



CENTRO STUDI  
INTERNAZIONALI

# The blue helmets and the challenge of asymmetric conflicts

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FEBRUARY 2018



Since its foundation in 1948, the United Nations (UN) contributes to guaranteeing peace in the world through numerous activities, among which peacekeeping operations (PKO) have always obtained particular relevance. The blue helmets intervene, in the framework of chapter six of the UN Charter, in countries that have recently experienced a conflict, with the aim of starting a process of stabilization. These operations have often encountered difficulties of various kind, as environments not much in favour of an intervention of an international type or the impossibility of efficaciously operating given the resources available. In the worse cases, the security operators have suffered acts of violence, in particular the years between 1992 and 1996 have been among the bloodiest ones, counting about 300 victims among the military personnel of the UN. If the following developments have registered a more positive trend, the data relative to the last four years (2013-2017) reveals a worrisome peak in the number of victims among the blue helmets: about 175. As a consequence, the leadership of the glass building has decided to investigate more deeply into which could be the causes of the recent increase and has charged retired General of the Brazilian Army Carlos Alberto dos Santos Cruz with writing a report for studying the case. The text, published in December 2017, is the result of numerous visits to UN missions in Mali, in the Central

African Republic, in Congo, and in South Sudan, where information was collected and interviews were conducted. It is important to note that the operations have not been chosen by chance, but rather they are the ones that have registered the highest number of victims in the last years. The report highlights the gaps present in some peacekeeping missions and suggests recommendations aimed at increasing the security of UN operators.

First of all, the document begins with the following assessment: the environments in which the current peacekeeping operations take place are characterised by the presence of terrorists, organized crime and armed groups. The latter do not generally refer to a state entity and pose an asymmetric threat. As a consequence, the UN flag does not offer protection anymore from eventual violent acts to which the blue helmets can be exposed. In the light of such reality, countries contributing with men and women to UN missions have to adapt and take the necessary measures; while, on its side, the United Nations has to shape its peacekeeping operations according to the characteristics of the region and the actors involved. On the basis of these considerations, Cruz and his team selected four macro-areas in which it is necessary to intervene with the end of increasing the security level of peacekeeping operations:

changing mind-set; improving capacity; achieving a threat-oriented mission footprint; and enhancing accountability.

The starting point Cruz identified is the realisation of the leadership and the men and women involved in PKO that the UN represents a target. The following step that needs to be taken consists in the States participating in UN missions and all levels of governance of the UN accepting the right of self-defence and, therefore, the use of force in case of threat. However, the text does not solely suggest to react in case of attack to a convoy or a UN base, for instance, but it proposes to use force also as a preventive mean. This latter aspect would require a specific reference in the mandate of the operation, hence the consent of the Security Council. The report has also revealed that many of the blue helmets are not properly trained and equipped for facing an asymmetric threat as the one that characterises the environments of the current PKO. For example, many operations are not equipped with vehicles with anti-mine protection, specific weapons and appropriate ammunitions; moreover, many soldiers lack basic operative skills. Not by chance, in the last years the attacks against blue helmets targeted mobile convoys, convoys escorts, and patrols, and saw the use of small arms, improvised explosive

devices (IED) and mines. Hence, the report suggests a pre-deployment training specific to each environment in which the PKO will take place, an update of the latter during the mission, and the supply of appropriate equipment. In addition, with the end of increasing the situational awareness and prevent eventual attacks, it is necessary to create a network of local informers for each peace mission. Human intelligence, in fact, in many operational environments is much more effective than advanced technologies for collecting information.

Once the essentially operative difficulties of PKO have been identified, the Cruz report goes to the roots of the matter and explores the decision-making process of the UN leadership. Namely, in the case in which troops about to join the blue helmets do not meet the standards required for operating in peace missions in hostile environments, the United Nations should abstain from deploying them. Following the same principle, security operators who have demonstrated on the field not to be properly prepared for the PKO in which they are deployed, should be repatriated. This, with the aim of avoiding them to represent a danger for themselves and the remaining troops. To sum up, the United Nations should, first of all, define the requirements for current and future blue helmets in terms

of mind-set, training and equipment. Secondly, the leadership of the glass building should be held accountable for deciding whether to deploy or not some troops and, therefore, using the terminology adopted by the report, exercise the authority of saying “yes or no”. Member States, on their side, should guarantee to men and women about to join a peace mission the operative capacities needed for facing the threats that can characterise the environment of the PKO. Commandants of peacekeeping operations, instead, should conduct exercises at least once a month, with the aim of training the blue helmets to respond, for example, in case of an ambush. It is evident, therefore, that choices concerning the deployment of troops should not be driven by political motives, but rather by a demonstrated professional competence in high risk environments.

The assessments made in the pages of the report spot on a issue that has taken shape in the last 25 years and has led to the configuration of nowadays reality: the blue helmets are increasingly less prepared for facing the risks that surround a PKO and for guaranteeing security to themselves and to those who operate under the flag of the organization. In order to elaborate this topic, it is necessary to examine the changes that have taken place inside the ranks of UN troops in the years. Since the beginning of

the '90s, western powers such as the United States, France, the United Kingdom and Italy contributed with men and women to peacekeeping operations. However, following the numerous losses suffered during missions led by the UN, many countries have decided to decrease their contribution. At this regard, it is a prime example the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in which about 160 military personnel lost their lives. For France this represented the bloodiest mission with 48 victims among French Armed Forces. Accomplish the complicated chain of command that characterizes UN missions, western countries with more prepared and equipped Armed Forces have given way to the ranks of blue helmets to contingents from developing countries. According to the data, if in 1993 France contributed to PKO with more than 6.000 men and women, Italy with about 3.400, the United Kingdom and the United States each with 2.500-2.700; the numbers for 2017 are definitely lower: 800 coming from Paris, about 1.000 from Rome, less than 700 from London and around fifty from Washington. Although it is necessary to look at these numbers keeping in mind that many factors, among which the diverse operative needs, have contributed shaping them in the years, the sharp decline is evident. In order to compensate such reduction other countries have entered the

game, in particular Ethiopia, Bangladesh and India have become the top three contributors on the global scale with respectively 8.387, 7.240 and 6.700 men and women, followed by Rwanda with about 6.500. Despite the numerical rebalancing, the operative capacity of the Armed Forces of these countries presents some gaps; not only a proper training is not guaranteed, but also the necessary resources for handling a peacekeeping mission in dangerous environments are not provided. Further complicating the picture is the charge of human rights violations that has been addressed to some contingents, especially during the operations in the African continent and in Haiti.

To conclude, the composition of the troops of the current PKO, combined with a difficulty of the United Nations to take military decisions on the field in a quick and effective manner, has led to a dramatic increase in the number of victims during peace missions. Therefore, in addition to the recommendations suggested by the Cruz report, the United Nations, with the end of attracting contributes from countries militarily more prepared, should work on improving its chain of command and control in the area of PKO. Indeed, such a chain does not stand out for velocity and simplicity, as the General

Fabrizio Castagnetti, former Chief of Staff of the Italian Army, underlined in the past.