The Role of the U.S. in UN Peacekeeping Operations

Recommendations & Actions

Recognizing the contribution of UN peacekeeping to the achievement of our strategic objectives, as outlined in the 2010 National Security Strategy, the U.S. should strengthen the UN’s ability to deploy robust, appropriately-funded peacekeeping operations to address complex conflict situations. Specifically, the U.S. should continue to show positive leadership through reliable and adequate financial support; back the implementation of necessary UN institutional reforms; commit key enabling equipment and other resources; and ensure that peacekeeping is not weakened or discredited through irresponsible deployments.

- Each new U.S. government fiscal year, Congress should appropriate enough money for the United States to fully pay its current peacekeeping assessments.
- Permanently remove the legislative cap on U.S. contributions to UN peacekeeping operations, allowing the U.S. to fully meet its obligations to the UN and to pay off arrears incurred under the cap.
- Continue to take a leading role in efforts to implement the Global Field Support Strategy and other reform initiatives in order to increase the efficiency, cost-effectiveness and rapid deployment capacity of UN peacekeeping missions.
- Commit specialized U.S. resources to UN peacekeeping missions to ensure missions are able to fulfill their mandates. This can include critical equipment, air assets and sustaining troops to peacekeeping operations worldwide.
- Provide direct support for senior officer training for troop-contributing countries and support for the UN’s effort to develop scenario-based training for peacekeepers, including on protecting civilians, preventing and responding to sexual violence by third parties, and preventing sexual abuse and exploitation by peacekeepers.
- Use U.S. leadership on the UN Security Council to ensure that UN peacekeeping missions are deployed responsibly and judiciously, and that missions receive the high-level political support needed to resolve crises in areas where peacekeepers are deployed.

Results

Continued positive engagement in UN peacekeeping operations and reforms will strengthen and expand the capacity of the UN to effectively and consistently protect civilians, as well as stabilize weak and failing states. It will also help the U.S. to share the cost and political burden of stabilizing states and filling potential security vacuums that could present a threat to U.S. security interests.
Background

Roughly 120,000 UN peacekeepers are currently deployed in 15 separate missions on four continents: a nearly three-fold increase in the number of UN personnel over the last decade. These operations all originate with the UN Security Council and are managed by the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations.

UN peacekeeping no longer resembles the “classic” observer missions of lightly armed troops monitoring ceasefire agreements. Today’s missions are complex operations in active conflict zones. Modern peacekeepers are asked to create stability, protect civilians, demobilize ex-combatants and guide the development of democratic institutions that respect human rights and uphold the rule of law. Peacekeeping today often represents a comprehensive effort to stabilize and reconstruct failed and failing states.

Overall, this comprehensive multilateral approach to peacekeeping has proven to be a successful, cost-efficient way to promote international peace and security. A 2005 RAND study found that multinational UN forces are far better suited than unilateral U.S. forces to perform peacekeeping responsibilities. In terms of cost-effectiveness, a 2006 Government Accountability Office study concluded that UN peacekeeping is eight times less expensive than funding a U.S. force. Furthermore, the Office of Management and Budget gave UN contributions to peacekeeping (CIPA account) its highest rating under the OMB Program Assessment Rating Tool. Finally, another study found that in the first three years after a conflict, U.N. peacekeeping missions have a substantial effect on GDP, with annual growth rates nearly 2.4 percent higher in postconflict countries where peacekeeping missions are present than in those where they are not.1

Reports of sexual abuse by UN peacekeepers threaten to overshadow their positive contributions that help prevent instability and secure peace. The UN has implemented significant reforms to curb and address sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers, including mandatory predeployment trainings and the establishment of conduct and discipline units at headquarters and in the field. The U.S. should press troop-contributing countries to hold their accused nationals legally accountable and incorporate the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse into their standard military training.

The U.S. should also continue to push for peacekeeping reform initiatives that increase cost-savings from UN missions. These include the Global Field Support Strategy (GFSS), a five-year project aimed at improving the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of administrative and logistics support to UN peacekeeping missions. The GFSS is already delivering significant benefits – expediting the deployment of new missions and consolidating operations – while also ensuring substantial cost savings, including an estimated $372 million in the coming year.2 Over the next three years, the U.S. should support its continued implementation.

The U.S. should also support adequate funding of missions. Since 1994, a congressionally-imposed cap has limited U.S. contributions to UN peacekeeping to 25 percent of the entire UN peacekeeping budget. While the U.S. renegotiates assessment rates with the UN every three years and the U.S. peacekeeping rate has dropped from 31 percent to 27 percent in the last 10 years, the cap remains. Congress routinely lifts the cap, but the issue must be revisited each year. This gives opponents of the UN opportunities to cut funding for peacekeeping and sends a poor signal to troop-contributing countries (TCCs) that put their troops on the line in missions the U.S. votes for in the Security Council. For example, from 2005-2007, the cap was not lifted and $175 million in debt for U.S. assessments for peacekeeping operations accrued. However, in 2009, President Obama supported and Congress included sufficient funding to pay off these arrears. This demonstrates that failing to pay our dues ultimately does not result in cost savings. Rather, funding shortfalls simply delay resources and force Congress to appropriate larger sums at a later date. Consequently, lifting the cap permanently is fiscally prudent and demonstrates our commitment to TCCs and to meeting our international obligations.

Beyond funding restraints, UN missions are also routinely deployed with mandated tasks that far exceed the equipment, staff, troop numbers and political support they receive to get the job done.

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