

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF U.N. PEACEKEEPING: A FACTOR IN THE RESOLUTION OF INTERNATIONAL CONFLICTS

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Introduction

In the post-Cold War international environment, two parallel developments are shaping the way the world community approaches international conflict. First, the nature of conflict is changing. Rivalry is based less upon ideology and increasingly upon ethnic and tribal conflicts which overlie competition for shrinking resources. Second, the information revolution is propelling the electronic media into a position of significant influence in focusing attention on certain, but not all, conflicts.¹ Some have argued that CNN and other worldwide television channels have become a driving force of international relations, and others see the emergence of a "global public."²

Following the end of the Cold War stalemate, a newly-found consensus among members of the United Nations Security Council allowed vigorous, near-unanimous action in response to aggression (Iraq/Kuwait). This new consensus also resulted in a much greater willingness to intervene in humani-

1. In a ground-breaking study, "Real-Time Television Coverage of Armed Conflicts and Diplomatic Crises: Does it Pressure or Distort Foreign Policy Decisions?" Nik Gowing asserts: "The virtual absence of images from conflicts in Nagorno Karabakh, Moldova, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Abkhazia, Angola, Liberia, Burundi, Kashmir, Sudan or the southern marshes of Iraq, consistently has led to little or no pressure for action by western governments or the United Nations. Yet the conflicts listed above are just as awful as Bosnia and in many cases much worse." *Working Paper Series*, published by the Shorenstein Barone Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, Harvard University, June 1994, 17.

2. Lewis M. Branscomb, "A Faulty Connection? Technology and International Relations," *Harvard International Review*, vol. XVI, no. 2, (Spring 1994); Itthiel de Sola Pool, *Technologies Without Boundaries: On Telecommunications in a Global Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

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tarian emergencies (Kurdish relief, the early Somalia effort), to monitor human rights violations (El Salvador), and to assist countries in post-war rehabilitation (Cambodia). This led to a "giddy expansion"³ of U.N. peacekeeping operations in the early 1990s; the number of peacekeepers deployed increased nearly tenfold in two years.

Most of these new U.N. operations have received significant media coverage and, as a result, have become increasingly dependent upon how public opinion in the belligerent countries and in the international community as a whole views them. They have been successful when, as in the case of Namibia, Cambodia, and Central America, international media interest coincided with support for the peace process in the theater of operations. It can be argued that in earlier decades public perceptions were incidental to the success of U.N. operations, but that in the 1990s public opinion has become a major factor in conflict management and conflict resolution.⁴

This article examines some of the consequences of post-Cold War developments for the information task of the United Nations and how the organization has coped with the new challenges. It analyzes the successful U.N. peacekeeping operations in Namibia and Cambodia as experiences from which much can be learned to improve the information flow both in future areas of operation and to the international community, whose support of the peace process is essential.

Peacekeeping — A Popular Tool in the "New World Order"

Although peacekeeping as a concept was not originally envisaged in the U.N. Charter, it has evolved over forty years as an internationally acceptable technique for controlling conflicts and promoting the peaceful settlement of disputes.⁵ The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to U.N. peacekeeping operations in 1988 demonstrated recognition that these operations represent one of the most significant innovations in the international community since the Second World War.

Between 1948 and 1988, there were fifteen such operations. The year 1988 saw an unprecedented growth, not only in terms of the number of operations

3. Marrack Goulding, "The Prospects for Peace-Keeping in the post-Cold War World," (unpublished manuscript) presentation at Harvard University, Center for International Affairs, 4 February 1994.

4. Various aspects of the interrelationship between public opinion and foreign affairs have been studied by, *inter alia*, James N. Rosenau, *Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: An Operational Formulation* (New York: Random House, 1961); Bernard C. Cohen, *The Public's Impact on Foreign Policy* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1973); Evan Luard, *Peace and Opinion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962); "The Media and Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War World," Briefing Paper by the Freedom Forum Media Studies Center (New York: Columbia University, 1993). James N. Rosenau has described a "skill revolution," which has led to "an evolution of new capacities for cogent analysis" among the public. James N. Rosenau, *The United Nations in a Turbulent World* (Boulder & London: International Peace Academy Occasional Paper Series, 1992), 15.

