The Rationale for an Independent UN Military Culture

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Since the UN's founding, over 1 million peacekeepers have been deployed in more than seventy operations, eleven of which are ongoing. While these forces operate under the UN banner, they do not constitute a United Nations military. Peacekeepers and police units are seconded to missions ad hoc by UN member states and remain employed by their respective national governments for the duration of their deployment. Over the years, as peace operations have become more frequent and complex, the UN has attempted to standardize operational procedures and rules of engagement, clarify the chain of command, and assert its operational authority. However, much remains in the hands of the member states, from training, pay scales, uniforms, rotation timelines, and a degree of sovereignty over aspects like force structure, promotion, and discipline. Additionally, many peacekeeper contributing countries impose limitations—known as national caveats—on how their troops are used by UN commanders.[1]

The fact that many elements remain under national control, especially training, means that units come to UN missions with their own military cultures in tow. The values, beliefs, and perceptions to which they have already been socialized, as well as the domestic political structures in which their respective military cultures are embedded, play a critical role in how they interpret and act on the broadly defined UN peacekeeping mandates.[2] Diversity can be beneficial, but because integration is low and mandates leave room for interpretation, UN peace operations often suffer from a range of internal issues. These include communication and coordination problems, low levels of cohesion, inconsistencies in the perceived purpose of the mission, divergent adherence to orders or respect for the institutional chain of command, and variations in use of force. These issues compound the external challenges present in the field and hinder mission implementation.

Drawing on literature at the nexus of international relations, psychology, peace studies, and military sociology, this paper demonstrates how the UN's cohesion and inconsistency issues stem from differences in deeply ingrained domestic military cultures, which inform decision-making from the highest levels to individual soldiers. This paper argues that for peace operations to reach their full potential, the UN must have its *own* military culture. Policy options for fostering an independent UN military culture are then considered, up to and including the creation of a UN standing army with troops recruited, commanded, and trained by the UN and loyal to the institution itself.

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[1] "UN Peacekeeping is Hamstrung by National Rules for Its Troops," *The Economist*, March 21, 2021.

[2] Chiara Ruffa, *Military Cultures in Peace and Stability Operations: Afghanistan and Lebanon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018): 4.

UN Peacekeeping: Structure, Tasks, & Use of Force

Each UN peace operation is authorized by a UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution, which sets the mission mandate, size, and tasks to perform. The budget and resources are approved by the UN General Assembly and member states voluntarily contribute military and police personnel.[3] UNSC resolutions are drafted via an intensely political process, shaped by inherent member state eagerness to cooperate but reluctance to overcommit. Politicians from contributing states have an incentive to downplay the risks and full scale of operational needs to their home constituencies, often leading to suboptimal mandates, insufficient resource allocations, or both—a phenomenon known as "organizational hypocrisy."[4]

Military forces seconded to the UN are deployed with the consent of the main parties to the conflict and are expected to remain impartial and avoid use of force, except in self-defense or defense of the mandate.[5] UN peacekeepers are under the operational authority of the UNSC. However, other actors, like the UN Secretary-General, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG), the force commander, UN Secretariat officials, and national contingents headed by contingent commanders play important roles in managing the operation and interpreting UN guidelines on the use of force. This is important because mandates, especially pertaining to use of force, are often vague. For example, mandates for UNPROFOR in Bosnia and UNOSOM II in Somalia called for "all measures necessary" and "all necessary means," respectively.[6] In both missions, SRSGs, force commanders, and often, individual units decided how, when, and how much force was 'necessary' to respond to a given situation. Section V will further analyze how these dynamics played out in Somalia.

While the primary tasks of UN peacekeepers are monitoring, supervising, and verifying compliance with ceasefires and withdrawals, today's forces are charged with an array of activities that extend far beyond keeping the peace. These activities include supporting economic development and institutional transformation, facilitating political processes, protecting civilians, overseeing disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs, and assisting in humanitarian aid provision. As peace operations have become more complex, organizational hypocrisy has become more problematic. By effectively ensuring missions are understaffed, underfunded, and undersupplied from the start, operations are increasingly prone to variable interpretation, incoherence, and operational micromanagement by troop-contributing states.

