

35 A critique of robust peacekeeping in contemporary peace operations

Thierry Tardy

The concept of robust peacekeeping emerged in the late 1990s as a response to the tragedies of Rwanda and Srebrenica, where UN peacekeepers failed to stop massive violations of human rights, allegedly because they were not sufficiently robust. In 2000 the Brahimi Report referred several times to the necessity of 'robust peacekeeping forces',¹ as a lesson from past experiences. Subsequently, the mandates of new operations increasingly included the idea that UN peacekeepers must be given the political and operational means to successfully implement their mandate. In particular, the simultaneous attention given to the protection of civilians in peace missions led the Security Council to instil a vocabulary of robustness in its resolutions.² In the majority of the mandates in the last decade, resolutions have authorized peacekeepers to use all 'necessary means to protect civilians when under imminent threat of physical violence'. In these various cases, robustness is understood to give an operation a degree of credibility, in particular vis-à-vis 'spoilers'. Robustness is designed to allow a peacekeeping force to protect itself, to provide freedom of manoeuvre, and to prevent situations where the implementation of the mandate, or more broadly the peace process, is 'taken hostage' by spoilers.

Although 'robust peacekeeping' is not a new concept and has been partially implemented in some operations (Sierra Leone, Democratic Republic of Congo [DRC], Haiti, Lebanon),³ it attracted renewed attention in 2008–10 arising from conceptual developments. Several policy documents issued by different units of the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) – 'UN Peacekeeping Operations. Principles and Guidelines', the 'New Horizon' non-paper, and a 'Concept Note on Robust Peacekeeping' – provided definitions of the term, partly in response to critiques of confusion and lack of clarity about the operational implications of robustness.⁴ Subsequently, robust peacekeeping was discussed at the 2010 session of the Special Committee for Peacekeeping Operations' (known as the C-34). The debates revealed the high degree of politicization that has characterized the C-34 (with its 144 members) over the last decade, as well as the sensitivity of the idea of robustness, particularly among countries of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

Here I challenge the coherence and feasibility of the concept of robust peacekeeping. While recognizing the necessity and virtue of a robust approach as a protection mechanism for peacekeepers, I question the extent to which robust peacekeeping is politically acceptable and operationally viable. Beyond the doctrinal difficulty of ensuring the compatibility of robustness with the principles of peace operations, robust peacekeeping is directly challenged by some enduring constraints of contemporary peace operations, such as weak political support, erratic availability and quality of troops, and reticence of troop contributors to embrace a robust approach. Thus, while robustness is presented as a solution to the 'credibility gap' confronting the UN, it leads to so many interrelated problems that the relevance of robustness is questionable.

My argument consists of three parts. First, it examines the different meanings of 'robust peacekeeping' and some of the issues deriving from definitional ambiguities. Second, it considers the broader peacekeeping environment and explores how robustness relates to other political issues that, in turn, affect the politics of robust peacekeeping. This leads to the third part and the question of the feasibility of robustness. How likely is it that troop contributors will meet the requirements for robust peacekeeping? What are the implications and possible unintended consequences of robustness and the use of force that it implies? How feasible is robustness in the broad implementation of peace operations mandates, say, beyond the mere protection of peacekeepers?

What is robust peacekeeping?

The UN has always had difficulty in reconciling its central role in the maintenance of international peace and security with the idea of coercion.⁵ The use of force is not absent from UN prerogatives, but the nature of the organization, its broad composition, and the politics within its main organs have made coercion conceptually and practically ambiguous. Robust peacekeeping was at the heart of what, in the early 1990s, was referred to as the 'grey area' of peacekeeping, an ill-defined activity situated between traditional peacekeeping and peace enforcement.⁶ The UN and its member states have faced great difficulty in handling this grey area, in terms of both doctrine and operations.⁷ At the core of the matter is the use of force by the military in situations that are not wars. This implies a doctrinal and cultural shift that the UN, states, and their military institutions have long resisted. This was epitomized in the 1990s in both Somalia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where peacekeepers either resorted to excessive force (Somalia) or refused military confrontation (Srebrenica), but in each case acted in a conceptual vacuum – as well as in the absence of political will in the Balkans case.

Meanwhile, the implications of more intrusive interventions for host countries' sovereignty have been largely overlooked. Host states consent to the presence of a UN operation, yet they are placed *de facto* in a situation of dependence that affects the nature of the relationship with the interveners (see the article by Ian Johnstone in *International Peacekeeping*). The idea that peacekeepers can resort to force on the territory of a sovereign country is not an anodyne issue. It carries a meaning that goes beyond the framework of a given operation and touches on international politics and the principles that regulate it. In this context, peacekeeping practices have evolved over the last two decades in a somewhat improvised manner, and with little reflection on the broad implications of these changing practices. Robust peacekeeping is presented as a response to standing weaknesses of UN operations, and, although it may well be part of the solution in some cases, it also reflects the ambiguities of UN and state policies in the management of international and intrastate crises. Moreover, it confirms the inherent difficulty in reconciling UN multilateralism and politics with coercion.

