



## **ENHANCING THE RAPID REACTION CAPABILITY OF THE UNITED NATIONS: THE OPTIONS**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Preventing violent conflict and responding quickly and effectively to crises are the most important tasks facing the United Nations (UN) in its efforts to maintain international peace and security. In relation to the latter, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan indicates that the first few weeks following a ceasefire or peace accord are critical for consolidating the peace and establishing the overall credibility of the mission. Yet, in every major UN peace operation launched between 1991 and 1999, an interval of between three and six months separated the adoption of a UN Security Council resolution authorising a mission and the point at which the force actually deployed. After the Security Council passed Resolution 918, which increased the UN's strength in Rwanda to 5,500 troops, nearly six months elapsed before the force was eventually mustered, by which point approximately 500,000 Rwandan civilians had been slaughtered.<sup>1</sup>

Looking to accelerate the UN's response to humanitarian emergencies and conflict, reformers have in recent years put forward a range of proposals. Although these vary greatly in the detail of their recommendations, two broad approaches can be identified. The first centres on the creation of a UN standing army, a permanent international force composed of individuals recruited, trained and deployed directly by the UN. The second – and at present more politically acceptable – group of options focuses instead upon strengthening standby arrangements, in which governments commit themselves to earmark *ad hoc* national military units for service in UN peace operations. These proposals are intended for a spectrum of scenarios, ranging from crisis management and humanitarian intervention to traditional and complex peacekeeping.

### **STANDING FORCES**

Many observers of the UN believe that the optimal way of improving its rapid reaction capacity is to equip it with a standing force. There are several justifications commonly cited in favour of a UN standing force, but cardinal among these is the belief that such a body would allow the Organisation to respond quickly to crises without being stymied by decisions taken at the national level.

#### **Key Proposals**

##### *The Urquhart Proposal –*

Sir Brian Urquhart, former Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, is a prominent contemporary advocate of a UN standing force, writing that, "from a purely practical point of view, a highly trained

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<sup>1</sup> The total number of civilians killed by the end of the genocide is estimated as between 800,000 and 1million.

rapid reaction force, permanently at the disposal of the Security Council, would be the most efficient way of spearheading international efforts" to deal with emergencies in the future. In recognition of the growing complexity of conflict in the post-Cold War era, Sir Brian has proposed that the force operate under entirely new rules of engagement, according to which the use of military force would correspond with neither peacekeeping nor enforcement doctrines. Debunking the commonplace objections relating to the cost of developing and maintaining such a body, he points out that a rapid reaction force would in fact be financially pragmatic. Had the modestly sized contingent requested for the Rwandan crisis been deployed within two weeks of Security Council Resolution 918, the cost would have amounted to \$US 115 million; the failure to do so gave rise to an expenditure of \$US 2 billion in humanitarian aid.

#### *The Dutch Government Proposal –*

In the mid-1990s, the Dutch Government released a report titled *A UN Rapid Deployment Brigade; A Preliminary Study*. This study explored the possibility of establishing a so-called UN 'fire brigade' – "a permanent, rapidly deployable brigade that would guarantee the immediate availability of troops when they were urgently needed". This brigade of between 2,500 and 5,000 personnel would not replace the traditional, *ad hoc* peacekeeping operations but would function as a stop-gap measure of strictly limited duration to deter aggression and build confidence in the host region while the traditional force was being mustered and deployed. The brigade's remit would also include preventive action and deployment in emergency humanitarian situations. The report recommended that, in order to reduce costs, the force be 'adopted' either by one or more member states or by a regional or similar security organisation such as NATO.

#### *The McGovern Proposal –*

US support for a UN standing army has been both long-standing and diverse in its origins. John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State during the Eisenhower Administration, was an early prominent advocate, while former Presidents Reagan, Bush Sr and Clinton have also championed the idea at one time or another. In 2000, Congressman James P. McGovern tabled House Resolution 4453 calling for the creation of a 'United Nations Rapid Deployment Police and Security Force' (UNRDSF), to be composed of a maximum of 6,000 personnel recruited and trained directly by the UN and to consist of both military and civilian elements. This force would operate under either Chapter VI or Chapter VII of the UN Charter, would be deployable within 15 days of the passing of a Security Council resolution and, after a maximum of six months, would be replaced by a traditional UN mission. After meeting with some opposition, James McGovern submitted a revised version of the bill in which virtually the same criteria for the UNRDSF were set out, but which differed in that no explicit mention of Chapters VI and VII appears. As outlined in House Resolution 938, however, the proposed scope of the UNRDSF remains expandable, encompassing "the authority to protect itself, execute negotiated peace accords, disarm combatants, protect civilians, detain war criminals, restore the rule of law and carry out other purposes as detailed in United Nations Security Council resolutions".

