

2. Peace operations and conflict management

Overview

The number of personnel serving with multilateral peace operations worldwide fell by more than 10 per cent in 2012, as the slight reduction in personnel deployments that started in 2011 gathered pace. The large drop was due to the withdrawal of troops from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan (see section I in this chapter). However, the reductions followed almost a decade of rapid expansion, and the total for deployments, at 233 642, was still the third highest since 2003.

Excluding ISAF, a different pattern emerged, as personnel deployments rose slightly. A total of 53 missions were active during 2012, one more than in 2011. Three new operations were launched, in Syria, Niger and Guinea-Bissau (see section II), and four missions closed (including one of the new missions). The small increases in both personnel deployments (excluding ISAF) and active missions in 2012 suggest that the trend, which had been downward since 2009, may be starting to stabilize.

The withdrawal of forces from ISAF was part of the transition process under which ISAF is handing over security responsibilities, district by district, to the Afghan national security forces. The transition, and ISAF's drawdown, are scheduled to be complete at the end of 2014. This is likely to sustain the downward trend in troop deployments. Even if Western attention were to completely refocus on, for example, the troubled Sahel region or Syria, new missions were to be deployed in those regions and the number of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces that remain in Afghanistan were sizeable, it is unlikely that these would balance the withdrawal of the 102 052 forces deployed with ISAF.

Nevertheless, some of the forces withdrawn from Afghanistan will probably be redeployed elsewhere and therefore the number of military personnel deployed outside Afghanistan is likely to increase. If they are not redeployed, some governments, particularly in the West, might fear legitimacy problems for their national armed forces at a time when they are under pressure to cut spending as part of austerity measures linked to the 2008 global financial crisis. Austerity was certainly a factor in the decisions of many countries, especially the United States, to accelerate the withdrawal of their troops from ISAF.

Austerity also led some states to be more critical of spending on peace operations and to increase budget constraints on missions in 2012. The United Nations Security Council increasingly imposed benchmarks and indicators to

evaluate existing UN missions' effectiveness and efficiency, and linked these to future mandate renewals. More missions were given narrowed mandates focusing on a core set of tasks achievable within a defined time frame. Cooperation between UN missions was also re-emphasized. For example, the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and the UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) cooperated in responding to instability in the border region between the two countries, and inter-mission cooperation facilitated the rapid deployment of the short-lived UN Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS).

Doubts about the capacity and will for protection of civilians (POC) in peace operations were reinforced in 2012. The UN operations in Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and South Sudan were the subject of outrage, both in their host countries and internationally, for perceived high-profile failures in the area of POC in 2012 (see section III). However, the problem may lie more in unrealistic mandates and expectations. Missions given civilian protection mandates are not given the forces necessary to control and dominate the territory under their responsibility. In addition, current and potential troop-contributing countries have little incentive to risk their troops' lives for POC as long as their national interests are not at stake.

With the international response in Libya and the early stages of the response to the Syria crisis in 2011, including the deployment of an Arab League observer mission, some had seen the possible beginnings of a firm actionable commitment to the concept of the responsibility to protect (R2P). These hopes were dashed in 2012 as the international community proved unable to agree on any action to halt the violence in Syria. Much of the debate concerned the balance between R2P and state sovereignty.

Divisions in the international community were also visible in the response to a military coup in Guinea-Bissau, where the African Union (AU), the European Union (EU) and the UN refused to recognize a transitional government set up through a controversial process mediated by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Despite these doubts, divisions and budget constraints, there is no reason to believe that the number of operations will decrease significantly in the near future, and the number of troops deployed outside Afghanistan is in fact likely to grow. How deep the dip in total personnel deployments will be after the drawdown of ISAF, and how diffuse the future picture, depend on three factors: the depth of future budget cuts in the West (and the extent to which they are allowed to affect the military and peacekeeping capacity); the number of troops that are eventually deployed in Mali, the broader Sahel and potentially Syria; and the extent to which countries are willing to put R2P and POC into practice rather than simply express outrage over the lack of responsiveness.