to stabilize whole states. As Alexandra Novosseloff notes in a new paper on these “one-dimensional” missions, the “simplicity and straightforwardness” of their mandates is appealing. Bigger U.N. missions have taken on a plethora of tasks, such as demobilizing rebel groups and reforming police forces, which they often struggle to implement. It seems sensible to refocus on achieving a more limited, but realistic, set of goals.

As Walter Dorn and Zachary Myers, two Canadian experts on peacekeeping, admit in another recent article on U.N. observer missions in the Middle East, it can be hard to show that this type of operation is effective. But they argue that even fairly small missions with narrow mandates can act as “safety valves” in long-running conflicts, monitoring military developments, mediating over small flare-ups and helping tamp down escalating violence.

This does not work all the time. A monitoring mission deployed by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or OSCE, did solid work reporting on violence in eastern Ukraine from 2014 until this February. Yet it could not prevent Russia from invading. But focusing on these breakdowns is not entirely fair. Observer missions are not designed to deter determined aggressors. But they can help facilitate reductions in violence in cases where conflict parties want to cooperate.

While peacekeeping experts' interest in U.N. observer missions is partly a reaction to the flaws of big blue helmet operations, there is a geopolitical element at play, too. The “one-dimensional” missions date back to the Cold War. There have been U.N. observers in the Middle East since the 1940s. The first peacekeepers deployed to Cyprus in 1964. With the U.N. Security Council potentially headed back into a Cold War-esque configuration following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it is natural to look back to the previous era of East-West confrontation for ideas about how missions may evolve. For Novosseloff, smaller U.N. operations may be “more prominent again as we enter a new period of great power rivalry and turbulence.”

Indeed, although it is still very much a matter of long-range conjecture, it is not inconceivable that some sort of U.N., OSCE or other observer mission may one day deploy in Ukraine. A cease-fire or political settlement between Russia and Ukraine appears very far away today. But as I noted in March, “it is possible to consider a scenario in which Kyiv and Moscow strike some sort of tentative bargain and need help to make it stick.” That might potentially mean deploying an international mission to monitor both sides' actions and mediate small disputes.

With the U.N. Security Council potentially headed back into a Cold War-esque configuration, it is natural to look back to that previous era for ideas about how U.N. peacekeeping missions may evolve.

As I noted in a recent paper for Cambridge University's Ukraine Peace Settlement Project, it is "almost impossible to envisage" Russia and Ukraine agreeing a large-scale blue helmet mission to end the war. It would also be extremely hard to find any countries capable and willing to send many troops for such a risky endeavor. It is slightly more plausible to imagine all parties agreeing to a lightweight observer mission to facilitate an end to hostilities. Such a mission could help pass messages between Russian and Ukrainian military commanders, verify that both sides implement the terms of their agreement to end the fighting and potentially help humanitarian workers get aid to civilians. It is hard to get beyond such generic lists of tasks without knowing more about the circumstances in which the war might eventually end, but U.N. officials and concerned diplomats would do well to read up now on how observer missions can work, so they are prepared to act if and when the time comes to do so.

Looking beyond Russia and Ukraine, it is certainly possible that we will see more lightweight observer missions in future, but we should be wary of relying too literally on Cold War models for how they operate. Even existing observer missions such as those chronicled by Novosseloff are likely to evolve in new directions as new technologies enable them to undertake their mandates in different ways.

Dorn and Myers note, for example, that U.N. observers in the Middle East could benefit from a "technological upgrade," such as using more drones and radar to monitor incidents around them. The OSCE made good use of drones in Ukraine before this year's crisis. At U.N. headquarters, officials are studying how they can use other techniques, such as data mining on social media, to get a better understanding of public attitudes to political crises and conflicts.

So, while peace observation missions may be an enduring part of the U.N.'s repertoire of crisis management options, the techniques and tools they use will change over time. The evolution of peacekeeping is an unpredictable business. Ten or 20 years ago, as bigger blue helmet operations took up the U.N.'s attention, its "legacy" missions from the Cold War were seen as being of marginal importance. Now they suddenly look relevant again. But being relevant does not necessarily mean they cannot be improved. As always, the U.N. will have to adapt its missions to new crises—and the global environment in which they emerge.

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