



U.S. Military Observers and Comprehensive Engagement

by Christopher Holshek

Since the turn of the century, U.S. policies have emphasized greater integrated power to engage a full range of threats, challenges, and opportunities largely concerned with the fragility of civil society and the seams within and between nation-states in a globalized world. This is not only due to well-known transforming strategic and operational environments, but more as of late because of increasing resource constraints for statesman and commanders, nationally and internationally. Moreover, the context for such engagements for the U.S. military, beyond being more joint and interagency, is increasingly multinational, with greater balance and synergy between “soft” and “hard” power, smaller military footprints, as much to prevent future conflicts as to respond to them, and involving greater cooperation with civilian interagency and non-governmental partners.

Yet, the U.S. military in general and the Army in particular have been overwhelmingly focused on large-scale counterinsurgency and other U.S.-led stability operations over the past decade. Once those operations wind down, they may discover they are less well-suited to operate in truly multinational environments where the U.S. is neither the lead nor dominant player or where a large U.S. military footprint is neither feasible nor desirable, such as in Africa. No better example exists of how the U.S. military can perform a quiet, low-cost, yet influential role in multinational, comprehensive engagement, while “strengthening its capacity to partner with foreign counterparts”ⁱ, than in the tiny group of the soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines who serve worldwide as U.S. military observers in United Nations field missions.

Strategic Impetus

The strategic impetus for U.S. engagement in multinational operations in general and UN peacekeeping in particular is more powerful than ever. Overall, national security engagements have been increasingly joint, interagency, and multinational in application; additionally, they involve greater engagement activities, directed from the combatant command (COCOM) level, to “build partnership capacity” and mitigate threats to stability and support the broader interests of the United States and its partners. Specifically with respect to the world’s premier multinational organization, the 2010 National Security Strategy, under the rubric of “Pursuing Comprehensive Engagement”, notes: “In recent years America’s frustration with international institutions has led us at times to engage the United Nations (U.N.) system on an ad hoc basis. But in a world of transnational challenges, the United States will need to invest in strengthening the international system, working from inside international institutions and frameworks to face their imperfections head on and to mobilize transnational cooperation.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The National Security Strategy additionally affirms Secretary of Defense Robert Gates' anticipation of the need for greater military engagement capabilities, recognizing the growing mission to "build partnership capacities" as a strategic economy-of-force measure. In the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review, he points out in numerous places that: "America's interests are inextricably linked to the integrity and resilience of the international system... America's power and influence are enhanced by sustaining a vibrant network of defense alliances and new partnerships, building cooperative approaches with key states, and maintaining interactions with important international institutions such as the United Nations... Moreover, military forces must be capable of working effectively with a range of civilian and international partners... Strong regional allies and partners are fundamental to meeting 21st century challenges successfully. Helping to build their capacity can help prevent conflict from beginning or escalating, reducing the possibility that large and enduring deployments of U.S. or allied forces would be required."ⁱⁱⁱ

Echoing the theme of building partner capacities and multinational engagement as a strategic economy-of-force measure, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice more pragmatically explained that "...UN peace operations are a crucial tool for managing international crises in which the only alternatives might otherwise be doing nothing at all or direct U.S. military intervention... UN peacekeeping is also cost-effective for the United States: instead of paying 100 percent of the costs for a unilateral deployment, the United States pays about one-fourth of the costs for UN peacekeeping, with other UN members collectively sharing the burden for the rest."^{iv} (It should also be taken into consideration that UN peacekeeping forces work at operational costs far below that of U.S. and many NATO forces. The reimbursement rate for UN peacekeepers set by the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, or DPKO, is at around \$1,200 per line soldier per month – much less than the pay and benefits for a U.S. soldier.)^v

Opportunities-based considerations should not, however, be the only reasons at a time when multinational engagement is becoming more central to U.S. national security and defense strategies. Gaining and maintaining influence at the multinational level should also be a paramount consideration. Since 9/11, direct U.S. involvement in UN field missions has dwindled while involvement of other "21st century centers of influence", among them China, has grown, as shown in the chart at Figure 1. This means that U.S. influence in this multinational forum has declined relative to powers with which the U.S. has an increasingly complex relationship and a greater need to engage bilaterally as well as multilaterally.

U.S. Military Observers: Strategic and Operational Values-Added

America's "blue-hatted" officers do much more than substantively contribute to at least a half-dozen multinational peacekeeping missions in, for example, Chad, Darfur, Egypt and Israel, Georgia, Haiti, Iraq, and Liberia.

