

UN crisis diplomacy and peacekeeping: an emergency health check¹

1. The UN: in need of a check-up?

The United Nations (UN) is currently in poor health but the severity of its condition is not yet clear. Over the last six months, the organisation has repeatedly shown signs of operational feebleness and political paralysis. Symptoms have ranged from the failure of the UN mission in South Sudan to foresee the country's implosion last December to the prolonged agony (and predictable futility) of bringing the Syrian government and opposition together in Geneva in January. The organisation's initial response to the Ukrainian crisis was equally messy, as the Secretary-General's envoy Robert Serry was expelled from Crimea by pro-Russian forces and the Security Council was unable to react because of Moscow's veto. From Darfur and Somalia to the Central African Republic (CAR) and Mali, UN peace operations and political missions have had to contend with poor resources, personnel and security.

But while these symptoms are worrying, their significance is uncertain. Are these merely the spasms and chills that inevitably affect any organisation involved in crisis management? Or could they be evidence of a chronic disability with the potential to cripple the organisation's long-term contribution to peace and security?

There are reasons for optimism. UN missions and officials have demonstrated resilience in the face of recent setbacks. Although caught off-guard in South Sudan, the peacekeepers there sheltered over 80,000 civilians in their camps despite incurring fatalities. The multilateral effort to dismantle the Syrian chemical arsenal has made remarkable progress. The battered UN operation in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has regained leverage by employing force against militias in the east of the country. Even the Cypriot peace process has stuttered back to life.

The UN's current woes do not approximate to the series of cataclysmic failures – Somalia, Rwanda and Srebrenica – that overwhelmed the organisation in the early and mid-1990s. And although tensions among the permanent five (P5) members of the Security Council have escalated over Syria and Ukraine, other organs of the UN system appear to be functioning better than expected. The Human Rights Council, typically bogged down in East–West and North–South disputes until a few years ago, has passed a series of strong and detailed resolutions addressing Syria. The High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, and her team have taken a concomitantly larger role in recent crises. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, often accused of paying insufficient attention to crisis management early in his tenure, has spoken out forcefully on conflicts like that in CAR that could otherwise be forgotten.

Yet, while the UN's successes may balance its failures on paper, something remains profoundly amiss. Faced with a mass of crises and conflicts, it is hard to discern underlying political or strategic patterns. A diagnostic framework is required to assess the UN's health and sift decisive developments from more transient factors. In 2008, in an article on peacekeeping in the mid-2000s, this author laid out one possible framework for distinguishing between “immediate, systemic and paradigmatic” crises facing

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the UN.² This paper returns to this tripartite scheme, and argues that the UN's operational system and political paradigm for crisis management are surely in crisis – and vulnerable to further failures in the near future.

The paper then goes on to argue that UN mediators cannot cure the organisation's deep flaws but do have a range of options to mitigate its weaknesses. These options include: (i) using diplomatic means to rescue blue-helmet operations that lack the military means to fulfil their mandates; (ii) acting as a buffer between Russia (and possibly China) and the West in a context of increasing international tension; (iii) undertaking “niche diplomacy” and de-escalatory activities in cases where the big powers wish to avoid clashes; and (iv) building relations with increasingly ambitious regional powers and regional organisations that may be able to drive peacemaking efforts even at times when the P5 are divided, distracted or powerless.

2. Diagnosing the UN's ills

This paper's diagnostic framework is straightforward. *Immediate crises* are simply the surprises and dilemmas that face the organisation on a daily basis, many of which fade away without any lasting impact. *Systemic crises*, by contrast, are those cases that (individually or coming together) reveal basic shortfalls in the UN's capacity to deliver on crisis diplomacy and conflict management. In 2008, the Darfur conflict and the UN's struggle to deploy a peacekeeping force in tandem with the African Union (AU) looked like such a crisis. Difficulties in recruiting capable forces, locating assets such as helicopters and negotiating host-state consent revealed problems that had already done damage to other blue-helmet operations.

This paper reviews both the present state of the peacekeeping system and the health of the UN's mechanisms for managing preventive diplomacy, good offices and political missions. It also addresses *paradigmatic crises*: situations that challenge the political foundations of UN crisis-management efforts. There is no single “UN paradigm” for handling conflicts, but some core principles are clearly relevant. These include: an acceptance of the UN's role in a given crisis among the P5 and (at least for show) other member states; some level of consent for UN engagement among the parties to the crisis in most cases; and respect for international humanitarian law and other liberal norms. In recent years, the organisation has also prioritised collaborating closely with regional organisations.

