2.1 Thematic Essay

Taking Risks: Sustaining Political Missions in Unstable Environments

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Although many political missions prioritize conflict prevention and crisis management, most operate in fairly safe places. Only a tenth of current UN and non-UN political missions are dealing with active wars or the immediate aftermath of conflict, whereas over half deal with longer-term post-conflict peacebuilding. Yet those missions that do operate in volatile or violent environments not only run unusually high risks but also have important opportunities to mitigate hostilities, mediate political bargains and help shape frameworks for lasting peace. A political mission working in a relatively stable country suffering from latent tensions may take months or years to affect local laws and debates. A mission in the midst of a fluid conflict can have the same effect in a matter of days or weeks.

The risks and opportunities of deploying political missions in risky environments have been underlined in a series of cases involving the UN in the last eighteen months, ranging from North Africa to Central Asia:

- The **UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL)** made its initial deployment to Tripoli within weeks of the fall of the city in 2011. The UN Department of Safety and Security (DSS) permitted UNSMIL to deploy while limiting the number of humanitarian personnel able to enter Libya. In April 2012, a convoy carrying the head of mission, Ian Martin, was assaulted by unknown assailants.
- In January 2012, the **UN Political Office for Somalia (UNPOS)** deployed personnel to Mogadishu. Although the mission was set up in 1995, security conditions had previously prevented it from setting up an office in the capital, and its base was in Nairobi. While African Union forces have secured large parts of Mogadishu, the new UNPOS office has been attacked and bombings and assassinations continue, placing limits on UN officials' freedom of movement.
- The **UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)**, launched in 2002, has continued to operate despite a series of attacks on its staff and offices in recent years, including the murder of seven international staff in Mazar-i-Sharif in 2011. As the last *Review of Political Missions* noted, UNAMA and UN agencies are no longer able to operate in many parts of Afghanistan.[*]

Yet in each of these cases, there has been a strong political case for keeping the UN mission going. UNSMIL played a significant role in assisting Libyan national elections in July 2012. Supported by UNPOS, Somali politicians have taken real though tenuous steps towards representative government. And while UNAMA has sometimes struggled to define its place in Afghan politics, it will almost certainly act as the primary flag-bearer for international support to the country after NATO withdraws in 2014.

These very different cases raise parallel doctrinal questions. How can missions craft political strategies that reflect the unpredictable dynamics of active conflicts and immediate post-conflict situations? What organizational and financial mechanisms are needed to prepare, mandate and deliver these strategies? And what security strategies can political missions deploy so as to operate effectively?

[*] Citations and references for this article are available online.

Some of these questions – especially concerning planning and financing – are relevant to all political missions. But in a period in which there are major obstacles to the deployment of new military stabilization and peacekeeping operations, there is a potential trend towards deploying political missions into more dangerous environments. This is not universally true, as the Security Council's decision to deploy blue beret military observers to Syria in April 2012 demonstrated. Yet the strategic failure of this mission (notwithstanding the courage of the observers) has in fact raised further questions about the utility of sending "peacekeepers" to monitor active conflicts. In some cases, there may be fewer dangers associated with deploying a political mission than a military presence. UN political missions do not usually sustain fatalities in their first year of operation, whereas UN peacekeeping operations lose an average of two to ten personnel in the same start-up period. While this reflects the differing tasks of these missions – military peacekeepers tend to suffer casualties while out on patrol and are often mandated to take risks to protect civilians under threat – the Security Council and other multilateral bodies may perceive political mission as low-cost and low-risk crisis response mechanisms.

In Afghanistan, meanwhile, UNAMA faces the challenge of maintaining its political role in a security situation that is liable to deteriorate after NATO forces depart in 2014. In Somalia, UNPOS may need to expand its operations further to highly unstable parts of the country beyond Mogadishu. There is a need to consider the political, operational and financial implications of these high-risk missions – as well as improving the readiness of the UN to send further political missions into similarly high-risk countries.