In Theory and Practice

To understand why domestic military culture guides field behavior, it is important to understand fundamentals of psychology. Our choices and actions are heavily influenced by context and framing, which is underpinned by cultural values and self-perception. This is especially true in crisis scenarios where tensions or threat-perceptions are high and there is pressure to make decisions quickly. Rational calculations frequently give way to reactionary or emotionally charged responses, calibrated based on learned norms, identities, and the desire to

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[3] "Technical Updates to the COE Manual," UN Department of Operational Support (2023): 3.
[4] Wolfgang Seibel et al., "Coordination, Learning, and Leadership: Challenges of Peace Operations," in *The Management of UN Peacekeeping: Coordination, Learning, and Leadership in Peace Operations* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2017): 11-35.
[5] In rare cases where chronic volatility hamstrings peace efforts, the UNSC has authorized offensive use of force by peacekeeping units. For example, in 2013 the UNSC authorized the deployment of the UN Force Intervention Brigade, a specialized formation of MONUSCO, to conduct targeted offensive operations, with or without the Congolese national army, against armed groups jeopardizing peace efforts in the eastern DRC.
[6] Trevor Findlay, *The Use of Force in UN Peace Operations* (Stockholm: SIPRI, 2002): 7-8.

maximize or minimize emotions.[7] The result is path dependency, the tendency to continue down a path one is already on, using methods and mental shortcuts one already knows.[8]

For UN peace operations, path dependency and dogmatism, the tendency to fit new information into existing opinions, are obstacles to cohesion and standardization. As Mai, Klimecki, and Döring point out, UN personnel surveyed in Liberia not only tried to apply old solutions to new problems but were resistant to learning new knowledge and adapting behavior accordingly.[9] This suggests that creating an independent UN military culture necessitates intensive and integrated training.

Unlike civilian peacekeepers, who receive integrated pre-deployment training, troop-contributing states are expected to provide certification that their forces have sufficiently completed UN standardized training prior to deployment, including operation basic skills, conduct and discipline, and human rights screening. Yet, integrated training almost always occurs in-mission.[10] UN guidance specifies that training should ensure that personnel are interoperable with other UN forces and entities once deployed, such as language skills and familiarization with the use of interpreters. However, such training is not conducted alongside foreign units and focus remains on combat tasks and 'hard skills.'[11] In the absence of collective pre-deployment training exercises and time dedicated to cross-cultural bonding or competency-building activities, national military cultures and doctrines prevail in the field. Thus, it is difficult to generate a single, strong organizational identity.[12]

Scholars in this field generally recognize culture as an important part of cohesion and an essential element of functional militaries. Siebold argues that highly functional militaries maximize cohesion along two lines. First is primary group bonding, which includes horizontal (peer-to-peer) bonding based on the cultivation of social comradeship and shared commitment to a common goal, and vertical (leader-follower) bonding based on demonstrated competence, reliability, and loyalty. Second is secondary group bonding, which refers to the trust personnel have in their organization or institution.[13] Cohesion is higher when patriotism is strong, leadership is perceived as competent, and soldiers trust one another. Unlike Siebold, King argues that culture and cohesion do not emerge as byproducts of bonding, but are actively cultivated through formal training rituals, rites of passage, collective movements, symbols, practices (like assigning nicknames), and simple orders that leave no room for interpretation.[14] A shared military culture and identity builds cohesion and encourages obedience, which in turn, may enhance performance by promoting cooperative and coordinated behavior.