Narrow versus broad approaches to robust peacekeeping

There is a consensus that robust peacekeeping is an ill-defined concept and that it is, as a consequence, difficult to operationalize. What does it mean for an operation to be robust? What does it entail for the Security Council, for peacekeepers, for the local authorities? Two conceptions – narrow and broad – of robust peacekeeping can be distinguished. The narrow approach is about enabling peacekeepers to implement their mandate by relying on their robustness – in posture, equipment, and their ability to resort to force. This approach is narrow in the sense that it focuses on the robustness of peacekeepers. This definition is in keeping

with the 2008 'Principles and Guidelines' that, in its glossary of terms, defines 'robust peacekeeping' as 'the use of force by a United Nations peacekeeping operation at the tactical level, with the authorization of the Security Council, to defend its mandate against spoilers whose activities pose a threat to civilians or risk undermining the peace process'.⁸ In this context, robust peacekeeping is also defined by what it is not: peace enforcement. Two key elements distinguish robust peacekeeping from peace enforcement: the level of force (tactical for robust peacekeeping, strategic for peace enforcement); and host state consent (required for robust peacekeeping but not in the case of peace enforcement).

The 'Principles and Guidelines' clarifies the distinction as follows:

robust peacekeeping should not be confused with peace enforcement, as envisaged under Chapter VII of the Charter. Robust peacekeeping involves the use of force at the tactical level with the authorization of the Security Council and consent of the host nation and/or the main parties to the conflict. By contrast, peace enforcement does not require the consent of the main parties and may involve the use of military force at the strategic or international level, which is normally prohibited for Member States under Article 2(4) of the Charter, unless authorized by the Security Council.⁹

By contrast, the broad approach considers robust peacekeeping in more political terms. It is defined in the 2009 UN 'New Horizon' non-paper as a 'robust approach to peacekeeping', which is a 'political and operational strategy to signal the intention of a UN mission to implement its mandate and to deter threats to an existing peace process in the face of resistance from spoilers'.¹⁰ While recognizing that at the tactical level a 'robust approach means that contingents may be required to use force in defence of the mandate', it emphasizes that 'it should be driven by a clear political strategy' (p.21), and that a 'successful robust approach depends on the commitment of the Security Council and the willingness of troop and police contributors to implement it'. This approach significantly broadens that of the 'Principles and Guidelines'. It recognizes that robustness cannot be confined to the peacekeepers and their ability to use force in defence of their mandate, but needs to be embedded in a broader framework that combines operational and political parameters. More than the robustness of the force, the firm stance adopted at all levels of the management of the mission is essential to the credibility and success of an operation. Ultimately, the use of force may be necessary, but as a means to an end that needs to be clearly identified.

In 2009 the Office of Military Affairs of DPKO/DFS (Department of Field Support) issued a 'Concept Note on Robust Peacekeeping' aimed at clarifying the 'key issues surrounding robust peacekeeping'.¹¹ Its interim definition of robust peacekeeping is as 'a posture by a peacekeeping operation that demonstrates willingness, capacity and capability to deter and confront, including through the use of force when necessary, an obstruction to the implementation of its mandate'. The document emphasizes that robust peacekeeping is a 'posture' rather 'than a specific activity', meaning that 'robustness ... can be demonstrated in many ways, including the use of political dialogue' but also 'targeted sanctions against identified spoilers ... support and incentives to national reconciliation efforts and [even] the initiation of early peacebuilding activities to help deliver a tangible peace dividend to local populations'.¹² This 'posture' issue is underlined by Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations Alain Le Roy at the 2010 C-34 session in very similar terms.¹³ The Concept Note further reiterates that robust peacekeeping is not peace enforcement, and that 'large scale violence or one where the major parties are engaged in violent conflict is no longer a robust peacekeeping context'.

To a certain extent, the Concept Note tries to reconcile the narrow and broad approaches. It states that 'robust peacekeeping is not only a military or police posture but also a political and operational approach that signals the determination of a peacekeeping operation to implement its mandate and to deter threats to an existing peace process'. In the same vein, robust peacekeeping does not necessarily entail the use of force, as deterrence 'based on the readiness to use force' is presented as 'the most effective approach'.¹⁴ However, its focus tends to be more on the military/peacekeeping dimension of the operation rather than on its political element. Robustness seems to derive from the possibility to resort to force more than from the existence of a political strategy or from the triangular dialogue between the Security Council, the Secretariat, and the troop-contributing countries (TCCs).

Overall, these documents help clarify what robust peacekeeping is and what it is not. However, it is worth noting that none of them has been endorsed by the member states, and therefore they can hardly be considered UN policy.¹⁵ Many Western states would no doubt support the general effort at conceptualizing robustness and would subscribe to the spirit of the DPKO/DFS documents; the same is not true, however, for many countries of the NAM that contest the terms of the debate as it is advanced by the UN Secretariat (see below).

Definitional ambiguities: robustness or effectiveness?

Contemporary peace operations do not lend themselves easily to a piecemeal analysis. Some activities of multidimensional operations might be more important than others. Yet the overall effectiveness of peace operations requires a holistic approach that simultaneously addresses key issues and that does not, by definition, compartmentalize them. Activities that are dependent upon a high degree of political engagement can hardly be analysed without examining the political setting. The narrow approach to robust peacekeeping is problematic precisely because it tends to single out one requirement of effectiveness without embedding it into a broader framework.