POLITICAL CHALLENGES AND MANDATES

When a political mission operates in a country that is still in conflict or is in the immediate aftermath of war, there is a natural focus on security issues. But the mission is also likely to face a confused and fluid political situation. Even if a war has resulted in a clear victory for one side – as in Libya – there may be tensions among the victors. The confusion may be greater in a case such as Somalia, where the government has limited territorial control, or where serious fighting still continues, as in Afghanistan.

In such cases, it is necessary to define what goals a political mission can fulfill. Potential tasks fall into two broad categories. The first category involves political dialogues. Most political missions operate in environments where opposed parties are ready to engage in political dialogue (although in a few cases, such as the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the UN acts as a conduit for communications between parties that want to limit direct contacts). In such cases, the range of tools available – covered in detail in earlier editions of the *Review of Political Missions* – range from good offices to formalized mediation.

Secondly, missions can also design and support formal transitions to new political settlements. This year, UNSMIL and UNPOS focused on transitions towards representative government in Libya and Somalia. The framework for these transitional processes is often negotiated in advance. UNAMA was set up after four months of consultations in the country and negotiations between Afghan leaders in Bonn, Germany. The UN Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) emerged from peace talks between the government and Maoist rebels involving a personal representative of the UN Secretary-General, which laid the framework for a rapid deployment of personnel in 2007. More recently, the efforts of the UN's envoy in Yemen, Jamal Benomar, led to the creation of a political office in Sana'a this year. But in some cases it is necessary for a political mission to work out its role after it has already received a mandate to deploy.

In the Libyan case, the UN undertook significant pre-planning for UNSMIL in 2011, but had to overhaul many of its assumptions after the fall of Gaddafi. The new authorities wanted a limited UN role. The Security Council granted UNSMIL an initial three-month planning mandate in September 2011. Because the formation of the Libyan government was delayed, the mission received a second three-month mandate in December 2011 and was only finally authorized to operate for a full year in March 2012.

This type of phased and flexible approach to making and implementing mandates can allow a mission to adapt to the fluid realities of a conflict or post-conflict environment. By contrast, a mission's ability to adapt can be limited by an inflexible mandate or one overloaded with tasks. UNAMA, for example, has recently been asked to carry out an expanding number of tasks (including preparing for presidential elections in 2014 and promoting reconciliation) that hinder it from focusing on firm political priorities.

It is sometimes necessary for a political mission to clarify what it *cannot* do to avoid overstretch. At an early stage in the deployment of UNSMIL, for

example, planners concluded that the mission should not become directly involved in processes such as programming security sector reform. Instead it has acted as a *de facto* broker for international assistance to the new government, facilitating the Libyan authorities' interactions with UN funds and agencies and other actors such as the European Union and World Bank.

However, there may also be cases in which political missions are required to perform either a monitoring role – such as ensuring that parties to a conflict maintain a ceasefire, a role played by UNMIN in Nepal – or play a facilitating function in sub-national political affairs. In the Balkans, missions deployed by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have prioritized these civil affairs roles, building up municipal and regional governance. In Afghanistan, UNAMA has deployed large numbers of personnel to provincial and regional offices to tackle similar tasks. UNPOS may need to do something similar in Somalia. But as we note below, dispersing staff in this way increased a mission's vulnerability to attacks. The dangers of monitoring in non-permissive environments were highlighted in Syria this year, where Arab League and then UN observers were attacked and compelled to withdraw.

PRIORITIES AND PLANNING

Overall, the UN's recent experiences of deploying political missions to politically volatile settings highlight three priorities. Firstly, it is important that missions deploy on the basis of robust planning and (where possible) dialogue with domestic political actors. Secondly, missions need the flexibility to change plans at short notice to reflect fast-moving political dynamics, and they need adaptable mandates to permit this. Finally, these mandates should be as narrow as possible to be achievable.

These sound like relatively straightforward goals. Yet, at least in the UN context, they remain surprisingly controversial. As Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon underlined in a report to the General Assembly in 2011, there are still no standard financial frameworks to fund the planning of political missions (in contrast to peacekeeping operations) or get them on the ground expeditiously. Even planning for UNSMIL – a high-profile project – was complicated in 2011 by UN financial regulations. The mission eventually deployed quickly (the first senior personnel got to Libya within three days of receiving their mandate) and maintained the political space to update its mandate regularly during its initial phase. But, as the UNAMA case shows, political missions are often constrained by complex mandates.