First, more than anything else, they directly represent the commitment of the United States to these missions, fostering their legitimacy and encouraging the participation on other nations. Whether with one or 100,000, America makes no more powerful a statement of its national interest than when it places its men and women in uniform – not a diplomat or developer – in a troubled area. Thus, U.S. military presence as such quietly multiplies diplomacy and development at this important level as well.

Second, as unofficial military ambassadors, their presence and interaction enhance America's international standing and image with utmost efficiency, not just in the country in question, but through their professional and personal interaction with civilian and military personnel (some of whom represent elites) from scores of other nationalities in the UN and its agencies, NGOs, host governments, and many other organizations. A typical UN field mission, for example, can have representation from more than 20 countries on its military and police staff and 40-50 countries on the civilian staff, as most UN Secretary General field mission reports show. Other than the media and, of course U.S. policies, their direct interaction affords a highly valuable and unique avenue of approach to shaping perceptions of Americans in general and the U.S. military in particular in a setting considered a level playing field. Likewise, U.S. military observers obtain valuable information as listening posts on how others abroad perceive the U.S. as a conscientious part of a whole-of-government, whole-of-nation instrument of "strategic public engagement" that emphasizes listening as much as message transmission^{vi}.

Third, they can informally act as strategic and operational scouts for both DoD and the U.S. Country Team, providing "ground truth" and helping to balance understanding of the situation in the target country and the effectiveness of the international intervention. Although not a part of their official mission, taking advantage of their networks and relationship-building among myriad players and their on-the-ground experience, they can informally and discreetly enhance strategic early warning of potential conflict in fragile states, improve knowledge of the "human terrain", assist with coordination between U.S. and UN entities in a crisis situation (the most recent opportunity being between SOUTHCOM and the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti, or MINUSTAH, although it was marginally exploited^{vii}), and open doors for other U.S. government or contracted representatives in many places in especially Africa where large U.S. forces presence is neither feasible nor desired.

Fourth, U.S. military observers can also act as strategic and operational enablers. An outstanding example is the assistance given by the U.S. military observer team to the inaugural deployment of a Bailey bridge by Armed Forces of Liberia engineers along a strategic supply route in the volatile Southeast, involving a number of players from the U.S. Country Team, engineering mentors from Pacific Architects and Engineers, DAI contract representatives for the U.S. Agency for International Development Liberia Community Infrastructure Program, the Ministry of Public Works, and the UN Mission – scoring a inimitable contribution to security sector reform efforts as well as governance and capacity and confidence building.

Less episodically, U.S. military observer teams help raise the efficacy of UN military operations simply through their embedded presence, their professional example, and as part of the UN military staff, their unique expertise in intelligence, operations, and civil affairs to significantly enhance the level of play, sometimes beyond the mission area. The UN Mission in Liberia, for example, adopted an approach to civil-military coordination that significantly augments a critical (peacekeeping to peacebuilding) transition management function there, serves as a model for other missions, and substantiated much of the new DPKO "UN-CIMIC" policy for UN peacekeeping forces. U.S. military observers are well aware that if they can help bring UN operations to a successful transition point, it may mitigate the future employment of U.S. hard power and related treasure to restore or enforce peace and stability, as well as open the door to "aid-to-trade" economic development and commercial opportunities in more stable environments.

Last but not least, they obtain much-needed and rare first-hand knowledge and insight on real-world multinational operations and understanding of the UN for future U.S. operations and international security interaction, as well as building strategic capital much in the same way as other security assistance programs like IMET do. They are among a small number of Americans with first-hand knowledge of the working UN. The institutional understanding and multinational engagement skills they gain in their year-long deployments are a precious resource to theater engagement strategies. And these largely junior and mid-grade officers are gaining a strategic leadership acumen normally acquired by a small minority of more senior officers whose successors will no doubt be in greater need of, much as their generational predecessors needed to learn more about “the interagency”.