In other words, there is little point in promoting robustness in the field if no political process underlies it, if the host country is lukewarm about it, or if a large number of key states deliberately stay away from UN operations and are not therefore engaged in the implementation of the concept. Yet, within the C-34, robustness seems to have been singled out by Western states as if it were a solution to the generic problems of effectiveness in peace operations. A large presence in UN operations (including from Western countries) and the existence of a political process backed by the Security Council and other important stakeholders, while presumably equally important to the overall success of peace missions, have not received the same level of attention.

The limits of the narrow approach would seem to make more attractive the broader vision proposed by the New Partnership Agenda. This favours going beyond the robustness of the force and adopting a more political approach to robustness. In other words, robustness at the field level works only if it is backed by robustness at the political level: in the Security Council, in dialogue with local actors, and in the constant and unified support that TCCs get from the Security Council. However, this approach runs the risk of diluting the concept of robustness. The rhetoric of robust peacekeeping/strategy/doctrine/peacebuilding¹⁶ overlooks the very meaning of the adjective 'robust' and the flaws in associating it with a variety of terms that are not intuitively close to the idea of robustness. What Western states and the DPKO wish to promote is peacekeeping with the appropriate mandate, support, and capabilities to fulfil the mission assigned by the Security Council. Quite simply the idea is fundamentally about effectiveness, not robustness.

This leads to a terminological debate about the use of the term 'robust'. As shown in the following section, debates at the UN in general and at the C-34 in particular are highly politicized, shaped by divergent objectives as well as by subjective positions. In this context, for an idea to be accepted it needs to be carefully calibrated and communicated. Yet the concept of robust peacekeeping has not been promoted effectively. For many countries of the South, the term 'robust' implies a degree of intrusiveness in the internal affairs of states and the possibility of coercion. In the end, one wonders if the reference to robustness in UN documents has actually been counterproductive, by dividing countries along a North-South axis over terminology rather than bringing them together on the operational necessity of robustness.

Indeed, several countries, including ones in the NAM, accept that peacekeeping forces need to be able to ensure their security and implement their mandate, potentially through a firm posture that may imply the resort to force, and do perform robust peacekeeping in the field.¹⁷ In 2005, the Report of the C-34 acknowledged the 'need for an appropriately strong military and civilian police presence, backed by adequate support resources throughout the peacekeeping operation, in order to deter spoilers and establish the credibility of the United Nations'.¹⁸ For example, Indian units have been regularly involved in robust operations, including during the Cold War.¹⁹ Robustness is therefore not a priori rejected. Yet many NAM countries disagree with the way the term is being framed. Ultimately, while clarification on the meaning of 'robust peacekeeping' is important, over-conceptualization has also attenuated the strength of the concept, to the extent that the use of the term itself is being questioned.²⁰

Robustness in the broader peacekeeping context

The 'New Horizon' non-paper insists on the necessity of going beyond the robustness of the force to include that of political actors – the Security Council, member states, and regional partners in particular. This is indeed crucial, as it is the nature of the political environment underlying an operation that determines the chances of success. Ideally, a firm stance at the political level would even make robustness in the field unnecessary. Yet, the politics of peacekeeping is complex, and robustness can hardly work as a substitute for a missing strategy.

Politicization of robust peacekeeping and substantive divergence

The very concept of robust peacekeeping is extremely contentious. Within the UN, debates on robust peacekeeping are intensely politicized, reflecting strong divergences on the meaning and implications of the concept. Politicization has been evident in the C-34. At the 2010 session, debates pitted the EU group pushing for robustness against the NAM that expressed concerns about the concept and its implications.²¹ For European states, robustness has been a response to a lack of effectiveness of peace operations, and is aimed at enabling peacekeepers to properly protect themselves and to have the freedom of manoeuvre to implement a mandate. A link is also established between robustness and the protection of civilians, which may require a robust posture and, if need be, the capacity to use force. By contrast, robustness is perceived by many NAM countries as deviating from the key principles of peacekeeping and as a potential threat to the sovereignty of host countries. A parallel is implicitly made between robustness, understood as a new instrument of domination over countries of the South, and a form of neo-colonialism. The fact that DPKO has developed a narrative that is very similar to that of Western countries adds to the perception of the UN as Western dominated. Within DPKO, units in charge of policy development are predominantly composed of nationals

from Western countries, and their ability to truly reflect the diversity of views of the member states is questioned.²²

Some countries even see a continuum between the 'responsibility to protect' and robustness within peacekeeping missions in the protection of civilians. In both cases, critics are concerned that external forces will infringe state sovereignty by coercive means.²³ Several Security Council resolutions, including resolution 1674 (2006) on the protection of civilians in armed conflict, and many resolutions on Sudan,²⁴ explicitly refer to the 2005 'UN World Summit Outcome' document and its provisions on the responsibility to protect, which adds to suspicion of a continuum between the two levels of coercion.

Equally problematic, the risk of abuse of a robust posture is invoked. Critics question the ability of crisis management actors to ensure that what begins as robust peacekeeping does not end as peace enforcement.

This leads to the question of compatibility of robust peacekeeping with the key principles of peace operations: impartiality, consent of the host state, and non-resort to force. For some NAM countries the use of force, other than in self-defence, is a direct challenge to the principle of non-resort to force, and therefore to the very nature of UN peace operations. Although the C-34 added the possibility of resorting to force 'in defence of the mandate'²⁵ to the principle of non-resort to force except in self-defence (a possibility incorporated in the 'Principles and Guidelines'), this evolution is still resisted and sometimes perceived as a deviation. Overall, there is an apparent tension between the conservatism of the key principles of peace operations, on the one hand, and the practical evolutions that have been endorsed by the Security Council, on the other, in particular the protection of civilians and the implied possible resort to force.

