

Opinion

U.N. Is The Logical Safety Net

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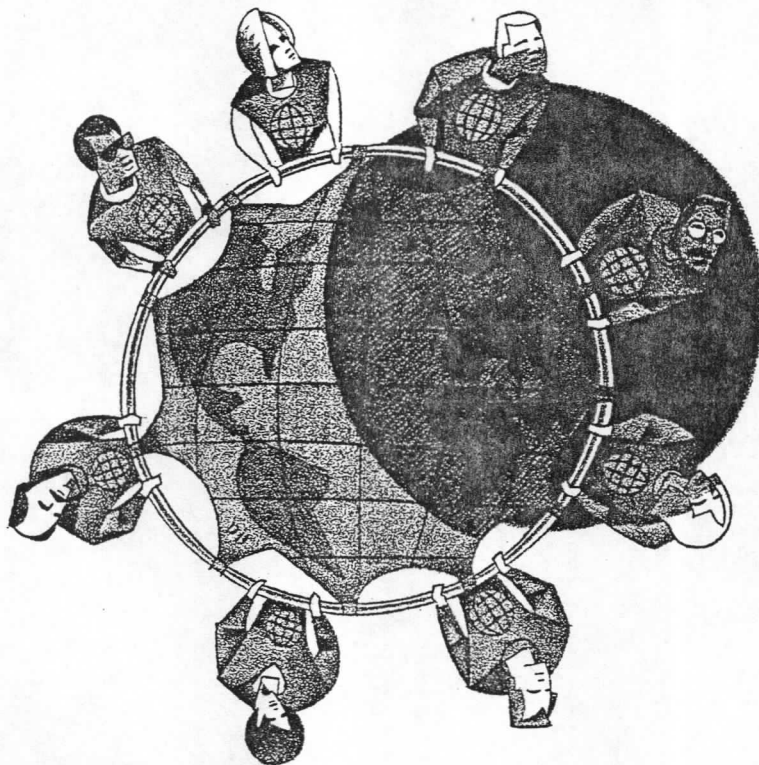
PHNOM PENH, Cambodia — The introductory letter to new American United Nations Military observers assigned to the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia starts like this: "Welcome to the largest peace keeping mission in the history of mankind. Never before have so many people, military and civilian, from around the globe, deployed in support of such an enormous undertaking as the attempt to establish peace in Cambodia. You are now making history."

And so they are. These individuals are also discovering an essential truth — that there is little peaceful about peacekeeping. Recently in Cambodia, there have been several separate incidents in which observers have been "detained" by Khmer Rouge soldiers. These "detainments" have been called independent decisions on the part of the local leaders by senior officials in Phnom Penh. Local leaders claim the decision is made at higher levels. The truth is probably somewhere in between. Despite the potential danger, every American that is here is a volunteer who has agreed to forgo the comforts of home and hearth to be a part of this seminal world event in the cause of peace.

More than 15,000 troops from 32 countries are engaged in this momentous attempt. Eleven countries supply lightly armed battalions which operate in each of the provinces of Cambodia. The entire contribution of the United States to the mission comes in the form of 47 of the 485 observers currently deployed in Cambodia.

The most important difference from conventional military operations is the fact that these observers operate unarmed. In what the Department of Defense recognizes officially as a combat zone. The practice of using unarmed observers might appear foolish, especially in a country where an AK-47 "assault" rifle can sell in the market place for as little as 50 U.S. dollars, and where State of Cambodia and Khmer Rouge forces regularly engage in artillery duels — but it is a technique of peacekeeping that has proven itself over the last three decades in tumultuous regions like the Middle East, and is proving itself so far in Cambodia.

The settlement of disputes between former or current warring parties requires a non-threatening third-party intermediary. An unarmed observer is immediately recognized as someone whose sole mission is



The United States needs to train its would-be observers to understand that keeping the peace is a different mission from enforcing a cease-fire.

one of peace. The unarmed observer, it is hoped, threatens no one. The perception of neutrality is the observer's best security.

Prominent in their white United Nations vehicles and helicopters, and wearing their trademark blue berets, observers range throughout the country assigned to tiny, isolated outposts in two- to five-man multinational teams. Living conditions are sometimes primitive. Their primary mission is the investigation and impartial, accurate reporting of incidents like cease-

fire violations.

Accurate reporting is essential to the peace process. It ensures that at least one set of eyes views an incident objectively. This objectivity is often key to the later settlement of sometimes extraordinarily contentious issues.

Aside from their primary mission of reporting, it is also these teams that are called upon to negotiate with provincial factional leaders for the security of United Nations electoral teams. These electoral teams are assigned to penetrate even the most remote villages in order to educate and register the estimated 5 million eligible voters in Cambodia. The overwhelming success of this operation, in which more than 99 percent of eligible voters have been registered in certain provinces, testifies to the importance of both the electoral team and the unarmed observer. Moreover, it demonstrates that Cambodian confidence in the democratic electoral process has grown.

Observers may also be called upon to monitor checkpoints with Vietnam, Thailand and Laos; patrol the Mekong River and Cambodian coastline; assist United Nations police conducting investigations of crimes committed against the local populace; advise United Nations human rights, refugee and non-government associated charitable organizations concerning safe travel (Cambodia is perhaps the most heavily land-mined country in the world); and much more. An observer's daily activities, depending upon the location of his outpost, can be unusually diverse.

The American military, now attempting to define new roles beyond the Cold War's policy of deterrence, has not yet embraced peacekeeping as a proper doctrinal mission. Because of this, current observers receive little training to prepare them for their duties. Because of the unusual diversity of functions and potentially hazardous situations that these men are exposed to, the United Nations generally selects observers from the company commander to senior field grades. Mature judgment is considered the most valuable asset.

Observers operate in an uncertain political-diplomatic environment where expedient solutions, common in a purely military context to which the officers are accustomed, are often anathema. Peacekeeping problems are frequently plagued by ambiguity. Clear-cut solutions are difficult to come by. Observers literally have to live by their wits. They can't shoot their way out of difficulties — they have to think their way out.

If the United States wants to remain a key force in peacekeeping missions throughout the world, this is the direction in which it must look. The American observers that are here believe their mission is an important one. Since the end of World War II, the American military has been told by its elected civilian leadership that its primary mission was the maintenance of peace through deterrence against the old Soviet Threat. Actively engaging in world peacekeeping activities under the auspices of the United Nations seems a logical next step.

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