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International Conflict Controllers: Manipulators or Manipulated?

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The complexity of today's national security environment has offered many opportunities for combatants to alter perceptions and facts and to complicate the United Nation's decision-making process. An interesting question arises as a result: is the U.N. still capable of manipulating an end to conflict through sanctions, negotiations, and other tested and tried instruments; or is it now itself the object of impotency and manipulation? This paper will address this national security issue, using the conflict in Bosnia as an example after a short contextual setting.

New Factors in the National Security Environment

The end of Cold War geo-politics unleashed consequences and processes hardly predictable at the time:

- large states lacked a definable enemy image, and hesitated to become involved in conflicts outside their national interests; many large states, such as Russia, were consumed by the transition process from communism to capitalism and paid less attention to international problems.
- historical, ethnic and religious factors appeared that overwhelmed governments with their energy and vitality; a "warrior mentality" emerged in some cases among forces of smaller groups that ignored standing laws and principles of civilized behavior, with combatants refusing to play by the rules of the U.N. or international community.
- centers of gravity of various forces causing the conflict (economic, military, historical, ethnic, etc.) were difficult to identify, making it more difficult to extinguish the essence of the conflict.
- states defined democracy and its supporting elements according to their own experience and understanding, resulting in vastly different working philosophies.

- international forces sometimes conducted operations in areas where no legitimate government was operating (Somalia); and

- using all elements of their national security structure, nations often blurred the distinction between military and law enforcement operations.¹

The formal U.N. conflict management process was hampered by these factors and unable to address each conflict and its consequences properly. As a result the U.N. tried to manage conflict through a series of threats (perceived and real), outright pleading for support, moral suasion, negotiations, and the acceptance of an action-reaction relationship between the international community and the combatants. The U.N.'s political use of conflict management in Bosnia, for example, evolved in the following way:

- the use of a U.N. personal envoy;

- fact-finding missions;

- humanitarian aide;

- creation of a U.N. Protection Force (UNPROFOR), which does not fit in the peacemaking/peacekeeping/peace enforcement order of engagement.

- the deterrence of attacks on humanitarian aide convoys;

- the creation of safe areas;

- and as a last resort NATO air strikes and the introduction of a rapid reaction force. Now the U.N. has handed Bosnia off to NATO.

In a non-cooperative environment, this process more closely resembles crisis response, in which the U.N. is always running several steps behind the combatants, than conflict management. Predictably U.N. efforts often proven to be unsuccessful.

The combatants to the conflict in Bosnia contributed to the failure of U.N. policy in two ways. First, they exploited/manipulated the U.N.'s inability to develop precise terminology; and second, they exploited/manipulated the U.N.'s prohibition on its forces to collect "information" to determine who is doing what to whom.

The Terminology-Mission Statement Problem

Officially, the U.N. mission in Bosnia was to:

- provide military assistance to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and approved organizations and agencies involved in humanitarian activity and repair of utilities in Bosnia-Herzegovina and assist in the following: evacuation of wounded; protection and care of people; and improvement of living conditions of people.

- establish conditions favorable to a cessation of hostilities. This includes the creation and maintenance of total exclusion zones² and also deterring attacks on U.N. safe areas.

Perhaps the U.N. could accomplish this mission if not for one fact: conflict management techniques, such as assisting in the cessation of hostilities, do not work in the presence of overt terminological misnomers that cause confusion over mission statements, expectations, and intentions of peace operation forces. This fact is exacerbated when unarmed "peacekeepers" become the object of armed attacks and hostage taking situations by the combatants. Instead of helping end the hostilities, they become pawns in the hands of the combatants.

Yet such is the case with the U.N. peace operations terminology of peacekeeping, peace enforcement, and U.N. protected force, which are inadequate to describe the situation at hand.³ The Bosnian Serbs would not call the U.N. force peacekeepers, since the Serbs did not give their consent to the presence of the force as called for by the U.N. definition. Instead of consent, the Bosnian Serbs tolerated the presence of UNPROFOR, who are not peacekeepers, in Bosnia.

Therefore, *U.N. forces in Bosnia were not conducting peacekeeping or peace enforcement operations, but a new phenomenon of the post-Cold War world, "warfare monitoring", a form of military diplomacy with long military-diplomatic chains of command for permission to use force and rules of engagement often out of sync with the contextual situation in which the peace forces found themselves.* In addition to peace operations terminology, U.N. member states also viewed the operating principles of legitimacy and credibility through their own cultural lenses. One culture, for example, may deem retribution for an attack necessary for a presence to remain credible while another culture may not think so.