SECURITY ISSUES

Political and procedural issues affect all political missions. But in cases where political missions deploy to insecure environments, it is necessary to link political strategy to security strategy. The UN Department of Political Affairs (DPA) underlines that primary responsibility for a mission's safety lies with a host government. But this may be hard to guarantee where there is instability and a government is weak. UN missions also rely on the Department of Safety and Security (DSS) to assess the risks they face and work out how to protect mission personnel, vehicles and facilities. DPA, DSS and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) have taken steps to improve security planning and crisis response through better risk analysis, forming a new inter-departmental crisis response mechanism this year.

As a new report by DPA highlights, political missions can take numerous tactical steps to maximize security (see Box 1). In high risk environments missions can also take strategic decisions to reduce risks:

- While essential personnel deploy into a conflict-affected country, a mission can maintain a secondary base elsewhere. UNPOS continues to be supported from Nairobi, and the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq has a rear base in Jordan. In some cases, a small number of in-country personnel can report back to a mission leadership based elsewhere. This is the model the OSCE has used for the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute: while officials are based in Armenia and Azerbaijan, the head of mission operates from Tbilisi, Georgia. In the Syrian case, the UN has proposed to set up a small liaison office in Damascus to back up the special envoy's main team based outside the country.
- A mission may rely on international military forces for security, such as the AU peacekeeping force in Somalia or NATO in Afghanistan. This can be problematic, however. A military force may have multiple priorities – including active campaigns – that rank higher than ensuring a political mission's freedom of movement at all times. Associating with the military force may reduce the mission's perceived political autonomy.

And when the military leave, as will be the case in Afghanistan in 2014, a political mission can be left behind without effective security.

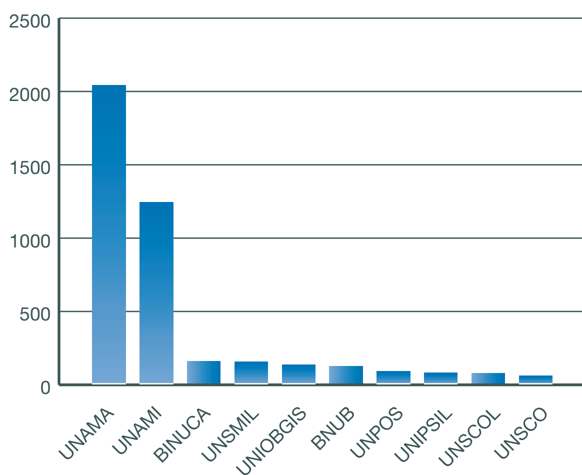
- Political missions can be protected by stand-alone international military or security forces. The UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) is guarded by a contingent of Fijian troops. The Security Council has asked the AU to provide a dedicated guard unit for UN staff in Somalia, and plans were made for military protection for a UN civilian deployment to Libya in a worst-case scenario. In Afghanistan, UNAMA is protected by a complement of gurkhas, who have used force on a series of occasions to protect UN bases and personnel. There are, however, concerns about using security contractors to guard UN missions elsewhere.

Any security mechanism constrains a mission's ability to interact with politicians and the parties to a conflict. However, this is less risky than deployment models that spread international personnel thinly – and potentially vulnerably - across a conflict-affected country. The 2011 attack on the UNAMA office in Mazar-i-Sharif demonstrated the risks inherent in maintaining a network of offices in an unstable country. UNAMA is now cutting back its network of provincial offices, although for budgetary reasons.