5. For an overview of current U.N. operations, see *United Nations Peace-Keeping* (New York: United Nations Department of Public Information, 1994), and mimeographed monthly updates of all current operations.

launched and soldiers deployed, but also in that the task of peacekeeping became more complex and far-reaching. There was a shift, from more traditional inter-positioning of U.N. military forces between combatants, to large, composite civilian/military operations, which performed functions as diverse as election supervision, human rights monitoring, and repatriation of refugees in Southern Africa, Central America, and Cambodia.

Most of these new operations gained a high media profile. Visual images from the theater of operations now add to the pressure of public opinion in New York and in the major capitals around the world. For the United Nations, this means that skillful and sustained media liaison has become vitally important (a) in the country where peacekeepers are deployed, (b) at U.N. headquarters in New York, and (c) in the troop-contributing and donor countries.

Fleeting Images — Long-term Needs

In the age of electronically transmitted news, a few minutes of television coverage from places like Somalia, Bosnia, and Haiti can create powerful images of chaos and bloodshed, as well as damaging perceptions of a lack of efficacy in U.N. missions deployed there. Once such images take hold in the public mind, they are hard to countermand.

Another, but quite different, challenge for U.N. press officers in the field is to maintain media interest when things go well. It is in the nature of the information business that successes are less newsworthy than disasters. Even when a certain conflict is no longer "hot" or, due to a short attention span for international issues, has been relegated to the "backburner" of the international agenda, the need to maintain public support for the peace process in the conflict area nevertheless continues.

The United Nations' information task in peacekeeping and conflict resolution thus involves considerably more than conventional media liaison. In fact, it can be argued that peacekeeping requires substantial public relations in the theater of operations, and that press work is but one facet of this process. As will be shown below, the United Nations made such an effort for its operations in Namibia (1989-1990) and Cambodia (1992-1993), helping keep the peace process on track in the face of political and military difficulties and during phases when international media interest in those conflicts had waned.

The United Nations' in-country information program for Namibia took into account educational levels, languages, cultures and traditions, and also the existing local communications infrastructure. To allow the difficult, laborious process of peace- and nation-building to take hold in developing countries where the media infrastructure is often weak, a long-term information program is needed. Peace- or nation-building require structurally sound public information and education, which are integral to the rehabilitation of war-torn societies.⁶

In order to succeed in its information task, the United Nations must both

6. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *An Agenda for Peace* (New York: United Nations, 1992).

satisfy the fast-paced, often myopic needs of foreign correspondents, and develop a country-specific communications strategy that provides strong support for the peace process.

Objectivity and Impartiality

Third-party mediation efforts often evoke suspicion and mistrust among the warring parties. Hence, maintaining an impartial, neutral stance has generally been seen as a precondition for a mediator's success. This is also true for the "good offices" that have been provided by successive U.N. Secretaries-General and their representatives in a multitude of conflicts over the past five decades.⁷ Most of these efforts have been conducted as "quiet," behind-the-scenes diplomacy in which secrecy prevailed. Because press coverage of negotiations-in-progress is generally abhorred by diplomats, public "participation" has been relegated to the time after negotiations are successfully concluded and their results can be announced in the form of agreements.⁸

Although confidential negotiations still play an important role in the post-Cold War world, the international organizations that have to keep the peace in a particular crisis area cannot afford to ignore either the press or the public, locally or internationally. During the ambitious "nation-building" operations in Namibia and Cambodia, the United Nations needed to "win the hearts and minds" of the population while simultaneously presenting the facts of the situation to the outside world in an objective manner. These seemingly conflicting tasks prove at times daunting to U.N. press officers working in a multicultural bureaucracy, where charges of propaganda, bias, and cultural hegemony are not unusual.

On the positive side, it is unlikely that a U.N. peacekeeping operation would get caught up in the maelstrom of "patriotic journalism" that affected reporting during the Gulf War and which has recently been criticized by Marvin Kalb, John MacArthur and others.⁹ The United Nations' actions in the field are under constant scrutiny both by the parties to the conflict and by a multitude of governmental and non-governmental observers and critics. In places such as Namibia, there were times when "U.N. watchers" afield outnumbered U.N. staffers. Confidentiality is difficult to maintain in the U.N. Secretariat, and the staff often struggles to present a consistent message.