A paradigmatic crisis can emerge, therefore, in cases where the UN engages in a conflict despite insurmountable political differences among the P5, or in the teeth of opposition from a regional organisation or – often decisively – the parties to a conflict. The UN has, of course, been involved in crises under these circumstances since its inception. Cold War fissures among the P5 did not stop the UN acting in Korea, Suez and Congo in the 1950s and 1960s. But the organisation's ability to absorb such tensions may be finite, as the UN's damaging loss of momentum from the mid-1960s to the late 1980s demonstrated. Since the end of the Cold War, the UN paradigm for conflict management has been tested by breakdowns over cases including Kosovo and Iraq but these have not crippled the organisation completely.

It is important to analyse whether the international splits over Syria, the Ukraine and other current crises could do deeper and more lasting damage to the UN's future. But first it is necessary to address the basic systemic factors hampering UN actions. Even if the overall international political climate was more favourable, the organisation would still have to make do with a faulty batch of crisis-response tools.

2 Gowan, Richard. “The Strategic Context: Peacekeeping in Crisis, 2006–08.” *International Peacekeeping* 15.4 (2008): 453–469.

3. Systemic stresses

A 360-degree review of the UN's crisis management capabilities would include the conflict-related activities of entities from humanitarian agencies to the UN Development Programme (UNDP). An overview of this type would reveal many reasons for concern. The relief effort for Syria has stumbled badly at times for technical as well as political reasons. UNDP's Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Recovery has shrunk significantly as donors have cut funds in the name of austerity.

This paper confines itself to a narrower look at the UN's diplomatic and security tools and its departments of peacekeeping operations and political affairs (DPKO and DPA). At first glance, these look systemically sound. Despite repeated warnings of overstretch, blue-helmet operations have expanded to record levels. By the end of 2013, there were over 97,000 soldiers and police officers under UN command, plus 22,000 AU troops in Somalia reliant on UN logistical support. The organisation has fielded a growing range of political missions, putting a growing number of civilians on the front lines in trouble-spots such as Libya. In many ways, the UN has weathered the global financial crunch better than institutional "competitors" such as NATO and the European Union, which have curtailed their expeditionary operations.

Yet it is possible that the UN's current level of activity masks fundamental weaknesses. We have noted that the Darfur mission appeared ripe for failure in 2008, with potentially serious ramifications for peacekeeping as a whole. The UN–AU operation (UNAMID) there has indeed struggled badly, although its travails have often been minimised by UN officials or glossed over by members of the Security Council. A recent *Foreign Policy* investigation of the mission concluded that it had been "bullied by government security forces and rebels, stymied by American and Western neglect, and left without the weapons necessary to fight in a region where more peacekeepers have been killed than in any other U.N. mission in the world".³

Peacekeeping officials often play down Darfur as an exceptional case – and a mission that simply should not have been deployed – rather than evidence of a systemic malaise. Yet there have been signs that other UN missions lack the military assets, clear doctrines or firmness of purpose needed to handle major threats. The force in Côte d'Ivoire came close to collapse during the post-electoral crisis of 2010–2011, with many units unable to patrol or unwilling to follow orders. The arrival of extra attack helicopters and a French intervention saved the day. In 2012, rebels seized the city of Goma in the DRC under the noses of one of the best-equipped UN forces in Africa, raising doubts about many of the peacekeepers' loyalty to their mandate.

If these shocks suggested that the peacekeeping system was more fragile than it first seemed, events over the last twelve months have reinforced this concern. In the first half of 2013, the Security Council turned to the UN to take over the African-led operation working alongside the French in Mali. The UN has struggled to get fresh soldiers on the ground, guarantee the quality and discipline of some African contingents and adapt to terrorist attacks. As the International Crisis Group (ICG) noted, the peacekeepers seem to have "a greater presence in [the largely stable capital] Bamako than the rest of the country".⁴ An international official notes that some UN troops seem to feel that "pillage after a fight is normal and to be expected".

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3 Lynch, Colum. "They Just Stood Watching", www.foreignpolicy.com, 7 April 2014.

4 "Mali: Reform or Relapse" (Africa Report 210), International Crisis Group, 10 January 2014.

