

Opinion

Commentary

U.N. missions are worth doing if done right

The problems associated with peacekeeping operations are many and varied. To name just a few: There is little agreement in the international community how these operations should be conducted or when; U.N. peacekeeping is habitually short of funding; command and control relationships are seldom clearly spelled out; U.N. mandates for peacekeeping are often ambiguous; UN administrative and logistical bureaucracies supporting peacekeeping are notoriously bloated and inefficient; multinational military forces have only rarely worked with one another; and finally, perhaps most importantly, there has been little rigorous analytical thought applied to the entire process.

All of these unsolved problems place peacekeeping soldiers' lives unnecessarily at risk while sometimes accomplishing little. If the United States is going to place American soldiers under temporary U.N. operational control — a bad idea currently — these difficulties and more must be corrected first.

The United States should support international peacekeeping efforts. American officers have served as unarmed military observers for decades throughout the Cold War. But as a plethora of international affairs pundits are fond of telling us these days, times have changed. Unfortunately, peacekeeping operations have not caught up with the new realities. American soldiers now find themselves com-

mitted, as units as well as individuals, to any number of potential hot spots around the globe even as military budgets are being slashed.

The new world order is a violent one. Ethnic, nationalist and religious conflicts abound. Events in Cambodia, Somalia, Angola, Morocco, and Bosnia bear out this assertion. As the leader of what used to be known as the Free World, the United States should actively engage in peacekeeping. How we engage is largely up to us. For the sake of future American soldiers who will be placed in harm's way, let's get it right.

It is important to recognize that there is nothing peaceful about peacekeeping. Soldiers are going to die and be wounded in the service of peace. Although unfortunate, these are the facts that must be accepted by any nation that supports these noble but often dangerous missions.

Many American professional soldiers are dead set against serving under U.N. operational control. Their reasoning is absolutely sound. The American military culture is accustomed to having clear-cut political objectives upon which to build equally clear-cut military objectives. Understanding the objective is a principle of war and without question the most important. This was the single most crucial lesson learned from America's debacle in Vietnam. Peacekeeping is often characterized by ambiguity.

The U.N. as an organization is adamant about appearing politically correct. This means that on all peacekeeping missions, staffs will have representative officers from contributing nations. These officers vary widely in terms of training and capability. Many will be linguistically incompetent in whatever languages are chosen as mission languages.

The U.N. mission in Cambodia had two official languages: English and French. Many participating nations spoke neither language. Rapid communications are essential to military operations, and lives are placed at risk when peacekeeping soldiers cannot talk to one another.

American soldiers, while under U.S. command and control, never have to wonder who is in charge or where their loyalties lie — not so within U.N. peacekeeping. The commanders of multinational units under U.N. operational control know that their first loyalty lies with their nation-

al governments. It is not uncommon for these commanders to dissemble or ignore an order given by a U.N. commander that they believe will not be approved by the leaders of the country that deployed them there. Military operations cannot be run like this. Again, too many lives are at risk.

Nations that contribute units — usually battalions — to peacekeeping operations often have vastly different military cultures. Some armies are excellent; some are predominantly engaged in police functions at home; others maintain border posts; a few are instruments of repression. It was ironic that some of the soldiers assigned to Cambodia as peacekeepers had the opportunity, for the first time, to view the conduct of a free and fair election.

American soldiers' lives should not be placed at additional risk by having potential incompetents, or worse, guarding their flanks. The U.N. currently has no minimum standard for military competence, but simply accepts whatever units and soldiers donor nations offer. This situation cannot be permitted to continue.

Before American soldiers are placed under U.N. operational control, a number of changes should be made. These changes include the requirement to expand the currently impotent military staff assigned to U.N. headquarters in New York. Establish a U.N. Peacekeeping Command to provide the necessary command and control of peacekeeping forces worldwide. Insure that the peacekeeping command has its own budget and receives necessary financial support. Create a U.N. peacekeeping command and staff school to train officers of member nations in the realities of peacekeeping roles and missions.

It is clear that the United States should support U.N. peacekeeping. Our moral obligation is absolute. But before we place American soldiers under U.N. operational control, we owe it to our citizens in uniform to husband their lives by insuring they receive competent leadership and training, necessary funding and adequate support.

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