The impact of the 'commitment gap' on robust peacekeeping

The North-South divisions over peacekeeping issues have been further shaped by some of the trends in peace operations. Debates on contemporary peacekeeping cannot ignore some of its tangible characteristics, and in particular who is doing what in peace operations. In fact, while Western states are the main financial contributors to the peacekeeping budget, they have been largely absent in terms of troop contributions since the mid-1990s.²⁶ Conversely, the developing countries have shouldered the largest troop contributions, and to a large extent have thus shaped the politics of peacekeeping in the field.²⁷ At the same time, the peacekeeping decision-making process remains dominated by the Security Council and its permanent members, to the detriment and chagrin of the main TCCs. This division of labour feeds the divide and the politicization of debates, particularly when, as is the case with robust peacekeeping, a concept is pushed by countries that are unlikely to actually implement it. Furthermore, the commitment gap raises questions about the abilities of TCCs to be 'robust' militarily. Former Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations Jean-Marie Guéhenno identifies three negative consequences of this paradox. First, there is 'much less willingness among troop contributors to take risks if the risks that they are expected to take are not shared by those who make the decisions'; second, the 'capacities available in the armed forces of the richer nations (intelligence, mobility, targeted firepower) mitigate the risks of robust peacekeeping and would make it more effective'; third, robust peacekeeping can work

only if it is embedded in a broader political strategy. While developed countries can give political support to a UN mission through non-military means, their systematic absence in UN military deployments undermines and weakens the message of universal

commitment that such deployments should convey, and can be construed as a lack of strategic commitment to the success of the mission.²⁸

These points illustrate the difficulty of confining the debate to the issue of robustness when it is one element among many influencing the effectiveness of peacekeeping. The mere idea that robustness requires some sort of collegiality and burden-sharing among member states is hard to contest and undermines the Western position accordingly. For some troop contributors, this leads to the possible role of Western countries in financing and equipping the TCCs to enable them to implement robustness. 'If the countries that push for robustness do not want to send their own troops, let them finance and/or equip the countries that are doing the job,' is an argument often heard in New York.²⁹

These divergences led some NAM members to contest the term 'robust peacekeeping' at the C-34's 2010 session to propose an 'effective peacekeeping' instead, objecting to the idea that robustness can be presented as the solution to what they see as much broader problems.³⁰ Eventually, the C-34 Report mentioned neither 'robust peacekeeping' nor the use of force. However, it

recognizes the necessity to intensify dialogue among Member States and the Secretariat, including in this forum, on ways and means to enhance the effectiveness of peacekeeping missions, including by addressing the requirement for peacekeeping missions to be able to deter, through the posture they adopt and actions they take, threats to the implementation of mandates, safety and security of peacekeeping personnel, and ongoing peace processes, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations.³¹

The wording may seem disappointing for proponents of an explicit reference to robust peacekeeping. Given the divergences expressed in the debates, however, the language has the merit of characterizing robustness by periphrases. That peacekeepers should be able to deter threats to peace processes, through their posture, recalls the vocabulary used for robustness. Moreover, the reference to peace processes goes much further than robustness confined to force protection, indicating a need to be firm at the political level, for example against the host state.

How feasible is robustness?

Any realistic approach to the reform of UN peacekeeping must reconcile what is needed and what is possible, and must therefore account for the enduring constraints of multidimensional peace operations. These constraints relate to the existence of a political process that underlies the deployment of a peace operation, the extent to which the Security Council is backing this process, the durability of a ceasefire or peace agreement, the nature of host state consent, the number and quality of troops available, and their propensity to take risks in the implementation of the mandate. Robustness needs to be approached in relation to these constraints, to which it is closely linked and that directly impact its feasibility. Three issues require special attention: the requirements of robust peacekeeping, its unintended consequences, and the varied degrees of its feasibility.

Requirements of robust peacekeeping

Robust peacekeeping implies a suite of political and operational requirements. Both the DPKO/DFS 'Concept Note on Robust Peacekeeping' and the 'New Horizon' non-paper

provide lists of such requirements. The Concept Note refers to 'clear and achievable mandates', 'improved consultation', 'better logistics and support', 'enhanced capacities and structures', 'enhanced training and readiness standards', a 'comprehensive communication strategy', and 'strong leadership'.³² In the same vein, the 'New Horizon' non-paper states that robust peacekeeping requires 'agreed minimum standards among contributing countries', a 'high degree of mobility . . . and the willingness and capacity to operate at a high tempo for sustained periods, night and day', 'effective mission command and control structures and units that can work together in larger formations', 'regular joint training and exercises', 'enhanced situational awareness and risk analysis', 'scenario-based planning and reliable contingency arrangements', 'modern technology, responsive logistics support and delegated authority to take difficult decisions in the field', to which the document adds 'the commitment of the Security Council and the willingness of troop and police contributors to implement [a resolution]'.³³

The UN Secretariat plays its part when it pushes for the improvement of state capabilities and practices, and the setting of standards in the peacekeeping domain. However, the list of requirements is very ambitious, and difficult to square with the constraints of contemporary peace operations, not to mention the financial implications of acquiring modern equipment.