The crisis in South Sudan has arguably caused even greater trauma. The post-independence peacekeeping mission there was launched in 2011 as a lightweight, mobile and politically smart outfit, unlike its counterpart to the north in Darfur. It never achieved these ambitions. In early 2013, an independent study found that the mission was hampered by a lack of air assets (also a problem in Mali) and unsystematic information gathering.⁵ These problems came back to haunt the UN mission (UNMISS) as South Sudan imploded in December. The ICG has accused UNMISS of being “neither politically nor operationally prepared for the conflict”.⁶

Many peacekeepers in Mali and South Sudan have nonetheless behaved bravely. In the DRC, the Security Council’s decision to launch a “Force Intervention Brigade” made up of well-armed African troops restored some stability after the Goma crisis. But it is hard to deny that the events of the last year bear the hallmarks of a systemic crisis in peacekeeping. Patterns of failure recur with unnerving frequency, involving insufficient military resources, inadequate political analysis, unreliable personnel and poor strategic direction. DPKO officials recognise these deficiencies and have tried to mitigate them by deploying advanced technologies such as drones and reviewing the quality of their forces more rigorously. It remains unclear whether the UN can find the resources and personnel to rebuild peacekeeping’s credibility.

Resource problems also dog the UN’s political missions and diplomatic efforts, which absorb fewer funds and (with occasional exceptions such as Syria) less political attention. Under Ban Ki-moon, DPA has been enlarged and given expanded responsibilities in cases including CAR and Somalia. Ban has repeatedly pressed the General Assembly to establish a new system for funding and overseeing political missions, but to no avail. In the meantime, political missions have suffered severe blows. In March 2013, UN political staff had to be evacuated from CAR as rebels seized the capital, Bangui, in a process that even senior UN officials call a humiliation. After the Security Council mandated an expansion of the UN presence in CAR in late 2013 it proved difficult to find sufficient numbers of personnel to fill the new posts at all, let alone to deploy them fast enough to monitor the worsening war. The new assistance mission in Somalia was undermined by a terrorist attack in Mogadishu that claimed fifteen lives. The long-running political presence in Afghanistan, adapting to the drawdown of Western troops, has also been targeted.

Just as DPKO has searched for answers to the systemic crisis in peacekeeping, DPA has looked hard for ways to manage the risks to political missions. It has deployed guard units to Bangui and Mogadishu that may protect civilian staff from future threats. But DPA’s ability to handle fresh conflicts is still too limited. The department and wider UN system have deep expertise on certain regions and cases, such as the Palestinian Territories, but stumble when tensions escalate in less familiar settings such as Egypt and Ukraine. This lack of breadth was highlighted when Ban Ki-moon had to redeploy Robert Serry, the Special Coordinator for the Middle East (and by chance a former Dutch ambassador to Ukraine) to Kiev and Crimea earlier this year.

The UN has always had to dig deep to find experts on unforeseen crises. If frictions between the West, Russia and China exacerbate tensions in Europe and the Asia-Pacific, the organisation may have to stretch to find the specialists and envoys to handle these clashes while also keeping up with events in Africa and the Middle East. The challenges involved in managing these tasks in parallel may place less obvious systemic strains on the UN than propping up its larger peace operations, but they will still be taxing. The UN’s ability to navigate these problems will also be shaped by deeper political challenges to its current paradigm of crisis management.

5 Hemmer, Jort. “We Are Laying the Groundwork for our own Failure” (CRU Policy Brief 25), Clingendael Institute, 31 January 2013.

6 “South Sudan: A Civil War by Any Other Name” (Africa Report 217), International Crisis Group, 10 April 2014.

4. Paradigmatic pains

How bad is the UN's political situation? For many observers, the Security Council's breakdowns between Russia, China and the West over Syria and Ukraine have defined UN diplomacy since 2011. Officials and diplomats in New York are marginally more sanguine. Moscow and Beijing may engage in trench warfare with the West but they have not opted for all-out confrontation. The two sides have largely kept diplomacy over Africa and the Middle East separate (although the Russians have thrown up more obstacles over Côte d'Ivoire, the Sudans and even CAR than is generally acknowledged). China has sporadically acted to moderate Russia's most anti-Western positions, and disapproved of its behaviour in Crimea. Moscow has chosen to protect its contacts with Washington – most obviously during the Syrian chemical weapons crisis – rather than return to full Cold War conditions.

On this logic, the UN has faced paradigmatic crises in Syria and Ukraine but these have not escalated so far as to compromise the organisation's overall credibility. The UN has, after all, always been a "selective security" institution, inconsistently utilised by major powers to resolve some crises and ignored during others.⁷ Even if the P5 cannot agree on how to deal with Eurasian or Middle Eastern issues through the Security Council, they can still use it to contain second-order problems in Africa.