#### *The Canadian Government Proposal –*

The Canadian government's contribution to the debate on rapid reaction – *Towards a Rapid Reaction Capability for the United Nations* – does not propose the establishment of a UN standing force in the short term. Instead, this report makes the case for building upon existing arrangements and developing complementary mechanisms for reducing the UN's response time to crises. Recommendations were accordingly made for a permanent operational-level rapid reaction headquarters and for the identification of national 'vanguard component groups' to be called upon by the headquarters, but which would remain under national authority. Despite the cautious pragmatism of the Canadian study, it nevertheless considers a UN standing force a valid long-term objective: "no matter how difficult this goal now seems, it deserves continued study with a clear process for assessing its feasibility over the long term".

## Potential Problems

Proposals advocating the creation of a standing rapid reaction force – though useful in terms of stimulating debate on UN reform – have run aground against a number of obstacles. Concerns have arisen with regard to the legitimacy of a standing army: given that peace operations fall within the exclusive domain of the Security Council, in which the developing world is markedly under-represented, doubts exist as to how acceptable the force would be – not least to the people whom it is intended to protect. It is furthermore unclear under which laws such a force would be governed, in which country it would be stationed and from where it would derive its funding – the latter concern being especially urgent given the membership's dismal record of honouring its financial obligations to the Organisation.

Coinciding with these objections is a fear that furnishing the UN with its own military would transform the Organisation into a world government with an independent political agenda and a corresponding capacity for aggression. At the core of this scepticism is a reluctance to disrupt the traditional relationship between the sovereignty of the nation state on the one hand and the use of force on the other. It has even been suggested that a UN standing army might emerge as a potential military rival to national forces and that this competition might precipitate an unwillingness on the part of national governments to share military technology with the UN force, with obvious implications for the efficacy of the latter.

However, these concerns presuppose an end to the Security Council's jurisdiction over the deployment of peace operations. The Security Council is an explicitly *international* body in which nation states retain ultimate authority over the decision to undertake any proposed action. Subsequently, a standing force would be incapable of executing an operation to which any of the permanent members was adverse. Indeed, far from constituting an unconstrained 'world army', the standing rapid reaction force could be hampered by a number of the same constraints which affect contemporary UN peace forces. While a standing rapid reaction force could increase the speed with which the UN could respond to crises, it could do so only *after* the political decision to send a mission had been made.

Despite the spuriousness of some of the objections to establishing a UN standing force, it is nonetheless apparent that the political will necessary to do so does not currently exist. This ambivalence, it should be noted, is not restricted to national governments and extends to key policy-makers at the UN. Former Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, for example, dismissed the standing force as "impractical and inappropriate", while more recently Kofi Annan stated the following: "I don't think we can have a standing United Nations army. The membership is not ready for that."

## **STANDBY ARRANGEMENTS**

Given these circumstances, a more viable way forward is to concentrate on enhancing standby arrangements rather than use resources on schemes to which key players remain opposed. In this way, some of the anticipated benefits of a UN standing army could be gained, while avoiding the pitfalls of proposals which impinge too closely on national authority over armed forces. As UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has commented, "...short of having a UN standing army, we have taken initiatives that will perhaps help us achieve what we are hoping to get out of a standing army".

Some of the more prominent initiatives to which the Secretary-General refers are outlined below. It should be noted that the distinctions made among the various proposals are somewhat arbitrary and that they should be seen as overlapping mechanisms for quickening reaction times to crises, rather than independent, competing solutions to the same problem.