With a few exceptions the main TCCs fall well short on most of the listed requirements. The last ten years of UN involvement in peace operations have amply demonstrated this in relation to UN overstretch, deployment and logistical problems, level of equipment, and performance of troop and police suppliers.³⁴ Whether NATO members would meet the requirements is far from certain, and the average level of equipment and training within NATO is significantly higher than that within the main UN TCCs. Once again the meaning and feasibility of robust peacekeeping in the absence of the countries that are best equipped and trained for it must be interrogated.

Also integral to robustness is a strong and lasting commitment by the Security Council and personnel contributors. Although robust peacekeeping is explicitly mandated by the Security Council, its unity and full support of peacekeepers' actions on the ground is never guaranteed over time. The level of commitment of contributors is equally erratic. For personnel contributors, robustness requires preparation, a sound knowledge of what robustness means politically and operationally and how robustness is distinguished from peace enforcement (in rules of engagement), awareness of the potential risks of robust action (see below), and the readiness to take casualties. A brief survey of UN operations and state policies over the last decade reveals a scarcity of countries displaying such a level of preparedness. Whether in relation to robustness or to the protection of civilians, troop contributors have little expertise in operationalizing Security Council resolutions.³⁵

Furthermore, to produce results, robust action also necessitates consecutive longer-term measures (police deployment, rule of law, disarmament) in order to consolidate the outcomes of robustness. Referencing the British operation in Sierra Leone (2000) and the French/EU operation in the DRC (2003), Mats Berdal concludes that the 'strategic impact' of 'coercive military action' 'depends crucially on what follows the short-term tactical engagement'.³⁶ Unless follow-up actions are present, 'it is not clear that the occasional robust foray will do the trick'.³⁷ This cautionary note relates not only to the need for a political objective that is served by robustness, but also to the impossibility of singling out robustness from other peacekeeping and peacebuilding activities. Most importantly, while robustness would be an option in operations that are perceived as falling within the strategic interests of the intervening countries (as in Afghanistan), the nature of UN peacekeeping makes it difficult to determine

the long-term commitment of TCCs to robustness. This is true simply because troop contributors frequently have little strategic interest at stake in the operation's host state. In other words, what is the 'strategic value' of the place where they intervene that would justify risking escalation of violence and fatalities?³⁸

In summary, robust peacekeeping faces 'conceptual overstretch', reflected by the mismatch between doctrinal development and the political and operational capacity of the UN and its member states to implement the concept.³⁹

Unintended consequences

The narrative in favour of robust peacekeeping generally assumes that robustness comes as a solution to some of the difficulties that peace operations face. Although this may be true in some circumstances, robustness also carries unintended consequences that may challenge its relevance. The DPKO/DFS Concept Note identifies the following risks of robust peacekeeping:⁴⁰

- 'loss or perception of loss of impartiality by a peacekeeping operation providing robust support to a government that is party to an ongoing conflict';
- risk deriving from 'collateral damage and civilian casualties as a result of robust military/police operations';
- 'conflict escalation by spoilers in reaction to a robust mandate implementation';
- perception by host authorities and population of 'infringement on national sovereignty';
- 'greater insecurity and retaliation either against peacekeepers or "soft" targets such as humanitarian actors and the local population, as well as the possibility of population displacement and its associated consequences'.

The Concept Note adds that the Security Council 'should be clearly informed of the risks before the decision [on the use of force] is taken'.

The risk of conflict escalation requires particular attention because it may imply an undesired shift from the use of force at the tactical level (which falls within robust peacekeeping) to the use of force at the strategic level (which characterizes peace enforcement). Ensuring that the use of force indeed remains at the tactical level is a complex issue for peacekeepers. The blurring gives credence to the argument put forward by some NAM countries that posits that the distinction between robust peacekeeping and peace enforcement is impossible to guarantee in practice. In the DRC, for example, some robust operations conducted by the UN operation against militias in the Ituri district in 2005 were close to war-fighting, leading the UN to comment on the nature of its 'peacekeeping' engagement.⁴¹

The management of the risk of conflict escalation has to do with the command and control structure of the operation. A critique by Western states of the UN system is its decentralized nature, with a high degree of devolution to the field in the persons of the special representative of the secretary-general (SRSG) and the force commander, and the risk that decisions taken at field level have consequences well beyond the mission itself. This decentralized command and control model is contrary to the more centralized approach of the EU or NATO, where strategic control remains at headquarters level. According to Guéhenno, the 'objective should be to strengthen the grip of UN Headquarters on missions, above all for peacekeeping missions with robust mandates, without losing the flexibility of a decentralized approach'.⁴²

Appropriate command and control arrangements are all the more important when robustness requires a degree of expertise that most troop contributors do not have. At the field level, this expertise is closer to that of police forces than to the military, especially in urban environments where proximity to local populations is high and where escalation prevention cannot be improvised. The role played by the UN mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) attests to this specificity of a robust posture within cities. Brazilian peacekeepers acted quite robustly on several occasions in the slums of Port-au-Prince at the request of the Haitian government, and they were indeed effective in trouncing some of the criminal groups. However, the operations were conducted by military – not police – units that had very limited training in urban modes of action, and therefore carried the risk of massive collateral damage, for example by the extensive use of automatic weapons in the high-density area of Cité-Soleil in July 2005. Indeed, in this particular case, allegations of excessive use of force and even human rights violations by the MINUSTAH were made by several human rights organizations.⁴³

