



The Quest For A United Nations Standing Army

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Despite calls and efforts to do so, the international community has never established a UN standing force. There are several reasons for this failure.

From 1948 to 1995, proposals for a permanent UN force that would be directly recruited, trained, equipped and controlled by the UN periodically resurfaced and were championed by strange bedfellows in academic, diplomatic and political circles. They ranged from former UN Secretary-General Trygve Lie's appeal for a UN 'Guard Force', to Ronald Reagan's [call at the end](#) of his presidency for a 'standing UN force – an army of conscience'. The latest proposal of this kind is the [UN Emergency Peace Service](#) proposal, which would provide the UN with the capability to prevent and respond rapidly and effectively to conflict or mass human rights violations. Such ideas have at least two common features: they aim to empower the UN to take timely and effective action on matters related to international peace and security, and none of them has ever been implemented.

The international community has therefore never possessed a standing force that could be directly recruited, trained, equipped and controlled by the UN, despite what some of the UN's architects had been vying for when the organisation was being negotiated in 1944. Instead, when a crisis erupts, the world body must rely on peacekeepers that are at the disposal of their governments and mostly arrive late. They [are also often](#) under-equipped and poorly trained for the tasks for which they are responsible.

Why has the idea of a permanent UN force never been realised? There are at least three reasons which I will discuss in this article:

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- principled objections to the idea,
- practical or technical objections
- and the absence of a transnational advocacy network capable of generating the political will needed for its establishment.

Because there have been so many proposals for standing forces since the birth of the UN, not all these reasons apply to every one of them. For example, criticism of the small size of some proposed forces would not apply to then US politician Harold Stassen's *idea* of a UN 'Legion' that would have comprised 250,000 members. Nevertheless, these three factors are the most salient explanations for why proposals for a permanent force based at the UN have never been realised.

Normative objections

The first and perhaps most pronounced normative contention relates to the use of force, as it bumps up against the entrenched norms of Westphalia sovereignty: non-intervention and territorial integrity. While contemporary peace operations permit the use of force in self-defence and defence of the mandate, there is still support for the traditional peacekeeping model based on the 'holy trinity' of the consent of the conflicting parties; impartiality or not taking sides in a conflict; and the non-use of force except in self-defence. Traditional peacekeepers followed the guiding principle that 'there is no peacekeeping when there is no peace to keep' and this often is mostly supported by such as China, India, Cuba and the [Non-Aligned Movement](#) generally.

Non-intervention is guarded for a variety of reasons, including the fear of being the target of an intervention by a standing force, and is a significant obstacle to the proposals for a standing force receiving support.

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Second is the fear that a permanent, supra-national force might have neo-colonial undertones or would be used for purposes other than those for which it was intended. This contention is based on the realist adage that all international politics is a struggle for power in an anarchical system where states are compelled to act in their own interests and, by implication, a UN standing force would never be created purely for cosmopolitan reasons independent of states' narrowly defined interests. Concerns about the misuse of such a force are closely linked to doubts about the ability of a UN force to achieve financial and logistic autonomy, which some commentators argue is still likely to fall back into the hands (and therefore control) of states.

A related normative contention concerns the body that would house and authorise a permanent force: the UN. Specifically, the belief that the UN is an institution lacking legitimacy, especially in the realm of international peace and security. Therefore, any proposal seeking to augment its capacity to enforce its will shall naturally be met with suspicion. Reasons for this suspicion are partly based on the composition of the UN Security Council, which in addition to being undemocratic, still largely reflects the outdated political climate of the post-World War II era. The inherent tension between global interests and national interests plaguing the UN is another stumbling block to empowering the UN with additional tools to advance its cosmopolitan goals. Dick Leurdijk, who was involved in the Dutch proposal for a [UN Rapid Deployment Brigade](#), pointed out that because a standing force would be contingent upon the UN Security Council to authorise it, the concept 'just takes us full circle, back to the question of national interests'.

Technical objections

Some argue that a small UN force, which is what many architects of such proposal advocate, would not be able to respond effectively to many humanitarian crises as most emergencies require a much greater number of troops, such as the 50,000 NATO troops required to keep Kosovo peaceful. They say that the small size of the proposed force might result in it being beholden to national military for longer term security provision and peacebuilding roles. This anticipated dependence of national military contravenes a central purpose for which it would be created: that is, to circumvent the political intransigencies that result in late-arriving and hamstrung peace operations.

Others express concerns about the 'standing' nature of a UN force, with some states arguing that it would be difficult to keep the force constantly occupied which could pose problems for morale. Gareth Evans, then Foreign Minister of Australia, [expressed similar views](#) about Brian Urquhart's, former Undersecretary-General of the United Nations, proposal, 'given rotational needs, up to half the core force would be non-operational a good deal of the time'.

The cost of a UN standing force is another concern raised by critics. For example, in response to former UN Secretary-General Lie's idea of a UN Guard, South Africa expressed concern about the cost considering what the UN could afford, while the Soviets argued that the cost might exceed the annual budget of the UN. Paying for the UN's peace operations has always been a source of political debate and, at times, controversy. For example, by the end of 2008 the level of outstanding contributions to peace operations was just under US\$3 billion, because many rich states had not paid their peacekeeping dues on

time. Financial crisis is only avoided because states agree to lend money and equipment to the UN.

Weak transnational advocacy network

I have studied the role that a transnational advocacy network has played in contributing to the demise of the most recent proposal for a UN standing force – the UN Emergency Peace Service proposal – yet similar findings could be applied to previous proposals. According to its supporters, UNEPS would comprise well-trained and well-equipped troops, police and civilians numbering around 15,000 who would be capable of preventing and responding rapidly to atrocities and other situations where civilians require protection from violence in armed conflict and natural disasters.

However, the inability of those promoting the idea of a UN force to effectively communicate and coordinate their advocacy activities resulted in the failure to leverage all the expertise of the members of the advocacy network. In addition, the advocates lacked sufficient appreciation of the importance of including a diverse range of stakeholders, comprising people from different geographical backgrounds. Such diversity can enhance the legitimacy of a network and its ability to advocate for certain ideas, partly by making it more difficult for opponents to discredit it as representing only the interests of certain groups.

A related point is that the advocates of the proposal lacked the support of influential allies such as states or a UN body to prompt the proposal within the UN. In addition, activists did not take full advantage of political opportunities to promote the proposal. For example, we know that the presence of a crisis of focusing event (in this case a mass atrocity or catastrophic failure in a peacekeeping operation) can also precipitate the ability of a transnational

advocacy network to achieve its goals. These were certainly taking place during the during of the campaign advocating for a UN standing force, and the genocide in Darfur is a case in point. But because the proposed UNEPS lacked the support from the media – another influential ally – the links between crises and the proposal were not widely disseminated.

Conclusion

There are several reasons why a UN standing force has never been realised: some of them are inherent to attributes of proposal themselves and some relate to how the ideas are advocated. Both these aspects can be modified to increase the political support the idea of a standing force receives from UN Members States. For example, being creative about the possibility of an independent funding structure could placate fears that a standing force would be co-opted by powerful states. Similarly, strengthening ties between members of an advocacy network and improving the sharing of information, might help to attract influential allies and strengthen their advocacy efforts overall.

Those who support the creation of a permanent UN force might find encouragement in implementation of other radical UN reform proposals such as the creation of an International Criminal Court, which after decades of failed attempts, was finally born in 1998 with the adoption of the Rome Statute. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen if and when a UN standing force will be established.

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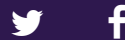
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