The UNPROFOR forces in Bosnia had no examples on which they could base their actions in this new security environment. Accordingly, problems arose over force structure, rules of engagement, unity of command, and mission creep, but they are beyond the scope of this paper.

Implications of the Inability of U.N. Forces to Collect "Information"

Perhaps the most important lesson learned from the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina is that today's wars, especially those regulated by the U.N., are subject to perverse overt and covert perception management by the principals. Combatants not only exploit the lack of international resolve/ know how to end the conflict but also the inability of the U.N. to collect and use information on their forces. As a result, combatants can manipulate events and perceptions in a manner as at no time in the past. This limits the ability of the U.N. to act impartially as well. Combatants actually see it in their interest to continue to fight under such conditions.

There were two types of perception management that exploited the U.N.'s inability to collect information. The first was perception management on the battlefield, and the other was through the media:

On the battlefield:

- combatants knew our principles/rules of engagement and manipulate them to their advantage;
- combatants were not homogenous groups but rather were composed of numerous warring factions (who is to blame?);
- combatants exploited the shape of the confrontation line, which changed almost daily, to their own advantage by infiltrating and shooting at U.N. forces from their opponent's territory, thus making it appear that the other side is doing the shooting; initiated attacks on their own people (mortar and artillery attacks) and then tried to blame the atrocities on the other side; they also exploited the limits of weapons exclusion zones, or failed to recognize some of the U.N. sponsored safe havens and U.N. DMZs;
- combatants targeted civilian populations for coercion with the objective of forcing their movement from their place of settlement;
- combatants used ceasefires to gain time and reposition forces; launched attacks from UNPROFOR areas, which supposedly were off limits to such actions; and used U.N. mandates as a yardstick of time against which they could commit atrocities, initiate attacks, or complete operations before the mandate's implementation;
- combatants exploited the lethargy of the U.N. Security Council's decision-making process by initiating or completing an operation before the vote was called on an issue (for example, the U.N. considered lifting the embargo on the Bosnian Muslims at a time when the Muslims initiated an offensive);
- combatants shot at or took UNPROFOR soldiers hostage;
- combatants utilized snipers and terrorist acts to intimidate both U.N. forces and the local population;
- combatants painted their vehicles and helicopters in U.N. colors in order to get around easier;
- combatants used intimidation by refusing to allow any U.N. fuel or humanitarian convoys through their territory or in some cases to leave their territory once the delivery had been made;
- combatants hid weapons among humanitarian aide;
- combatants attempted to establish an action-reaction scenario for the U.N. and NATO to follow that would bring an attack on the opposing side. For example, one side attacking from a DMZ (while trying to give the impression that the other side did the shooting) would hopefully draw a NATO air response on the innocent party;
- combatants had UNPROFOR elements sell their weapons to one or another of the combatants; and there were claims that some of the Turkish UNPROFOR were actually Bosnian Muslims who had gone to Turkey for military training and returned as UNPROFOR.⁴ This charge was never proven.

In the media:

- combatants manipulated today's transparent diplomacy (as opposed to the secretive diplomatic moves of the past) offered through TV stations such as CNN
- combatants exploited inaccurate or hastily assembled news coverage of an event, relaying information as if it came from an authoritative source when in fact it did not.
- combatants utilized sources of money and influence to plant false stories in international media about events and battles.

A forceful reminder of how these two processes work in tandem was offered in late August 1995. Sarajevo's Marketplace was hit by a 120 millimeter mortar shell and scores were killed or wounded. The Serbs were blamed for this atrocity, and the Bosnian Prime Minister quickly went on CNN to state that the U.N. had proof that the Serbs did it. A week later, Russian Colonel Andrei Demurenko, U.N. Chief of Staff of Sector Sarajevo, cast doubt on this finding. He conducted an independent investigation and revealed that hitting such a target (a nine meter wide street) from a range of three to four kilometers was a "one in a million shot." Also, Demurenko noted that U.N. artillery reconnaissance did not hear the sound of the mortar shell either at the moment when it was fired or later, when several more shells blasted into the center of Sarajevo.⁵ While not stating that the Serbs didn't conduct the shelling or that the Bosnians or Croats had, Demurenko underscored simply that the incident hadn't happened the way most international observers were led to believe. In other words, Demurenko stated that our perceptions had been manipulated by someone.

