3. Peace operations and conflict management

Overview

The year 2011 was in many respects a year of contradiction for peacekeeping. On the one hand, after nearly a decade of record expansion in the numbers of operations and personnel deployed and the costs of financing these operations, peacekeeping showed initial signs of slowing down in 2010 and there were further indications in 2011 that peace operations—and in particular military-heavy, multidimensional operations—have reached a plateau. Fifty-two peace operations were active in 2011, with 262 129 personnel deployed, largely unchanged since 2010 (see section I in this chapter). New operations in Libya, South Sudan and Syria and expanded operations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Haiti and Somalia were balanced by the closure or drawdown of missions elsewhere (see section III). On the other hand, 2011 saw the possible beginnings of a firm actionable commitment by the international community to the concepts of the responsibility to protect (R2P) and protection of civilians (POC) in relation to the conflicts in Côte d'Ivoire, Libya and Syria (see also chapter 1). Significantly, at the end of 2011 the Arab League deployed the first mission in its history, to Syria (see section II).

Several factors explain the consolidation trend of recent years. First and foremost is the global military overstretch: during the years of expansion the United Nations and other organizations had difficulty in persuading countries to contribute sufficient troops and force enablers such as helicopters. The emergence of new contributors such as Brazil, China and Indonesia, while a positive development, did not significantly fill the demand gap (as discussed in SIPRI Yearbook 2011). Certainly, the massive operations in Afghanistan and Iraq (each deploying over 100 000 personnel at its peak) amplified the demand for military personnel and diverted resources (particularly those belonging to Western states) that could have been applied to mainstream peacekeeping. However, the impending withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from Afghanistan in 2014 will not necessarily free up resources for other operations. A second factor is the ongoing global financial downturn, which had a more discernable impact on peacekeeping in 2011 as governments outlined budget cuts for their militaries and advocated leaner operations and quicker exits in multilateral frameworks such as the UN. Third, over the past decade contemporary peace operations have faced 'mission creep' in terms of the explosion of mandated tasks, which often require civilian expertise and open-ended time frames. This has led to a questioning of whether a heavy (and long-term) military footprint in peace operations is necessary.

As a result of the growing complexity of political objectives in contemporary operation mandates and the lack of civilian experts, the focus of policy discussions and development in 2010 and 2011 provided a strong impetus to develop global civilian capacities for peace operations. Additionally, the UN buttressed its mediation and conflict-prevention capacities and, when determining whether a UN peace operation was necessary or appropriate, sought alternative models to the multidimensional operations, such as the political mission in Libya (see section II).

The quest for alternate, more cost-effective models to a heavy on-the-ground military footprint may lead to future operations becoming more technology-oriented. For example, the use of drones to gather tactical information could improve force protection capabilities as well as the ability of operations to, for instance, implement POC mandates. However, access to and the transfer of technology among states remain highly political issues.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) operation in Libya falls outside the SIPRI definition of a peace operation (and so does not appear in the table of peace operations in section IV) but is nonetheless significant as it encapsulates the current global debate on how to demarcate the boundaries of peacekeeping. It was the first military intervention to be launched in the R2P framework and was mandated by the UN Security Council with no permanent member objecting. However, towards the end of the operation, whatever tentative consensus there had been disintegrated over the extent of the responsibility (see section II). More broadly, the NATO operation in Libya highlighted the complicated relationships and boundaries between protection of civilians in peace operations and actions undertaken to enforce peace.

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