This underplays the dangers to the UN's broader crisis-management paradigm. The Security Council's splits over Syria have corroded the reputation of the body's conflict-management tools. Although far smaller than the operations in Mali and South Sudan, the 2012 UN Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) raised public awareness of the fragilities of peacekeeping. Robert Mood, the general who led the mission, has blamed the US, UK and France for turning to the UN without proposing a real bargain with Damascus: "I observed up close how Western politics is about national interests, international rivalry, and the constituency at home rather than about the moral responsibility to [. . .] protect innocent civilians in harm's way".⁸

Similar doubts about the P5's commitments are widespread. Pascale Baeriswyl, a former member of the Swiss mission in New York, argues that the UN's main powers lack "sufficient energy and motivation to realise a long term foreign policy vision. Thus, today the Security Council symbolises the eroding power of the multilateral governance system to shape events".⁹ This sense of drift has emboldened those who would like to defy or circumvent the organisation. Leaders from Syria's Bashar al-Assad to South Sudan's Salva Kiir have proved adept at constraining and controlling the UN presences on their territory through a mix of terror and sharp political tactics. Having seen UNMISS stick to its guns in December, Kiir accused Ban Ki-moon of colonialism, presaging a campaign of harassment against the peacekeeping force.

This is nothing new (neither Assad nor Kiir has yet outmanoeuvred the UN for as long as Slobodan Milosevic managed in the 1990s) but it inevitably exacerbates the systemic strains on peacekeepers, political missions and envoys outlined above. In the absence of strong leadership from the Security Council, more spoilers are likely to exploit the UN's vulnerabilities. Meantime – as Chester Crocker,

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7 Roberts, Adam and Dominik Zaum. "Selective Security: War and the United Nations Security Council since 1945" (Adephi Paper 395). Routledge, 2013.

8 Mood, Robert. "My Experiences as the Head of the UN Mission in Syria." CEIP, 21 January 2014.

9 Baeriswyl, Pascale. "Backdoor Revolution." *German Review on the United Nations*, 61.5 (2013).

Fen Osler Hampson and Pamela Aall have observed – regional organisations, ad hoc coalitions and ambitious regional powers are also taking advantage of the UN's weaknesses.¹⁰

Saudi Arabia has thus used the Arab League to marshal opposition to President Assad during the Syrian crisis, while also stirring up the UN General Assembly to demand action against Damascus. In doing so, it undermined UN–Arab League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi's efforts to resolve the crisis on behalf of both the UN and the League. In South Sudan, meanwhile, the UN's efforts to save lives have been eclipsed by Uganda's decision to send troops to fight for Salva Kiir despite the Security Council's explicit condemnation of "external" interventions in the fighting.

Risk-taking players such as Saudi Arabia and Uganda are the main beneficiaries of the P5's lack of common purpose. The more divided the Council becomes, the more mid-level powers will challenge the UN and pursue alternative, fragmentary approaches to future conflicts. Once again, UN officials are familiar with this threat and have made efforts to co-opt potential competitors. The Force Intervention Brigade in the DRC was, for example, originally an AU-backed initiative championed by South Africa and Tanzania that DPKO officials revised and adapted after the Goma crisis. But even the most ingenious UN strategies are likely only to delay the dilution of the organisation's influence. The P5's clashes over Syria and Ukraine are contributing to a far broader corrosion of the UN paradigm for conflict management.

5. Mediators: medicating an unhealthy UN?

This paper has offered a brief check-up on the symptoms afflicting the UN, and the overall diagnosis is not good. Rather than simply suffering from painful but passing crises, both the UN's peacekeeping and diplomatic tools appear to be prey to persistent systemic weaknesses. The tensions between the organisation's biggest members mean that a complete cure is highly unlikely: political divisions are liable to upset most efforts to remedy its operational difficulties. But although incurable, the UN's condition is not yet fatal. Unless there is a catastrophic further rift within the P5, the organisation will probably continue to limp on for the foreseeable future.

The organisation's envoys and mediators have an important role to play in keeping it on its feet. The political and systemic challenges to the UN's activities actually increase the importance of small-scale, targeted initiatives by individual officials to mitigate crises. A series of mediators has, for example, had to compensate for the systemic flaws of peacekeeping in the DRC. In 2008, Olusegun Obasanjo was sent to find a regional solution to fighting in the east of the country. In 2013, Ban Ki-moon's chief of staff, Susana Malcorra shuttled to and from the Great Lakes to forge another regional political agreement after the fall of Goma, paving the way for the Force Intervention Brigade. Mary Robinson is now the official UN envoy to the region. The more that blue-helmet operations stumble due to gaps in their personnel and equipment, the more such mediation will be necessary to contain the damage.