## Key Initiatives

### *United Nations Logistics Base (UNLB) –*

In the early 1990s, a number of reforms were initiated which aimed to improve the UN Secretariat's capacity to plan, conduct and manage peace operations. Foremost among these was the creation, in 1994, of a permanent UN peacekeeping logistics base (UNLB) in Brindisi, Italy. The base serves to store and make shipments of material to and from UN peace operations worldwide and to operate as the UN relay centre for telecommunications networks connecting all UN peacekeeping missions, as well as several UN agencies and headquarters. The UNLB also maintains non-military supplies and equipment in two 'start-up kits', each of which is able to provide basic support for up to 100 persons for a maximum period of three months in a 'bare-base' environment. The merits of these kits derive from the fact that they can be issued at very short notice and suffice to support the opening of a new mission anywhere in the world.

### *United Nations Standby Arrangements System (UNSAS) –*

In 1993, then UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali created a 'UN Standby Forces Planning Team'. Its efforts produced the United Nations Standby Arrangements System, a database of military and civilian personnel, as well as materiel and equipment, that member states might be willing to commit to future peacekeeping operations at the request of the Secretary-General. These commitments are manifested by four levels of agreement which record the resources that each country can dedicate to UN peacekeeping operations and the speed with which they are able to make them available. As the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) makes clear, the resources remain on 'standby' in their home country, where necessary preparation and training are conducted in accordance with UN guidelines. Standby resources are used exclusively for peacekeeping operations mandated by the Security Council. UNSAS does not create a binding obligation; its potential for success depends entirely upon whether participant states actually fulfil their pledges. However, by equipping the UN with an accurate idea of the capabilities of the subscribing states and their degrees of readiness, and by providing a catalogue of options in the event that states withhold participation, UNSAS in theory allows for a better advance understanding of the requirements for peacekeeping operations.

### *The Multinational Standby High Readiness Brigade (SHIRBRIG) –*

Conceived as a complement to UNSAS, SHIRBRIG aims to provide the UN with a well-trained multinational force of 4,000 to 5,000 troops for use in peacekeeping operations mandated by the Security Council under Chapter VI of the UN Charter. Comprising a headquarters unit, infantry battalions and reconnaissance units, as well as engineering and logistics support, the Brigade possesses a reaction time of between 15 to 30 days, with units self-sufficient for up to 60 days and deployable for a maximum of six months. The Brigade is subject to the command and control of the UN and is under the direction of the Secretary-General and the force commander of the specific operation. However, participating member states maintain sovereignty over troops and decide whether to partake in an operation on a case-by-case basis.

The Brigade's first test arose in June 2000 with the peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Under the terms of the accord, which was mediated by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU)<sup>2</sup>, it was agreed that a UN force should secure and monitor the disputed border between the two countries and SHIRBRIG officers were invited to participate in the planning for what became the UN Mission in Eritrea and Ethiopia (UNMEE). Drawing on personnel from all its participating member states<sup>3</sup>, a

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<sup>2</sup> In 2001, the African Union (AU) was established to replace the OAU.

<sup>3</sup> 16 nations are currently members of SHIRBRIG: Argentina, Austria, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Italy, Ireland, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden.

SHIRBRIG headquarters was deployed in November 2000, as were a Dutch infantry battalion, a Canadian infantry company and a Danish headquarters company. Notwithstanding a few operational teething problems, SHIRBRIG's involvement in this instance is widely considered to have been a success, with Kofi Annan naming SHIRBRIG a model arrangement from which other groupings of states could draw valuable lessons.

### *Regional Rapid Reaction Forces –*

The August 2000 Report on the Panel on UN Peace Operations – also known as the *Brahimi Report* – recognised that the UN may be ill-suited to the demands of muscular peacekeeping and peace enforcement and that farming out operational responsibility to regional organisations and so-called 'coalitions of the willing' could present a more effective method of dealing with conflict and crises. Given the subsequent trend toward enhanced co-operation with regional bodies, the UN's capacity for rapid deployment may profit significantly from regional efforts to achieve swifter response times to crises. Notably, both the European Union (EU) and African Union (AU) have launched initiatives to improve their respective capacities for rapid reaction. In both cases a strong focus is accorded to the benchmarks identified in the *Brahimi Report*, which concluded that traditional peacekeeping operations should be deployable within 30 days and complex missions within 90 days. Additionally, however, each organisation has taken steps to develop mechanisms to expedite deployment well in advance of the 30-day timeline, so as to secure the situation for the arrival of the traditional peace operation.