Just as it is typically wise for a political mission in a volatile country to follow a relatively narrow mandate, it is also advisable to keep the number of staff deployed low to reduce overall risks. This may mean limiting total staff dealing with issues outside the core politics of a mission's mandate, although any mission needs a sufficient complement of support staff to operate. Currently, of the UN's three missions highlighted in this essay, UNAMA, UNPOS and UNSMIL, all have widely varying numbers of substantive staff in comparison to support personnel (refer to the table on page 20 for more information).[1]

Moreover, if a mission lacks "eyes and ears" on the ground it may struggle to make good political judgments. In some cases, it may be important for a mission's political profile to have an office in a sensitive area. UNAMI, for example, maintains a presence in the contested northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk while UNSMIL set up an office in the anti-Gaddafi center Benghazi to balance its base in Tripoli.

Top 10 Political Missions by Size: 31 July 2012*



*Figures reflect actual, not authorized staff.

DPA Guidance on Security Aspects of SPM Deployment:

- The primary responsibility for the security and protection of UN personnel rests with the host authorities, but the UN Department of Safety and Security (DSS) is responsible for operational support and oversight of the security management system. DPA staff should communicate closely and meet regularly with DSS, providing it with information about the nature and profile of the mission so that it can implement sufficient security measures for the mission and the UNCT as a whole.
- DSS must assess the potential security risk to staff and plan risk mitigation measures accordingly. Its assessment determines the number of security staff required and the location of the Mission Headquarters and field offices.
- In choosing security personnel, the mission may hire local staff, use host country police, contract local companies, or use Secretariat security officers.
- Close protection for the Head of Mission should always be included in the initial budget, even if it may ultimately not be necessary.
- In the start-up phase, mission managers should ensure that the security section addresses the immediate security of mission staff, and they must put a mission evacuation plan in place as early as possible.
- DPA staff must assist DSS in consulting with the UNCT on the ground and sensitizing the UNCT before the arrival of the mission.

POLICY ISSUES

This brief overview has highlighted that political missions are able to operate in politically volatile and hazardous environments, but that they *(i)* require flexible and focused mandates and *(ii)* potentially need special basing arrangements and security arrangements if they are to be able to achieve their goals. The cases we have cited here show the need for continued efforts to meet these requirements. In security terms, there is a need for deeper analysis of the use of stand-alone security forces in protecting political missions in dangerous environments. Would it, for example, be possible for some UN member states to train contingents specifically for this security role, which differs from standard peacekeeping?

Secondly, the UNSMIL case offers useful precedents for the Security Council when debating and mandating other civilian deployments to dangerous places. The Council's *de facto* adoption of a phased approach to developing UNSMIL's mandate – and its acceptance that core elements of that mandate needed to be worked out through in-country talks – is arguably a good model for future missions. Council members should review and summarize the lessons arising from this episode (some of those countries that sat in the Council in 2011-2012 and are now leaving it could lead a study of this type.)

A third priority is to ensure that financial and bureaucratic issues do not complicate already risky deployments. As we have noted, Ban Ki-moon highlighted in a 2011 report to the General Assembly that new political missions do not have access to start-up funds and strategic deployments stocks to speed up their initial operations. Member states postponed making any decisions on this last year, primarily because member states could not agree on Ban's suggestion that political missions should be funded through a new dedicated budget, similar to the peacekeeping budget. This proposal remains contentious, but the General Assembly should at least approve reforms to the start-up mechanisms for new missions, which would involve smaller changes and have a clear impact on operational efficiency.

Whatever steps the UN takes to improve security, mandates and resources, deploying political missions to countries that are still experiencing (or could relapse into) severe violence will always be dangerous. A single attack similar to that in Baghdad in 2003, which killed over 20 UN personnel, could not only destroy a mission but also put a halt to similar deployments elsewhere. If there is a trend towards utilizing political missions in dangerous settings, the political and operational mechanisms supporting these missions have to be reinforced.

NOTES

1 The breakdown of substantive and support staff in each of these missions is as follows: UNAMA (244 substantive staff and 1,708 support staff); UNPOS (38 substantive staff and 51 support staff); UNSMIL (59 substantive staff and 98 support staff). "Substantive" occupational groups are defined as civil affairs, economic affairs, electoral affairs, human rights, humanitarian affairs, legal affairs, political affairs, public administration, rule of law and social sciences. "Support" staff includes personnel in all other occupational categories.