

Workshop and public panel discussion on UN Peacekeeping

FES workshop “New horizons and old problems for UN Peacekeeping” on July 7, 2011 in Berlin

Good News

Considerable progress has been made in the course of the new horizons process, although predominantly in technical and procedural terms. Different initiatives, aiming at a more timely reaction on emerging crisis like rosters for civilian personnel are underway and a Global Field Support Strategy has been drawn up by the UN Department for Field Support. More generally, the need for rapid deployment has arrived at the centre of the international discussion, which is underpinned by the promising efforts of different regional organisations to create the accordant capacities. The same applies for the protection of civilians, an issue which has arrived both on the field level, where it is now understood as a mission wide task, and also on the political level. The Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations for example – after some initial trouble – now addresses this topic in its sessions.

The implementation problems: consolidation or idleness?

Against this multitude of small steps, member states and especially the Security Council, seem to have failed to take the complementary steps forward. Namely the old call for clear and achievable mandates, a reasoned political process besides the mission and the willingness to assure the necessary resources still seem to remain unheard. A benevolent explanation for this behaviour might be the perception that the situation of UN peacekeeping, regarding declining numbers of missions and troops, has consolidated. But new potential demand for peacekeeping missions is on the horizon, be it the follow-up of ISAF in Afghanistan, the upcoming post-conflict rehabilitation in Libya or the infamous unforeseen crisis X.

Is ‘being realistic’ adequate to future challenges?

At different points of the discussion, the participants underlined the need to ‘manage expectations’. *First*, what the peacekeeping stakeholders realistically might expect per Dollar spent and per soldier sent to the field. *Second*, what success or failure in conflict resolution the international community might make the United Nations accountable for, given limited resources and restricted political leeway. In line with this ‘realistic approach’, observers watched a shift from doctrinal questions to implementation issues in the discussion on peacekeeping reforms. So would it be better to focus the discussion more specifically on practical questions like for instance about specific rules of engagement for the use of force to solve a specific problem on the ground rather than the more general question of the use of force as an item of the Security Council’s toolbox?

In a short-term perspective, yes: a lot of improvements could be achieved with low costs and moderate political will. For example, member states could more effectively activate and support civilian experts to prepare them for an assignment to an UN mission. Moreover, cooperation between the UN and regional organisations as well as between these regional organisations could still be improved, not least for the sake of rapid deployment in peace operations.

In a long-term perspective however, the international community has to be honest with itself. A true peacekeeping partnership needs a commitment of all members, in particular on the ground and a substantial involvement of troop contributors and rising powers on par with the traditionally dominant global powers when it comes to strategic decisions and mandate design; which also relates to the demand for reform of the UN Security Council and its working methods. Otherwise, the old and continuous force contributors might turn away from UN peacekeeping and focus on other international forums and organizations. Furthermore, the unsolved doctrinal questions will come back relentlessly. In the contemporary difficult conflict environments, this is notably the pivotal question of consent of the conflict parties to a peacekeeping operation. This is a sensitive problem while considering a new peace operation. It is a real challenge when the mission has already deployed.