At the political level, the risk of loss of impartiality and legitimacy is exacerbated by the intrusive and coercive nature of robust peacekeeping. Robustness is supposed to provide credibility to a mission, and may also enhance the host state's sovereignty by confronting non-state spoilers,⁴⁴ but the chance that the consequent use of force will damage its impartiality and legitimacy is high. The problem reinforces the need to embed robust peacekeeping in a political framework that robustness is supposed to serve.⁴⁵ The effectiveness and legitimacy of robust peacekeeping are dependent on the level of political backing that it gets from the Security Council members, the main personnel contributors, and the host state.

The full backing of the host state is crucial, in particular when confronting so-called spoilers.⁴⁶ But when consent is weak and tenuous as in Sudan and the DRC, when the spoilers are backed by the government as in Darfur, or when spoilers are either the state itself or resistance groups such as Hezbollah, then the very feasibility of robustness is at stake. Here again the tension between what is required and what is possible comes to the surface. In most UN peace missions, the level of political support and the character of the political process are issues of constant concern. The extent to which robustness is possible in these circumstances is highly debateable.

Finally, altering the nature of peace operations through the adoption of a more openly robust posture is likely to lead to unpredictable counter-reactions – concerning host acceptance, spoilers' behaviour, impacts on local actors, and even TCC motives and behaviour. Robustness may deter some spoilers, but it may also induce reactions or new forms of disruption that would not have appeared in the absence of robustness. Faced with a robust military force, politically motivated groups may change tactics or areas of operations in a way that will further complicate the robust approach. As Richard Gowan and Benjamin Tortolani argue, robustness creates new vulnerabilities that have not been clearly identified and that vary from one mission to the other.⁴⁷ A robust approach can also directly impact on the level of integration (when risks of retaliation against non-military components of the operation increase), the unity among contributors (that may diverge on the virtues of robustness), and the level of cooperation with external partners. It follows that, although robustness is presented as a solution, there may be cases where it is part of the problem.

Varying degrees of feasibility according to the meaning of robustness

Finally, the several meanings of 'robust peacekeeping' lead to a typology of activities that can be significantly different, therefore necessitating different types of requirements. First, the generic term of 'robust peacekeeping' embraces both the idea of robustness in protection of

the force and robustness in defence of the mandate, which in most cases includes protecting civilians. This amalgam is problematic, as these two activities are fundamentally different. Robust peacekeeping for the protection of the force is aimed at ensuring a certain level of security for the peacekeepers and at deterring intermittent or continuous harassment from spoilers. It is peacekeeper centred and is regarded by many potential and actual contributors as a condition of their commitment. By contrast, robust peacekeeping in defence of the mandate and in the protection of civilians is mandate centred and is far more ambitious. The two approaches entail different postures, operational capabilities, and levels of political commitment from the Security Council, TCCs and host authorities. In Darfur, for example, where peacekeepers face attacks on a daily basis, few would contest the necessity of guaranteeing their protection. This vision of robustness is broadly accepted, including by a majority of NAM states. Yet robustness in confronting the spoilers in a coercive way or in implementing the mandate is far less acceptable, in particular to the TCCs, some of which neighbour Sudan and would be reluctant to engage in a confrontation with state-backed spoilers.

Robustness in defence of the mandate places the operation in a very different situation. First, it increases the degree of intrusiveness into the internal affairs of the host state as well as the risk of moving from the use of force at the tactical level to that at the strategic level. Second, the above-mentioned changes directly impact on the nature of motives and the degree of commitment from the contributing states. Leaving aside the capabilities issue, the key question is whether current TCCs would indeed consider robustness beyond their own protection. Are they ready to assume the above-identified risks? Does their conceptualization of their role in UN peace operations allow them to contemplate a long-term confrontation with potential spoilers that are at times backed by the host state? If we do not confine the debate to current TCCs, would Western states be ready and/or willing to commit to a possible and repeated use of force against spoilers in a UN peace mission? Not many examples come to mind to demonstrate such willingness. When the UK and France did take the risks of defeating spoilers, respectively in Sierra Leone (Operation *Palliser*) and the DRC in 2003 (EU-led Operation *Artemis*), the operations were limited in time and space, in contrast to usual operations by the UN.⁴⁸

Furthermore, to what extent are host states ready to accept robust peacekeeping operations and the associated threat to their sovereignty? The cases of Sudan and Lebanon are telling examples. In the case of Sudan, President Omar al-Bashir made sure that any troop contributor inclined to act robustly would not participate. In the case of Lebanon, the government refused to accept any explicit reference to Chapter VII of the UN Charter though resolution 1701 (2006) authorized 'UNIFIL [UN Interim Force in Lebanon] to take all necessary action in areas of deployment of its forces and as it deems within its capabilities, to ensure that its area of operations is not utilized for hostile activities of any kind, to resist attempts by forceful means to prevent it from discharging its duties under the mandate of the Security Council'.⁴⁹ And, despite Western states' initial insistence on the robustness of UNIFIL II, such robustness is in practice peacekeeper centred rather than mandate centred, and Western states are extremely reluctant to take any action that could lead to escalation. In both cases, potential spoilers are powerful and/or state-backed and therefore alter the nature of robustness.