Most of the above values-added have yet to reach their full potential – mainly because the program is not managed within a deliberate, strategic context. Still, the geopolitical advantages of U.S. military observers have been used of late to argue for the deployment of as many as 100 to Congo to bolster ineffective peacekeeping efforts there – and not by Americans, as a British online report contended: “American colonels and captains publicly monitoring the situation would send a clear message to the Congolese and their neighbors that Washington wants calm. This American mini-presence would also play a tripwire role; it’s one thing to outflank and embarrass standard UN infantry, but quite another to play games in front of U.S. observers.”^{viii}

Force Management

Even though about half actually perform important functions on the UN force staff, all U.S. military personnel deployed in support of the UN field missions are considered military observers per a memorandum of understanding between DoD and DPKO, due to Title 10 restrictions on assignment or seconding of U.S. military personnel outside of U.S. command and control structures. The US Military Observer Group – Washington (USMOG-W), nested in the Army G-3/5/7, exercises Joint command authority and administrative support to U.S. military personnel to UN military observer missions for which Secretary of the Army is DoD Executive Agent. As such, USMOG-W implements DoD policy regarding personnel, logistics, administration, force protection, and operations for U.S. observer missions.

U.S. military observer teams, ranging from two in Georgia to nine in Liberia, are led by Senior U.S. Military Observers (SUSMOs), who exercise team command and leadership responsibilities. They assess and report on UN operations along U.S. and UN lines in order to enhance UN effectiveness and thus further U.S. and international political-military interests. SUSMOs often serve as primary staff in the multinational force headquarters.

With access to little to no U.S. military infrastructure or “life support systems” – a rare experience for most U.S. military personnel, U.S. military observer teams operate much like a combination of special operations, civil affairs, and military attaches. About one-third of them are from the Reserve Component, taking advantage of civil-military and interdisciplinary mindsets and non-military skills unique to those forces.

Although U.S. military observers are not under the command and control of the embassy, they receive support under the International Cooperative Administrative Support Services system. This includes access to postal, consular, medical, and administrative services. The

observer team and the SUSMO in particular, in turn, liaise with and provide assistance to embassy assigned or associated offices and personnel in the conduct of their mission.

U.S. military observers undergo a rigorous three week pre-deployment training course at the U.S. Marine base at Quantico, VA. In addition to mission orientations, they receive training in weapons, tactical survival and other force protection techniques, tactical lifesaving and first aid, and off-road and vehicle emergency procedures. There is some training more specific to the UN military observer mission and the country of deployment, usually provided by U.S. instructors, as well as appearances by alumni from previous deployments.

The Way Ahead

Considering their obvious strategic importance and demonstrated values-added and payoff potential, greater DoD commitment to this multinational opportunity would go far to enhance U.S. foreign and security policies in a very challenging era. It deserves far more attention among those within and tangential to the U.S. government who could benefit enormously from their work. With the encouragement of the State Department, DoD could, for example:

- Expand the U.S. military observer program (e.g., at least twofold) and improve visibility at the departmental level (including State and USAID) and in joint doctrine (e.g., JP 3-07, JP 3-08, and the Capstone Concept for Joint Operations) in order to address shortfalls in understanding and exploiting the values-added, especially at the COCOM level, of this largely underutilized resource.
- Continue to improve COCOM awareness of U.S. military observer presence and operations in their areas of responsibility, especially in Africa, through more intense liaison with the Military Representative Office at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations in New York as well as through the appropriate country team offices.
- Conduct an OSD-directed staff study to look at placing USMOG under a joint command structure under OSD executive authority rather than Army G-3/5/7 buried under layers of stability operations staff focused largely on operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, overwhelmingly concerned with force protection due to the tendency to compare these deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, and more limited by Army (vice Joint) regulations on, for example, representational funds and gifts – an aspect of this relationship-building mission that is hard to overestimate.
- Provide greater balance in pre-deployment training between combat-related force protection and risk management skill enhancement, and mission-related training and education on, for example, the UN and UN peacekeeping and military observer operations, U.S. diplomatic and development interests and the U.S. country team(s) involved, country and cultural awareness, UN mission rules-of-engagement, etc. Include more UN (vice U.S.) instructors to introduce non-U.S. points of view.
- Continue to maintain the recently extended length of tours of duty (from six months to one year) to maximize their relationship-building, networking, and situational understanding outcomes. Overcome Service-related issues preventing universal

commitment to such tour lengths through a revised DoD Directive 2065.1E (U.S. Personnel Assigned to UN Missions).

- Take advantage of a newly created database to systemically exploit accumulated UN multinational operations experience for emerging operations – engagement, security, and relief/reconstruction, and change the perception of such an assignment to one that is career-enhancing. Consider such personnel first for key assignments involving building partnership at more senior levels.
- Conduct more deliberate and substantial (i.e., OSD and interagency) end-of-tour debriefings of SUSMOs and U.S. military observer team members other than a short presentation by the SUSMO at USMOG-W as a small part of out-processing.