Within a few days, Demurenko had other U.N. spokesmen on his side. According to David Binder, correspondent for the *New York Times*, Demurenko's supporters included an American officer, a Canadian officer, and a U.N. administration official.⁶

Such actions are indicative of efforts to manipulate peace according to the desires of the side initiating the action. Precise terminology and some information collection capability would have lessened (but not eliminated) the manipulation of UNPROFOR and the media by the combatants. As a result, it is difficult to place blame, and mistakes in doing so can cause huge international crises. Obviously, this is a national security issue that deserves much closer attention in the future.

Conclusion

In light of the continued failures in Bosnia, now is the time to uncover some new principles or operating procedures and put a stop to the manipulation. U.N. decision-makers need to redefine/refine conflict management tools. Doctrine writers need to relook the diplomatic and military measures for the use of their tools under today's diverse, new conditions, especially the terminology issue. New variants and uses must be found for old institutions and procedures, and some U.N. procedures are in sore need of updating. This may include lifting the ban on collecting information. Otherwise, how is the international community to understand what is happening to it, that is, how it is being manipulated by the combatants?

The world is faced with individuals and groups that not only desire no form of conflict control but also have at their grasp the ability to manage perceptions through the mass media as at no

time in the past. An individual computer hacker, with proper monetary support, has the potential to do as he desires or is told, even if it means taking over a country's nuclear control options or destroying integrated command and control functions among a nation's leadership. One individual with miniaturized nuclear materials can now threaten a nation as entire countries once did.

Governments, particularly democratic ones where officials are elected by constituencies, are uncomfortable sticking their neck out and applying untested instruments of conflict management to such complex situations. Rather, they mistakenly remain solidly reliant on tools of the past that have produced demonstrated results, such as President Clinton's reliance on an updated version of the Weinberger Doctrine. In the U.N., where representatives represent national and not constituency issues, peace operation principles no longer work as they did during the Cold War. The world is facing a new national security environment that requires creative thinking on the part of all concerned. Isn't it time we paid attention?

Endnotes

1. In a 1992 article on "The Question of the Theory of Military Conflicts," Russian Colonel A.F. Klimenko divided military conflicts into sociopolitical, legal and strategic subsets. Sociopolitical conflicts were further subdivided into those involving national interests, "type of contradiction" (religious, ethnic, etc.), the sociopolitical makeup of participants, and the nature of a country's political goals (predatory, defense, etc.). Legal conflicts were subdivided into violations of or accordance with international law. Strategic conflicts were subdivided by scale, methods of military operations, means for accomplishing goals, and intensity. Subdivisions of this type will multiply and new dimensions added (criminal conflicts, internet or computer virus conflicts, etc.). [BACK](#)

2. Total exclusion zones pertain to heavy weapons which in the U.N. resolutions include anything larger than 40mm. [BACK](#)

3. The U.S. Army defines peacekeeping as "neutral military or paramilitary operations that are undertaken with the consent of all major belligerents; designed to monitor and facilitate implementation of an existing truce and support diplomatic efforts to reach long-term political settlement." The U.N. defines peacekeeping as "the deployment of a U.N. presence in the field, hitherto with the consent of all the parties concerned, normally involving U.N. military and/or police personnel and frequently civilians as well. Peacekeeping is a technique that expands the possibilities for both the prevention of conflict and the making of peace."

Peace-enforcement is defined by the U.S. Army as "the application of military force or the threat of its use, normally pursuant to international authorization, to compel compliance with generally accepted resolutions or sanctions to maintain or restore peace and support diplomatic efforts to reach a long-term political settlement; the primary purpose of PE is the restoration of peace under conditions broadly defined by the international community." The U.N. has not formally defined peace enforcement but does talk about peace enforcement units which would be warranted, as a provisional measure, under Article 40 of the U.N. Charter. Secretary General Boutros-Ghali notes that such units should not be confused with forces constituted under Article

43 to deal with acts of aggression or with military personnel which governments agree to keep on stand-by for possible peacekeeping operations.

U.S. quotations were taken from Glossary-13 of the final draft of Army FM 100-23, Peace Operations. U.N. definitions were taken from page 11 of Boutros Boutros-Ghali's *An Agenda for Peace*, U.N. New York, 1992, and the peace enforcement discussion from page 26. [BACK](#)

4. "UNPROFOR Sells Weapons," *Defense and Foreign Affairs*, Volume XXII, No. 11-12, Nov-Dec 1994, p 1. [BACK](#)

5. ITAR TASS, 29 August 1995, as reported in FBIS-SOV-95-168, 30 August 1995, p 15. [BACK](#)

6. David Binder, "Bosnia's Bombers," as published in Pentagon publication *The Earlybird*, 20 September 1995, p 11. [BACK](#)