Furthermore, a perennial shortage of trained information officers and scarce financial resources make a situation like that of the Gulf operation — where 150

7. For an example of the extensive literature on the role of third-party mediators in the U.N. context, see Brian Urquhart, *HammarSKJOLD* (New York: Harper, 1972) and Javier Perez de Cuellar, "The Role of the U.N. Secretary-General," in Adam Roberts and Benedict Kingsbury, eds., *United Nations, Divided World* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993).

8. Bernard Cohen, *The Public's Impact*, describes in detail the resistance of State Department officials to communicating with press or public.

9. Marvin Kalb, "The Dangers of Patriotic Journalism" unpublished manuscript, Harvard University, Fall 1993; John R. MacArthur, *Second Front, Censorship and Propaganda in the Gulf War* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1992).

U.S. military public affairs officers were reportedly assigned to escort journalists — highly improbable in a U.N. context. "News management" of the dimensions encountered during the Falklands/Malvinas conflict or the operations in Grenada or the Gulf is, under current conditions, not a serious possibility in a U.N. peacekeeping mission. Ad hoc measures and "muddling through" continue to be emblematic of U.N. field operations, especially in the start-up phase. These pose image problems of a different kind.

The Image of the United Nations

The United Nations' public image in the United States and other Western countries has been volatile in recent years. It has depended both on the way its most visible activities have been portrayed by the international media, and on the attitudes of major world leaders. Neither the remarkable shift from the negative public views of the United Nations during the Reagan era to the more positive attitudes during the Bush presidency, nor the effect these attitudes have had on perceptions of the United Nations in other countries, has yet been analyzed.

In the mid-eighties, extensive and far-reaching criticism was launched by officials of the Reagan administration and conservative think tanks against the U.N. system. Persistent negative publicity contributed to the Congressional withholding of U.S. budgetary dues and the withdrawal of the U.S. from UNESCO.

Responding to this crisis, in 1987 the U.N. Secretary-General decided to review the organization's public information apparatus in order to "reform and revitalize" it. A team of public relations and business management experts analyzed the functioning of the Department of Public Information (DPI) and arrived at a set of interlocking recommendations for restructuring¹⁰ that took two years to put into practice. A "project management" system was instituted, and U.N. managers were retrained in modern communications strategies and public relations techniques.

Peacekeeping, as one of the most visible and visually striking activities of the United Nations, was a logical area in which the new information strategies could be applied. In early 1988, United Nations-led negotiations to end the wars in Afghanistan and between Iran and Iraq, bore fruit. Peace settlements in both cases included new peacekeeping operations as well as large-scale humanitarian programs, particularly in Afghanistan. The United Nations's newly trained project managers designed a comprehensive information program for the U.N. Good Offices Mission in Afghanistan and Pakistan (UNGOMAP) and "Operation Salaam."

10. The restructuring was outlined by the (then) Under Secretary-General for Public Information, Therese Paquet-Sevigny, in "A Plan to Revitalize the Department of Public Information" which she presented to DPI staff on 23 October 1987 (U.N. internal document no. 87-45565).

Improved Image, New Tasks

As stated before, 1988 marked a major change for the United Nations, both politically and from a public relations perspective. Greater confidence in the organization's capacity for peacekeeping and conflict resolution brought new, unprecedented tasks and the highest recognition from the international community: the Nobel Peace Prize.

At the same time, twelve years of laborious negotiations finally produced the tripartite Southern African Peace Accords.¹¹ They were signed by South Africa, Angola and Cuba at U.N. Headquarters in New York in December 1988. The United Nations was to play a major role in the implementation of the agreements, including the withdrawal of South African forces from Namibia, the withdrawal of Cuban forces from Angola, and the holding of elections in Namibia. In preparing for the largest U.N. operation to date, project managers in the U.N.'s Information Department designed a very ambitious information program that was put into effect in early 1989 (see discussion below).

