

7. Peace operations and conflict management

Overview

The year 2015 was a year of reviews for the United Nations: 70 years after the UN was founded; 67 years after the first UN peacekeeping operation, the UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), was established; and 15 years after the Brahimi Report, UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, and the Millennium Development Goals. Three major reviews took place more or less simultaneously in 2015, with great potential for strengthening peace operations and tying the fragmented UN system more closely together: the High-level Independent Panel on UN Peace Operations (HIPPO), the Ten-year Review of the Peacebuilding Architecture, and the Global Study on UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

At the same time, 2015 was a year of consolidation with regard to trends and developments in peace operations. Although there was no shortage of conflicts and crises, international efforts to resolve them rarely involved any new or significantly enhanced peace operations. The four relatively small, new missions were: the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-led Resolute Support Mission (RSM); the European Union (EU) Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) Mission in Mali (EUCAP Sahel Mali); the EU Military Advisory Mission in the Central African Republic (CAR) (EUMAM RCA); and the Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring Mechanism (CTSAMM). There were also few terminations of missions (see section II). The three relatively small operations that terminated in 2015 were: the Security Council-mandated French Operation Licorne in Côte d'Ivoire; the EU Military Operation in the CAR (EUFOR RCA); and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (MVM) for South Sudan.

The number of peace operations active during 2015 in comparison to 2014 declined slightly (by 2) to 61. With 162 703 personnel in the field, the total number of personnel deployed in peace operations in 2015 was slightly more (about 1000) than the previous year. This means that the fall in the total number of personnel deployed in peace operations that started in 2012 (due to the drawdown of ISAF) has come to an end, and that the increase in personnel in all peace operations (excluding ISAF and the RSM) is slowing down. The UN deployed 3336 more personnel in 2015 than in 2014. As such, it remained the primary actor in peace operations, deploying roughly one-third of all peace operations (20 out of 61) and 70 per cent of all personnel (113 660 out of 162 703) (see section I).

Several factors underlie this overall consolidation in peace operation trends. First, in a number of conflicts (geo)political obstacles, failing peace processes and/or the security environment continued to prohibit the establishment of new peace operations. Second, in those countries where the interests of great powers converged and the situation allowed for a peace operation to be deployed, one or more peace operations were often already being hosted. Third, in their conflict management efforts and in dealing with jihadist groups such as Islamic State and Boko Haram, international and regional actors relied on means other than peace operations—such as military interventions and direct or indirect support of local proxies.

It is hard to predict the direction of next year's trends. A number of operations are on the list for drawdown, potentially decreasing the number of missions as well as the number of personnel deployed. However, this could be the calm before the storm, with difficult operations in Burundi, Libya, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen potentially on the horizon. In light of this, HIPPO's review of UN peace operations, along with its recommendations and a call for change and essential strategic shifts, is increasingly relevant.

Following HIPPO's review, the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, presented his own report on how he intends to implement the recommendations. At the Leaders' Summit on Peacekeeping many of the recommendations were endorsed by UN member states and many countries came with unprecedented pledges. Yet what the future brings for the implementation of HIPPO's recommendations remains to be seen. It certainly appears to have been a missed opportunity that, in the end, the three major review processes were not better tied together to allow for a more cross-cutting impact on the UN system.

Moreover, as the potential new mission areas are not the most stable and peaceful, clearer HIPPO recommendations on how UN peace operations should deal with situations where there is 'no peace to keep' or no political process to support would have been useful. In such circumstances it is often unclear who the parties to the conflict are, and peacekeepers face asymmetric and unconventional threats. As UN stabilization missions are becoming increasingly common, there is a need not only for caution but also for anticipating how to undertake them. And this need to further develop strategies to deal with the 'exceptions to the rule' has become increasingly urgent (see section III).

In spite of all the pledges and revived support for peace operations at the Leaders' Summit on Peacekeeping, 2015 was also a year in which the UN's reputation was seriously damaged and its efforts to strive for peace undermined by cover-up attempts regarding sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) by French soldiers in Operation Sangaris in the CAR. The UN system for dealing with SEA, which has been established over the past few years, is clearly insufficient and HIPPO's call for change is greatly needed in this area (see section IV).