Largely as a response to its inability to address the series of Balkan crises in the early 1990s, the EU has been developing its military capacity and has accordingly made a number of recommendations to promote rapid and effective deployment. At the EU Helsinki Summit in December 1999, European leaders formulated the Helsinki Headline Goal (HHG), which articulated military targets for the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) for the period 1999 to 2003. Critical to the HHG was the aim to develop an EU Rapid Reaction Force (ERRF), consisting of 60,000 troops available at 60 days' notice and sustainable for up to one year. The ERRF is designed to give assistance to civilians threatened by a crisis, to intervene to separate warring factions and to respond to UN calls for peacekeeping forces.

EU governments recently concluded negotiations on a new Headline Goal for the period 2004 to 2010 which entails the creation of so-called elite 'battle groups'.<sup>4</sup> Floated by Britain and France at a bilateral summit in Le Touquet in February 2003 and later supported by Germany, the proposal envisages the creation of highly trained battalion-sized formations of 1,500 troops. These formations would be available within 15 days' notice, sustainable for up to 30 days and deployable for up to four months. These groups would be equipped to undertake operations in distant crises and would be prepared to conduct missions in extremely hostile environments, including mountain, desert and jungle terrain.

The African Union has likewise been exploring means of enhancing its role in the maintenance of peace and security in its sphere. Central to this process is a plan to create, by 2010, an African Standby Force (ASF) to keep or enforce the peace. This initiative involves the establishment of regionally-based standby brigades, numbering between 3,500 and 5,000 troops. At a meeting in Addis Ababa in May 2003, the African Chiefs of Defence Staff (ACDS) adopted a policy framework outlining the various conflict scenarios for the ASF. These included monitoring missions and peacekeeping operations under the auspices of the UN, the AU or regional peace support operations and envisaged possible peace enforcement or intervention missions in the future. The ACDS fixed long-term targets which coincide with the *Brahimi* timelines, but also made recommendations for the establishment of a rapid reaction military force which would be deployable within 14 days to avert genocide and other humanitarian disasters.

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<sup>4</sup> Adopted and published by the Council of the European Union in Brussels on 4 May 2004.

National efforts to enhance rapid reaction are also underway and offer the potential to boost the UN's ability to respond promptly to crises around the world. The UK government's 1998 Strategic Defence Review ruled that the UK's ability to project military force was hampered by an insufficient response time. To rectify this deficit, the Review stressed the importance of creating a genuinely hard-hitting, flexible and rapidly deployable force able to undertake the full gamut of short-notice missions. In particular, it proposed that the previously established Joint Rapid Deployment Force (JRDF) be given a more substantial pool of capabilities and incorporate resources and personnel from the airforce, army and navy. From this pool – known as the Joint Rapid Reaction Forces (JRRF) – tailored force packages can be assembled and deployed quickly in operations of all kinds, including UN operations.

In June 1999, the UK government made a pledge to this effect by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the UN designating capabilities from the JRRF to multinational efforts to enhance international peace and security. But the UK's contribution of military personnel to UN peacekeeping operations – which has hovered at around 400 since June 2001 – forms a low proportion of the total number of troops participating in UN peacekeeping operations, which in June 2004 stood at 48,988. Moreover, the UK Defence White Paper of September 2003 made no specific reference at all to the government's intention to allocate troops to UN operations, instead describing the UN simply as a forum for international debate and placing an emphasis on its limitations. By focusing on its commitments to NATO, the EU and even coalitions of willing states, serious concerns must be raised in respect of the UK government's support for and participation in UN operations.

### **Potential Problems**

The viability of the above proposals stems mainly from their respect for national sovereignty and thus their acceptability to troop-contributing countries. However, this political advantage also translates into a major practical shortcoming. The success of both UNSAS and SHIRBRIG, for instance, depends on the resolve of often capricious national governments; the prospect of an operation being hamstrung by a national veto thus remains very real. When the UN Secretary-General attempted to expand the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) in May 1994, not one of the 19 governments which at the time participated in UNSAS agreed to contribute military forces. Those that did offer troops – by and large from African states – lacked the logistics and equipment to make a meaningful contribution.