During the following fourteen months, the United Nations supervised this difficult peace process, which led to the independence of Namibia in March 1990, and in turn, contributed to the opening of avenues for peace in South Africa itself, beginning with the release of Nelson Mandela in early 1990. Public perceptions of the United Nations were very favorable worldwide, and media reporting was predominantly positive.¹²

The successes of 1988-1990 resulted in a virtual avalanche of new peacekeeping demands placed at the United Nations' doorstep: Angola (UNAVEM II), Mozambique, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Haiti, and the two-year mega-operation in Cambodia. With its capacities already strained, in 1992 the United Nations was asked to launch almost simultaneously the missions in Yugoslavia and Somalia.

The Somalia operation in particular demonstrated vividly that a high profile in the media by no means assures favorable public perceptions of a peacekeeping mission. Instant media coverage has made U.N. peacekeeping more transparent than ever. Working in an open (i.e. uncensored) media environment has led to greater scrutiny of recent U.N. field missions, making them vulnerable to criticism from correspondents and other observers in the theater of operations.

The open media environment has also allowed countries participating in

11. A comprehensive account of the intricate process of years of negotiations that led to the peace accords is rendered by Chester A. Crocker, *High Noon in Southern Africa, Making Peace in a Rough Neighborhood* (New York: Norton, 1992).

12. In the discussion of the interrelationship between press reporting, public opinion, and foreign policy, there is a great deal of semantic and substantive confusion, as in the lack of distinction between "published" and "public opinion." Nik Gowing has shed light on important aspects of this complicated relationship: "Governments pay lip service to the vagaries of public views which during crises . . . they know are usually ill-informed, inexpert, uncritical and therefore unreliable." And: "Ultimately, journalistic voices of anger [on Bosnia] did not weigh as heavily on government thinking as many have assumed. Neither did public opinion. By and large the aim of governments was to maintain within limits a well-defined, low-risk, low-cost policy line." Gowing, 28, 29-30.

those operations to deflect particular criticism to the United Nations, thus covering up their own policy blunders.¹³ While some see it as one of the main (albeit unwritten) functions of the United Nations to provide symbolic, "fig-leaf" or face-saving measures for member states,¹⁴ suffice it to say that such a situation makes an effective public relations effort by the United Nations all the more difficult. As a consequence, the organization is again severely tested in maintaining a public image which is not marked by "schizophrenia, impotence and ostrich-like behavior."¹⁵

Best Case Scenario: The Information Program of the U.N. Operation in Namibia: 1988-1990

The U.N. operation in Namibia was a high-profile, well-prepared public relations effort in a country that harbored many suspicions against foreign influence in general and against the international peace plan for Namibia in particular. By using "corporate image-making" and other public relations techniques, the United Nations managed to convince the overwhelming majority of the population in the territory that the international peace plan was in the country's best interest, and that holding free and fair elections leading to independence from South Africa was a desirable goal.¹⁶

In spite of major political, military, and logistical hurdles, the Namibian people had widely accepted the United Nations' presence and goals within three months of its arrival in April 1989. Thereafter, the peace process could run its course, leading to free and fair elections and to Namibia's independence ahead of the internationally agreed upon timetable in March 1990.

The fact that the international consensus, which had carried the Namibia Peace Plan during decades of difficult negotiations, did not wane when it encountered significant obstacles in April and May of 1989, contributed to the success of this U.N. mission. Press reporting from the theater of operations in Namibia played a crucial role in these first crisis months. Early planning and

13. In "Missions Impossible," Dick Kirschten wrote, "the October 3 [1993] debacle [in Somalia] that turned U.S. public opinion virulently against the U.N. mission was an American operation from start to finish, conducted without the knowledge of the U.N. command in Somalia." *National Journal*, 30 October 1993, 2578.

14. Ronald Steel argued on the op-ed page of the *New York Times* (25 April 1994): "Don't use the United Nations for cover. Either the U.S. has a compelling interest in aiding the Bosnian Muslims or it doesn't. The problem can't be avoided by fobbing it off on the United Nations, and then complaining when things go wrong, as we did in the Somalia fiasco, that the United Nations made us do it. The United Nations can do only what its members authorize. To ignore this simple fact is to weaken and discredit the organization."

15. Stanley Hoffmann, presentation on Western policies on the former Yugoslavia at Harvard University, Center for International Affairs, 19 April 1994.