In general terms, while the peacekeeper-centred approach to robustness is broadly accepted, there is little indication of readiness among UN member states to embrace the robust peacekeeping approach in all its dimensions. On the contrary, the majority of current operations evince a strong reluctance to do so. In some cases, as in the DRC with Indian and Pakistani contingents, or in Haiti with Brazilian peacekeepers, robust action has been taken. Yet very few countries are ready to assume the consequences of this type of action over a long

period. It follows that a distinction between robustness in protection of the force and robustness in defence of the mandate may be justified. Thus far, it appears that housing the two notions under the same conceptual umbrella is counterproductive.

Conclusion

Contemporary peace operations face a wide range of difficulties which sometimes leads them to overall failure. Addressing those difficulties is critical and requires long-term efforts that target different actors and activities. Guaranteeing that UN peace operations are given the means to implement mandates, including through the use of force in some cases, is a pivotal issue. Rwanda and Srebrenica are cases in point where peacekeepers remained passive while massive violations of human rights were perpetrated. In the same vein, letting criminal groups and other militias harass UN units is unacceptable. Consequently, robustness does have some merits that need to be developed. At the same time, I have argued that robustness poses a host of conceptual as well as operational difficulties that undermine its coherence and feasibility.

Conceptually, the idea of robustness places peacekeepers in the grey area between peacekeeping and peace enforcement, and therefore challenges the key principles of peacekeeping. Understandably this creates resistance. At the operational level, the sense of common effort that robust peacekeeping implies is undermined by the commitment gap in troop contributions and the absence of Western states from UN operations. Robustness pushed by the North and implemented by the South has clearly been problematic. Finally, and most importantly, while robustness needs to be part of a broader political strategy (more than does 'non-robust' peacekeeping), backed by the Security Council, the main TCCs, and even the host state, this has not been observed to date. It follows that the conditions for effectively implementing robustness do not seem to be met. The worst scenario would be robust peacekeeping as a substitute for a lack of strategy.

Notes

- 1 The Brahimi Report mentions a 'robust doctrine' (p.ix), 'sufficiently robust rules of engagement' (p.x), 'robust peacekeeping forces' (p.xi), 'robust force posture' (p.1), and 'robust rules of engagement' (pp. 10, 54). 'Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations', UN doc., A/55/305, S/2000/809, 21 Aug. 2000.
- 2 See Victoria Holt and Glyn Taylor, 'Protecting Civilians in the Context of UN Peace keeping Operations. Successes, Setbacks and Remaining Challenges', independent study, DPKO and Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA), New York, 2009.
- 3 See Ian Johnstone, 'Dilemmas of Robust Peace Operations', *Annual Review of Global Peace Operations 2006*, New York: Center on International Cooperation, New York University/ Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner 2006, pp. 1–17.
- 4 'United Nations Peacekeeping Operations. Principles and Guidelines' ('Capstone Doctrine'), DPKO/DFS, New York, 2008; 'A New Partnership Agenda. Charting a New Horizon for UN Peacekeeping', DPKO/DFS, non-paper, New York, 2009; 'DPKO/DFS Concept Note on Robust Peacekeeping', Office of Military Affairs, DPKO, New York, 2009.
- 5 Thierry Tardy, 'The UN and the Use of force. A Marriage against Nature', *Security Dialogue* Vol. 38, No. 1, 2007, pp. 49–70.
- 6 See John Ruggie, 'Wandering in the Void. Charting the UN's New Strategic Role', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 5, 1993, p. 28; Marrack Goulding, 'The Evolution of United Nations Peacekeeping', *International Affairs*, Vol. 69, No. 3, 1993, p. 461.
- 7 See Peter Viggo Jakobsen, 'The Emerging Consensus on Grey Area Peace Operations Doctrine: Will It Last and Enhance Operational Effectiveness?', *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 2000, pp. 36–56.