Now more than ever, U.S. military observers are an excellent low-risk, low-cost means to significantly enhance comprehensive engagement, U.S. and UN multinational operations, and American multidimensional power and influence in coordination with theater engagement activities – if properly and carefully exploited and managed. Most importantly, it would go far to build the necessary knowledge and skills U.S. military personnel – beyond “whole-of-government” and “whole-of-nation” to “whole-of-world” – will need to engage international partners to secure America’s international standing to the next turn of the century.

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Troop, Police, and UNMOs Contributions: U.S. vs. China

| U.S. and Chinese Contributions to UN Peacekeeping Missions, 2000-09 | | | | | | |
|---|-----------|--|-----------|--|----------|--|
| Year | Troops | | Police | | UNMOs | |
| | U.S./PRC | | U.S./PRC | | U.S./PRC | |
| 2000 | 0 / 0 | | 849 / 55 | | 36 / 43 | |
| 2001 | 1 / 1 | | 707 / 75 | | 42 / 53 | |
| 2002 | 2 / 2 | | 603 / 69 | | 26 / 52 | |
| 2003 | 2 / 289 | | 494 / 21 | | 22 / 48 | |
| 2004 | 8 / 787 | | 404 / 194 | | 17 / 55 | |
| 2005 | 10 / 791 | | 359 / 197 | | 18 / 71 | |
| 2006 | 9 / 1419 | | 298 / 180 | | 17 / 67 | |
| 2007 | 8 / 1576 | | 291 / 177 | | 17 / 71 | |
| 2008 | 10 / 1889 | | 72 / 204 | | 9 / 53 | |
| 2009 | 12 / 1892 | | 55 / 191 | | 8 / 53 | |

Source: UN Year in Review, 2000-2009, accessed through www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/contributors/ on 22 February 2010. All figures reflect as of 31 December for each year.

Figure 1. Comparative troop, police, and military observer participation in UN field missions over the past 10 years. Figures for U.S. military personnel attached to UN field missions are inaccurate due to the confusion created by the esoteric command-and-control relationship explained in the article. The true figures, according to USMOG-W, have ranged between 20 and 30 “UNMOs” only over the reported period. It is also important to note that, while U.S. contributions to UN peacekeeping operations budget have averaged over \$2.6-billion per year in this timeframe, China’s contribution has been around \$35-88-million. In fact, the PRC, now possessing the world’s second largest economy, still qualifies under UN rules as a donor nation from the “Non-Development Assistance Committee”, ranking second on financial contributions behind the Republic of Korea.

Photo Gallery:



The Armed Force of Liberia's first Bailey bridge launch in December 2008. The author is at center-left, with AFL engineers and officers to his rear and left. DoD contract mentors and USAID and Ministry of Public Works men and women stand in the foreground with female AFL members.



U.S. and Chinese members of the UN Mission in Liberia.



The Liberian project manager of a youth agricultural training farm explains the pilot project to the author and staff officers of the resident Bangladesh peacekeeping battalion.

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ⁱ Barack Obama, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, D.C., The White House, May 2010), 11.

ⁱⁱ *National Security Strategy*, 13.

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert M. Gates, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington D.C, Department of Defense, February 2010), iv, xiv, 7, and 10.

^{iv} Susan Rice, “Progress Report by the United States Mission to the United Nations, A New Era of Engagement, Advancing America’s Interests in the World” (New York, U.S. Mission to the United Nations, 29 April 2010), <http://www.usun.state.gov/briefing/statements/2009/april/126495.htm>, accessed 12 April 2010.

^v Reimbursement rates for peacekeepers are not openly published by the United Nations; however, in addition to the author’s personal knowledge, there are numerous sources that quote figures of just over \$1,000, plus specialty pay and other allowances, for the lowest-ranking soldiers. See also “Peacekeeping” in Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peacekeeping>, accessed 27 June 2010.

^{vi} Kristin M. Lord and Marc Lynch, *America’s Extended Hand - Assessing the Obama Administration’s Global Engagement Strategy*, Center for a New American Security, June 2010; first mention of the term “strategic public engagement” is on page 3

^{vii} From the author’s own observations and inquires with SOUTCHOM while serving at the Haiti Interagency Task Force national response center at USAID, January-February 2010

^{viii} Richard Gowan, “Wanted: 100 American military observers to save Congo”, *Global Dashboard*, (London, WordPress), 27 May 2010, <http://www.globaldashboard.org/2010/05/27/wanted-100-american-military-observers-to-save-congo/>, accessed 13 June 2010