16. A summary of the U.N.'s operation in Namibia is contained in *The Blue Helmets: A Review of United Nations Peacekeeping*, second edition (New York: United Nations, 1990). See also a U.N. issued photojournal, *UNTAG in Namibia: A New Nation is Born* (Windhoek: United Nations, 1990) and the presentations on Namibia in *The Singapore Symposium: The Changing Role of the United Nations in Conflict Resolution and Peace-Keeping* (New York: United Nations DPI/1141-40708, 1991).

generous funding for the United Nations' own information program for the Namibia operation (UNTAG) paid off in times of crisis.

The Namibian Peace Plan had an innovative "identity program" with a succinct, coherent message: "UNTAG—Free and Fair Elections in Namibia." A multitude of visual communications tools, such as posters, stickers, leaflets, cartoons, and videos were used, and all of them had consistent color schemes. The United Nations also had daily radio broadcasts and weekly television programs. Moreover, the United Nations was in a position to monitor the South African-controlled media products and ensure that they complied with the "impartiality principle."

The United Nations set up a network of district political offices in Namibia, which also functioned as information centers. U.N. staff working in those centers were trained prior to their arrival in the country and received extensive briefings on the ground. Many Namibians were initially quite doubtful and suspicious about the sizeable international presence in their country. To avoid any misunderstanding, and to prepare Namibians for self-rule, it was made clear that the United Nations' job would end with independence. The return of tens of thousands of exiles, most of whom were highly educated, helped in this civic education process. U.N. information campaign planners studied local traditions and discovered the importance of visual symbols in African civic cultures. The United Nations' message, free and fair elections leading to independence, was consistently communicated throughout the period of transition.

Furthermore, in a country where apartheid still had a strong mental hold, the United Nations' use of racially mixed teams working on an egalitarian basis served an important educational function. It helped break through apartheid barriers and loosen racial and political tensions in the population.

Lessons Learned: Cambodia and Beyond

Following the Namibia experience, the United Nations recognized that in order for UNTAC (United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia) — the largest peacekeeping operation of its kind — to succeed, it was essential to build public awareness in Cambodia about the Paris Peace Agreement of 1991 and about what its implementation would mean for the people of Cambodia.

UNTAC had seven major components (human rights, electoral, military, civil administration, police, repatriation and rehabilitation) and over 20,000 military and civilian personnel. More than half of the U.N. staff working on information and education to produce radio and television programs as well as printed materials were Cambodian.

In Cambodia, the United Nations tried to open up or "decontrol" the local media (i.e., ensure more press freedom and a greater variety of views). This helped break down the climate of fear connected with the open expression of political views in this tormented country. At the same time, the United Nations was at pains to dissociate itself from all of the political parties. Initially, UNTAC radio broadcasts were done by Khmer-speaking international staff-members, rather than Cambodians, because speech patterns in Khmer had political over-

tones. As in Namibia, careful control was exercised to ensure neutrality of language, colors, and symbols.

The experiences in Namibia and Cambodia show that a consistent, well-planned information and education campaign is vital if an internationally supervised democratization process in countries without democratic traditions is to have lasting effect. Providing objective information and basic civic education tools can thus make an important long-term contribution to the growth of an indigenous political culture and help the development of civic structures in these countries.

Although international media coverage of the U.N. Cambodian operation was, for a variety of reasons, less positive overall than that of the transition process in Namibia, these two experiences show the importance of an integrated, well-funded information program that takes into account the information needs of the international news media as well as conditions in the country of deployment. These two processes go hand in hand: if support for the peace process is absent in the theater, international coverage will reflect this weakness; if worldwide reporting is consistently negative, it will have serious repercussions in the area of operations.

Peacekeeping Versus Military Enforcement

One of the consequences of the United Nations' recent experiences in Somalia and Bosnia has been pervasive confusion in the international community over what constitutes "peacekeeping." While those two operations contain elements of traditional peacekeeping, they are predominantly enforcement missions under Chapter VII of the U.N. Charter, and thus follow different rules of engagement.