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[7] Robin Markwica, "Introduction," in *Emotional Choices: How the Logic of Affect shapes Coercive Diplomacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018): 1-35.
[8] Ted Hopf, "The Logic of Habit in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations* 16, no. 4 (2010): 539-561.
[9] Melanie Mai, Rüdiger Klimecki, and Sebastian Döring, "Learning and Identity in the Field," in *The Management of UN Peacekeeping: Coordination, Learning & Leadership in Peace Operations* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2017): 204.
[10] "Training," Conduct in UN Field Missions, United Nations.
[11] "United Nations Infantry Battalion Manual (UNIBAM), second edition" UN Department of Peace Operations, January 2020, 78-81.
[12] Mai et al., "Learning and Identity in the Field," 204.
[13] Guy L. Siebold, "The Essence of Military Group Cohesion," *Armed Forces & Society* 33, no. 2 (2007): 286-295.
[14] Anthony King, "The Word of Command: Communication and Cohesion in the Military," *Armed Forces & Society* 32, no. 4 (2006): 493-512.

Empirical Example: UNOSOM II

According to Bell, soldiers and commanders face "the combatant's trilemma," whereby they must balance civilian protection against other imperatives like force protection and obtaining and maintaining a military advantage.[15] The combatant's trilemma should be less relevant in peacekeeping missions, since impartiality is paramount and there is no military advantage to gain. However, in Somalia, peacekeepers found themselves caught in the crossfire and forced to choose which side of the triangle to prioritize. The choice units made reflected the highly fragmented military cultures of the participating nations.

From the beginning, UNOSOM II, which took over from the US-led, UN-sanctioned Unified Task Force (UNITAF) in March 1993, was plagued by a hostile operating environment and an overly ambitious mandate. Somalia's clan warfare and high levels of gun ownership made it dangerous for peacekeepers, whose presence was not universally accepted as legitimate. The security situation exacerbated organizational dysfunction and exposed major weaknesses in UN command and control. The major issue was the wildly inconsistent Rules of Engagement (ROE) adopted by the various contingents.

On one end of the spectrum were the Canadians, whose preoccupation with force protection motivated them to adopt aggressive ROE. The US contingent, guided by the doctrinal preferences of then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Colin Powell, insisted on a clear, finite mission, the use of overwhelming, efficient force, and ROE with room to maneuver.[16] Unlike other national contingents, US support forces remained separate from the UN command and control structure. Per Findlay, this was a big mistake: "By keeping the QRF and Rangers under its own command, the USA was able to unilaterally militarize the operation and propel the UN towards [its main political goal]."[17]

On the other end of the spectrum was the Italian contingent, the former colonial power in Somalia whose military culture is based on being 'good humanitarian soldiers.'[18] At odds with US and Canadian methods, Italian commander General Loi pushed for a softer, negotiated approach and insisted on clearing instructions with Rome. The French contingent and others followed Italy's lead, defecting from the UN chain of command and rendering UN operational control all but meaningless. Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali accused the Italians of pursuing 'their own agenda at the expense of the UN effort.'[19]

Like the Italians, the Indian, Pakistani, and Saudi contingents favored a gentler approach and ran UN commands up the domestic flagpole before acting. While their timidity had more to do with technical deficiencies and battlefield inexperience than self-perceptions as good Samaritans, these contingents (especially the Pakistanis) were hamstrung by excessively restrictive ROE.[20] Unable to justifiably deploy force, and unwilling to work together (Indian and Pakistani troops refused to serve under each other's control), they were a drag on mission resources, and often had to rely on stronger partners for support or coverage.

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[15] Andrew Bell, "Combatant Socialization and Norms of Restraint: Examining Officer Training at US Military Academy and ROTC," *Journal of Peace Research* 59, no. 2 (2022): 180-196.
[16] Colin Powell, *My American Journey* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995).
[17] Findlay, *The Use of Force in UN Peace Operations*, 213.
[18] Ruffa, *Military Cultures in Peace and Stability Operations*, 9.
[19] Findlay, *The Use of Force in UN Peace Operations*, 214.
[20] Findlay, *The Use of Force in UN Peace Operations*, 213.