Though Chapter VIII of the UN Charter encourages the participation of regional organisations in the promotion of international peace and security, regional rapid reaction forces suffer from the same setbacks which tarnish the legitimacy and viability of regional peacekeeping organisations more broadly. Although regional organisations are often thought to possess a comparative advantage in peace operations – by virtue of an assumed familiarity with the terrain, language and history of the crisis zone – it is debatable whether regional bodies are best placed to serve as honest brokers to a conflict. On the one hand, states contiguous to a dispute are likely to have a genuine interest in preventing or quelling conflict, as crises often engender refugee flows and environmental problems not easily contained by political borders. On the other hand, however, neighbours to a crisis often develop an interest in its perpetuation, and are able to exploit conditions of disorder under the pretext of a regional intervention.<sup>5</sup>

For these reasons, an absence of UN oversight during regional peace operations could have dangerous implications for both the efficacy and legitimacy of these missions more generally. The EU has indicated its preference for securing UN authorisation for ERF operations, but it has also reserved the right to take action without such explicit support. Similarly, accounts of the ASF have predicated AU-led missions upon the endorsement of the Security Council. However, the African Union's Constitutive Act is somewhat ambiguous on this point: Article 4, which cites the principles of the Union

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed analysis of these issues, please refer to the UN and Conflict Programme's *Regional Security Organisations* briefing. See [www.una.org.uk/ps\\_main.html](http://www.una.org.uk/ps_main.html)

and proclaims its right of intervention in cases of genocide and war crimes, does not mention the United Nations. The AU's commitment to the UN is articulated by a fleeting reference in Article 3, in which the AU pledges to take "due account of the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights".

Serious legal limitations must also be considered when assessing the merits of the above initiatives. The scope of SHIRBRIG, for example, is restricted to peacekeeping under Chapter VI. It cannot, therefore, be used for fast-breaking crises that necessitate humanitarian intervention or preventive deployments with Chapter VII Security Council mandates. Its ability even to enter a theatre is traditionally dependent on the consent of the parties to the conflict – a serious consideration given the marked proliferation of intricate, internal conflicts in which belligerents themselves are often difficult to identify.

With the advent of multiple organisations having similar spheres of responsibility, the prospect of duplication has become a cause for concern. NATO, by way of illustration, is itself currently developing a rapid reaction force similar to the ERF. It is imperative that existing organisations fulfilling useful roles are not made redundant and that overlapping domains of activity be avoided in order to discourage waste, confusion and harmful contradiction of purpose.

Projects such as those outlined above inevitably favour those countries with the material capacity to participate. This works to crystallise an international system which is already skewed against the poorer countries of the South. SHIRBRIG, for instance, is meant to reflect a universal composition. Yet, of the 16 member states currently contributing to SHIRBRIG, most are wealthy and from the North – far from the broad participation anticipated.

## **CONCLUSION**

Regardless of whether the international community opts for a standing force or not, it is clear that dramatic steps need to be taken to improve the response time of the UN to crises and conflicts – not merely in strategically important regions, but around the world in accordance with need. Ultimately any progress will depend upon the will and dedication of member states, as it is from its membership that the UN's capacity and resources are derived. Any attempts at reform must reflect this reality or else be consigned to failure. Rapid reaction, as with any other aspect of UN reform, will continue to elude the United Nations in the absence of political will. If this will is not generated, the UN risks being sidelined and perhaps replaced by less legitimate, less representative and less disinterested bodies.

## **APPENDIX 1: LIST OF ACRONYMS**

ACDS	African Chiefs of Defence Staff
ASF	African Standby Force
AU	African Union
DPKO	Department of Peacekeeping Operations
ERRF	European Rapid Reaction Force
ESDP	European Security and Defence Policy
EU	European Union
HHG	Helsinki Headline Goal
JRDF	Joint Rapid Deployment Force
JRRF	Joint Rapid Reaction Forces
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
SHIRBRIG	Standby High Readiness Brigade
UK	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
UN	United Nations
UNAMIR	United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda
UNLB	United Nations Logistics Base
UNMEE	United Nations Mission in Eritrea and Ethiopia
UNRDSF	United Nations Rapid Deployment Police and Security Force
UNSAS	United Nations Standby Arrangements System