11. 'Principles and Guidelines' (see n.4 above), p. 98.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 34–5.
13. 'A New Partnership Agenda' (see n.4 above), p. 21.
14. 'DPKO/DFS Concept Note' (see n.4 above), p. 1.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
16. See Proceedings of the C-34 debates, UN doc, GA/PK/203, 22 Feb. 2010.
17. 'DPKO/DFS Concept Note' (see n.4 above), p. 2.
18. DPKO's 'Principles and Guidelines' states in a footnote that 'the list [of terms of its glossary] does not provide authoritative UN definitions', and that 'official UN definitions are being considered in the context of the ongoing terminology deliberations of the General Assembly's Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations' (see n.4 above), p. 100.
19. The 'DPKO/DFS Concept Note' also mentions 'robust support' (see n.4 above), p. 3.
20. For example, the representative of South Africa at the C-34 session spoke about robust peacekeeping using the same terms as those of the 'New Horizon' non-paper. Declaration of the Representative of South Africa, UN doc, GA/PK/203 [see n.13 above].
21. 'Report of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations and Its Working Group', UN doc, A/59/19, 1 March 2005, §46.
22. See Statement of the Representative of India in the Security Council, 5 Aug. 2009: 'India is not unfamiliar with the concept of "robust" peacekeeping', as it contributed in a major way to the UN operation in Congo in the 1960s that was 'the first UN "robust" peacekeeping operation' (at: www.un.int/india/2009/ind1585.pdf).
23. Several experts have proposed that DPKO reframe its approach and even abandon the term 'robust'. See Cedric de Coning, Andreas O. Stensland, and Thierry Tardy (eds), *Beyond the 'New Horizon'*, Oslo: NUPI and GCSP, 2010.
24. See Proceedings of the C-34 debates (n.13 above) and UN doc, GA/PK/204, 23 Feb. 2010.
25. Author's interviews at Missions to the UN, New York, June 2010.
26. Author's interviews with NAM country representatives, New York, June 2010; see also Philip Cunliffe (ed.), *Critical Perspectives on the Responsibility to Protect: Interrogating Theory and Practice*, London: Routledge, forthcoming.
27. See UN Security Council resolutions 1706 (2006); 1784 (2007); 1812 (2008); 1828 (2008); 1870 (2009); 1881 (2009); 1919 (2010); 1935 (2010).
28. See 'Report of the Special Committee' (n.18 above), §30.
29. Alex Bellamy and Paul Williams, 'The West and Contemporary Peace Operations', *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 46, No. 1, 2009, pp. 39–57; Thierry Tardy, *Gestion de crise, maintien et consolidation de la paix. Acteurs, activités, défis* [Crisis Management, Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding. Actors, Activities, Challenges], Louvain-la-Neuve: De Boeck, 2009, pp. 83–5.
30. As of July 2010, the top ten troop contributors were Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Nigeria, Egypt, Nepal, Ghana, Rwanda, Jordan, and Uruguay (UN website at: www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/contributors/2010/june10_2.pdf).
31. Jean-Marie Guéhenno, 'Robust Peacekeeping: Building Political Consensus and Strengthening Command and Control', in *Robust Peacekeeping: The Politics of Force*, New York: Center on International Cooperation, New York University, 2009, p. 9.
32. Author's interviews at Missions to the UN, New York, June 2010.
33. Cf Declaration of the Representative of Morocco on behalf of the NAM at the C-34, UN doc, GA/PK/203, 22 Feb. 2010.
34. 'Report of the Special Committee' (see n.18 above), § 65.
35. 'DPKO/DFS Concept Note' (see n.4 above), pp. 4–5.
36. 'New Horizon Report' (see n.4 above), p. 21.
37. Cf Richard Gowan and Benjamin Tortolani, 'Robust Peacekeeping and its Limitations', in *Robust Peacekeeping* (see n.28 above), p.52.
38. On the difficulty of operationalizing the mandate on protection of civilians, see Holt and Taylor (n. 2 above).
39. Mads Berdal, *Building Peace after War*, London: International Institute for Security Studies, 2009, p. 111.
40. Maciek Hawrylak and David Malone, 'Haiti, Again! A Tough Peacebuilding Task', *Policy Options*, Sept. 2005, p. 36, cited in Berdal (see n.36 above), p. 111.
41. See Sarjoh Bah, 'Understanding the Political Dimensions of Robust Peacekeeping', presentation at

- seminar on 'Robust Peacekeeping: Principles and Practical Guidelines', French Ministry of Defence and Research Network on Peacekeeping Operations (Montreal), Paris, 12–13 April 2010.
- 39 See Stian Kjeksrud, 'Matching Robust Ambitions with Robust Action in UN Peace Operations: Towards a Conceptual Overstretch?', Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, Oslo, April 2009.
- 40 'DPKO/DFS Concept Note' (see n.4 above), p. 3.
- 41 See Denis Tull, 'Peacekeeping in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Waging Peace and Fighting War', *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 2009, pp. 224–5. Tull also notes the inconsistency of the MONUC's action in not applying the same level of robustness throughout the DRC.
- 42 Guéhenno (see n.28 above), p. 11.
- 43 Following the events in Haiti in July 2005, the UN Commission of Human Rights' Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions asked MINUSTAH for clarification regarding 'allegations of serious human rights violations' committed by the blue helmets. In a report to the Commission on 27 March 2006, the Special Rapporteur described MINUSTAH's response as 'broadly satisfactory'. See 'Report of the Special Rapporteur, Commission on Human Rights', UN doc, E/CN.4/2006/53/Add.1, 27 March 2006; 'Report of the Secretary-General on the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti', UN doc, S/2006/592, 28 July 2006. In parallel, a complaint against Brazil was submitted to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights by human rights activists, but was eventually rejected by the Commission.
- 44 In Haiti, notwithstanding the controversy over some of its methods, MINUSTAH's action against criminal groups in Port-au-Prince was clearly aimed at enhancing the government's own authority. Also see Johnstone (n.3 above), pp. 5, 13.
- 45 See Berdal (n.36 above), pp. 100–121.
- 46 See Bah (n.38 above).
- 47 Gowan and Tortolani (see n.34 above), p. 53.
- 48 Berdal (see n.36 above), pp. 102–15.
- 49 UN Security Council resolution 1701, 11 Aug. 2006; see also Alexandra Novosseloff and Richard Gowan, 'Security Council Diplomacy and the New UNIFIL', in Efrat Elron and Joe Soeters (eds.), *Multiple Perspectives on UNIFIL*, New York: International Peace Institute, 2011.