Policy Recommendations to Foster a UN Military Culture

1. Boost standardization, while accounting for differences in military culture

The UN should work toward greater cohesion by building on ongoing comprehensive standardization efforts, such as the 2017 Santos Cruz report on improving the security of UN peacekeepers.[21] Such efforts could include a more robust training program with a focus on combating implicit bias and conducting a study on the various value systems and perceptions underpinning the military cultures of its peacekeeping leadership and major troop-contributing nations. While funding for UN peacekeeping comes mostly from wealthier members (US, China, Japan, and EU states), uniformed troops are overwhelmingly contributed by developing states (Bangladesh, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Nepal, and India). Therefore, field decision-making in peace operations is more likely to reflect the military culture, doctrine, and political considerations of Bangladesh or Rwanda than of Germany or Japan. A thorough understanding of these cultures may help predict peacekeeping behavior and ensure the force composition is best suited to the mandate of the mission.

2. Institutionalization of the SRSG and force commander roles

For each mission, the Secretary-General appoints a head of mission, SRSG, to lead the civilian component and a force commander to lead the military component. The SRSG may come from within the UN system or from a member state. The force commander is chosen from the military hierarchy of a member state, typically one contributing troops to the operation.[22] The SRSG and force commander have a high degree of operational autonomy. For these reasons, the SRSG and force commander roles should be institutionalized. SRSGs should come from within the UN system or have spent their careers in multilateral organizations. Force commanders should be thoroughly vetted and, ideally, would have spent their careers in peacekeeping or in coalition settings.

3. Establishment of a Rapid Reaction Force (RRF)

The UN has considered creating a "rapid reaction force" since its failure to prevent genocide in Rwanda in the mid-1990s. As envisioned by Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali, an RRF would have many of the same characteristics as an autonomous UN force—training (including joint exercises), equipment, and procedures.[23] However, personnel would be stationed in their home countries and national governments would retain sovereignty over their troops. Troops participating in an RRF would be regularly exposed to the standards and symbols of the UN and an RRF would require robust institutional management to ensure uniform compliance. As such, an RRF would inevitably generate elements of military culture, with a degree of loyalty to the UN itself. However, national considerations remain present as troops selected for an RRF would likely be experienced and already socialized by their domestic militaries. Additionally, while joint operations and common standards are helpful, they are no substitute for a fully integrated force.

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[21] Alexandra Novosseloff, "Improving the Military Effectiveness and Proficiency of Peacekeeping Operations: A New Goal for A4P?" International Forum for the Challenges of Peace Operations, February 2019.
[22] Findlay, *The Use of Force in UN Peace Operations*, 7-8.
[23] Nina M. Serafino, *A U.N. Rapid Reaction Force? A Discussion of the Issues and Considerations for U.S. Policymakers* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, 1995).

4. Creation of a permanent, autonomous UN force

To achieve a UN military culture and avoid fragmentation along national lines, the UN would need a permanent and autonomous force. A UN standing army would require a paradigm shift: patriotism toward the nation would be replaced by loyalty to the UN as an institution and the principles on which it stands. The UN would need training facilities, independent of national armed forces, that are coordinated by UN personnel and paid for with institutional resources. The UN would then need to replicate states behavior to generate military cohesion and culture, as described by King and Siebold.

Conclusion

Existing arguments for the creation of an autonomous UN force often focus on the material and measurable benefits. By bypassing the cumbersome political process for authorizing and mustering troops for peace operations, an autonomous force could get involved earlier, curb spillover conflict, prevent excess bloodshed, and, ultimately, improve global security. As this paper has demonstrated, an autonomous force would also develop a shared culture over time, mitigating the inconsistencies and incoherence that have categorized many peacekeeping missions of the past. However, this UN autonomous force has failed to materialize due to outstanding questions about responsibility for funding, staffing, direction, and accountability, as well as concerns of transforming the UN from a forum of states to a state-like actor itself.