U.N. peacekeeping operations generally depend on the consent and cooperation of the parties involved in the conflict; they use force primarily in self-defense and when all peaceful means have been exhausted; and they need widespread support in the international community as a whole which is expected to volunteer forces and finance the operations over an extended period of time.¹⁷ They normally serve to maintain a ceasefire and create a holding pattern in which negotiations for a more durable peace can proceed.

When, as in the cases of Namibia, Central America, and Cambodia, the United Nations was charged with implementing international peace accords with relatively clear mandates, agreed upon by the parties and vouched for by the international community, the U.N. operations encountered difficulties, but they were able to achieve their goals within the established time frames. In Yugoslavia and Somalia, on the other hand, due to complicated, shifting demands placed on the U.N. operations by the Security Council over a period of many months, the United Nations found itself in a very uncomfortable "twilight zone" between peacekeeping and military enforcement which threatens to

17. Marrack Goulding, "The Evolution of United Nations Peacekeeping," *International Affairs*, vol. 69, no. 3 (1993): 455.

undermine the very basis of peacekeeping. When the United Nations is perceived as a party to the conflict, its role as an impartial mediator is called into question.¹⁸ The recently attempted "division of labor" between the United Nations as peacekeeper and provider of humanitarian assistance and NATO's enforcement mandate is still in the process of being tested on the ground in Bosnia.

Lessons learned from these experiences will need to be evaluated not only from a policy perspective,¹⁹ but also because of the repercussions such military actions have on public perceptions of the United Nations and its missions.

Conclusions

Public opinion is now a major factor in international conflict management and conflict resolution. In order to achieve their goals, U.N. peacekeeping operations in the 1990's need an overall positive image, both inside the territory in which they are deployed and in the international community at large.

Special image problems have arisen for the United Nations as a consequence of the experiences in Somalia and Bosnia. The resulting uncomfortable mix of peacekeeping and military enforcement has put the United Nations into a situation where its traditional role of an impartial broker is impaired. This has affected public perceptions of the organization in the belligerent countries and the international community as a whole.

The United Nations will need to take stock of its experiences, both positive and negative.²⁰ The basic purpose and proven techniques of peacekeeping need to be restated, and a coherent message communicated. To this end, distinctions between peacekeeping and military enforcement actions should, when possible, be more clearly drawn. The United Nations needs to manage both its successes and failures from a public relations perspective as it seeks to project a more stable image.

Like other international organizations, the United Nations will need to continuously adjust its information program to keep pace with the electronic media world. However, U.N. communication strategies must also be guided by long-range perspectives of peacebuilding. With few exceptions, electronic me-

18. See interview with the Special Representative of the Secretary-General in the former Yugoslavia, Yasushi Akashi, who stresses the importance of "peace-making" and "bridge-building" as essential elements of his mission in Bosnia, the *New York Times*, 26 April 1994, 6.

19. In a 23 September 1994 address to the Staff College at Camberley entitled "The Future of U.N. Peacekeeping," Kofi Annan, the U.N. Under Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, drew some important conclusions from the U.N.'s experience in Rwanda. "In my mind our rules of engagement matter far less to those on the ground than the strength that we have to enforce them.... Force too easily reverted to by peacekeepers who are quickly outnumbered, will prove only counter-productive."

20. A rather uncommon argument is put forward by James N. Rosenau, *The United Nations in a Turbulent World*, 52: "As people become increasingly performance-oriented and as they increasingly come to question the competence of states, the UN seems destined to gain." Saadia Touval, on the other hand, feels that the United Nations is "hindered by complex decision-making procedures, the inability to effectively commit usually scant state resources, and hence insufficient flexibility and leverage." *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 73, no. 5 (September/October 1994): 55.

dia are not likely to take sustained interest in the developmental concerns of rebuilding war-torn countries.²¹ More traditional means of communication should not be discounted. Instead, they should be used side by side with the new technologies, particularly in the developing world.

The United Nations is expected to be a major player in the international community of the nineties, which is shaped by emerging new conflicts and fast-paced communications. New forms of interaction between the public, the media, and foreign policy makers are evolving; it is important for the United Nations to keep abreast of these developments.

21. Kofi Annan, "Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Action," presentation at Princeton University, 22 October 1993.