Non-UN mediators have also stepped in to manage such situations: the AU has taken a diplomatic lead in Darfur, while East African states convened peace talks on South Sudan in Ethiopia. Such interventions may often be the best or only chances of peace, but they almost inevitably underscore UN operations' systemic weaknesses. With a reduced diplomatic role, UNMISS has lost its residual leverage in Juba. It is essential that the UN retains the capacity to mediate in similar crises in future, both to support its personnel under fire and to ensure that peace operations pursue credible political strategies rather than simply concentrate on basic security issues.

UN mediators also need to absorb and reduce the diplomatic fallout of P5 divisions. In the Syrian case, Lakhdar Brahimi tackled this head on, coordinating closely with Washington and Moscow for over a year, and facilitating January's Geneva talks. This has risked compromising his autonomy and alienated

¹⁰ Crocker, Chester A., Fen Osler Hampson and Pamela Aall. "A Global Security Vacuum Half-filled: Regional Organizations, Hybrid Groups and Security Management." *International Peacekeeping* (2014).

regional players such as the Saudis. But keeping US–Russian channels open may also have played a necessary role in limiting the deleterious effects of the Syrian crisis on broader big-power diplomacy (not least concerning Iran), at least before the Ukraine crisis hit.

Not all current crises demand that UN officials play such a self-sacrificing role. In some cases, the P5 will continue to opt to avoid confrontation, creating niches for peacemaking. In 2011, for example, Russia and the West agreed to take a low-key approach to the Yemeni crisis in the Security Council, offering political space to a UN mediator, Jamal Benomar, to help head off all-out war. In other cases, the UN can play its traditional Cold War role as a mechanism for de-escalating inter-P5 crises. The organisation's support mission in Libya (UNSMIL) was able to handle the immediate aftermath of the fall of Gaddafi in 2011 and assist in elections the following year despite enduring divisions within the Security Council over NATO's military actions.

Niche diplomacy and de-escalatory activities have limits. Even where the UN enjoys initial successes, as in Libya, it may struggle to gather the resources and political will to address evolving threats. Yemen remains fragile and Libya is in chaos. In other crises, even initial success is impossible. The dispatch of Robert Serry and senior UN officials to Kiev and Moscow during the Ukraine crisis failed to sway Russia. Big-power interests predictably impose tight constraints elsewhere. China has taken steps to limit the UN's role in handling rising ethnic conflicts in northern Myanmar.

Examples such as these revive memories of the UN's quiet diplomacy during the later Cold War. The organisation cannot just retreat into that era, however. It faces intense pressure to speak out on humanitarian crises and Secretary-General Ban, stung by criticisms of his underwhelming response to the 2009 Sri Lanka crisis, has taken this to heart. His advocacy for intervention in CAR has, arguably, justified this approach but his equally outspoken approach to Syria has delivered painfully little.

Perhaps even more significantly, UN mediators cannot look only to the P5 but must also address the proliferation of regional actors who are taking a greater role in crisis management. As noted, the UN has placed growing emphasis on its partnerships with regional organisations, although this has proved difficult in situations from Darfur to Syria. Envoys used to the UN paradigm of peacemaking often find their new partners crude, inefficient or biased. But, with the P5 in a state of dysfunction, these imperfect allies can be crucial to allowing the UN to act at all.

Where the P5 is stuck, a regional push for action can give UN mediators enough energy to act. For all its faults, Saudi Arabia created the impetus for the initial UN–Arab League mediation in Syria led by Kofi Annan in 2012 after the Security Council stalled, orchestrating a General Assembly call for an envoy. In CAR, the very weak sub-regional organisation (ECCAS) and the AU have paved the way for a UN intervention, just as West African states lobbied for peacekeepers in Mali. These processes have been bumpy. However, in future, smart UN officials may often plot with their regional counterparts to cajole or coerce the Security Council into engaging in conflicts that the P5 would otherwise ignore. With the UN paradigm for conflict management ailing, even its most dedicated employees have to look for alternatives.

This may sound pessimistic but this check-up on the UN suggests that pessimism is in order. Rather than try to restore the organisation to full health (something it has arguably never enjoyed), those who care for it need to find ways to alleviate its pain.