PEACEKEEPING: A BARRIER TO DURABLE PEACE?

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It is important to recognize the distinctions between the short-term and long-term effects of peacekeeping missions and to understand the ways in which the presence of peacekeepers shapes the incentives of warring sides to reach peace agreements. This distinction creates what we refer to as the “peacekeeping-peacemaking dilemma:” The steps that an intervening force takes toward stopping the fighting between belligerents can, paradoxically, undermine the achievement of a comprehensive peace agreement. Without considering the short- and long-term costs and benefits, policymakers risk deploying peacekeeping missions that may successfully manage the level of ongoing violence but at the same time disincentivize the warring sides to reach a settlement and establish a durable peace.

Introduction

When UN peacekeepers were deployed to Cyprus in 1964, few observers anticipated that it would be possible to withdraw those troops in the short run. Yet no one projected that almost five decades later those forces would still be in place and that the conflict would remain unresolved, even though its violent manifestations have been mitigated. Conventional wisdom assumes that the intervention of peacekeepers is always a positive step toward the achievement of a comprehensive, lasting peace between warring sides. Although this does occur for some conflicts, (e.g., UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia or UNTAC), we argue that it is important to recognize the distinctions between the short- and long-term effects of peacekeeping missions and to understand the ways in which the presence of peacekeepers shapes the incentives of warring sides to reach peace agreements in a conflict. This distinction creates what we refer to as the “peacekeeping-peacemaking dilemma:” The steps that an intervening force takes toward stopping the fighting between belligerents can, paradoxically, undermine the...
prospects for a comprehensive peace agreement. As a result, policymakers must carefully consider the trade-offs in the application of a peacekeeping strategy for armed conflicts throughout the world.

The link between traditional peacekeeping efforts — those that are focused on ending the fighting between combatants and maintaining a cease-fire, once established — and diplomatic initiatives to establish a broader peace settlement — is a vital one. If peacekeeping is instrumental in subsequently promoting peace settlements, then early interventions by peacekeepers are desirable. Peacekeepers might, for example, dampen the severity of fighting and mitigate the effects of a conflict on civilians, while also helping to overcome the commitment problems that can be a key barrier for the establishment of a long-term peace settlement. If, however, peacekeepers serve as a short-term stabilizing force but ultimately undermine long-term efforts to achieve a peace settlement, then they may provide little more than a tourniquet that, once applied, cannot be removed. To the degree to which peacekeepers successfully reduce the intensity of conflict, they may reduce the incentives for the warring sides to make the tough compromises required for achieving a long-term peace settlement. This is a commonly offered critique of the UN peacekeeping missions in Cyprus and the Golan Heights, each of which has successfully limited conflict but also remained in operation for extended periods without the achievement of a peace settlement between the protagonists.

The majority of peacekeeping analyses, whether conducted by scholars or in “lessons learned” reports of national militaries and international organizations, have focused on peacekeeping effectiveness during the cease-fire or post-settlement stages of conflict rather than on the impact upon the transition from cease-fire to settlement that peacekeeping exerts. Although diplomacy aimed at producing a peace settlement is usually conducted separately from the peacekeeping effort itself, it is important to remember that peacekeeping configures the environment in which these diplomatic efforts take place while influencing the incentives offered to the combatants in reaching a settlement.

The Conventional View of Peacekeeping and Conflict Resolution

The traditional perspective, reflecting public perceptions and those of actors that provide peacekeeping, regards the deployment of peacekeepers as enhancing peacemaking efforts. This line of thinking draws heavily upon the idea that intense conflict makes the prospects for peace more difficult.1 According to this rationale, as a conflict continues over time and the warring sides experience intense fighting, peacemaking becomes more challenging because the parties grow more psychologically committed to the conflict.2 As this psychological commitment deepens, each seeks to punish the other side and achieve a return on their own sunk costs from the conflict. This was reflected in the Bosnian civil war, and the feelings of enmity between the Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks. In turn, even when conflicting parties might consider moving toward a peace settlement as the costs of fighting grow unbearable, severe violence heightens the “bargainer’s dilemma” in which disputants fear that a willingness to make concessions toward a peace agreement will be interpreted as a sign of weakness and be exploited by their adversary.
By establishing and maintaining a cease-fire among the warring sides, peacekeepers can create an environment in which the psychological barriers to settlement begin to diminish and the bargainer’s dilemma can be attenuated. A cooling-off period can lessen hostilities and build some trust between the protagonists. In addition, according to this view, intense conflict puts domestic political constraints on leaders who might otherwise be inclined to sign a peace agreement. Negotiating with the enemy may have significant political costs during active hostilities. During ongoing violence, when both sides are inflicting harm upon one another, political leaders are likely to fear that their constituents will perceive peace efforts as a sign of weakness or, worse, appeasement. Ending the violence can lessen these political risks for leaders and facilitate peace talks. Calls for cease-fires or pauses in bombing attacks in order to promote negotiations and diplomatic efforts are consistent with this underlying logic. Of course, this presumes that hostilities harden bargaining positions and attitudes, rather than leading to concessions by parties suffering significant costs.

In a different but related argument, active conflict leads decision makers to concentrate on ongoing hostilities (a short-term concern), therefore they will not place settlement issues (a longer-term concern) high on their agendas. During heightened armed conflict, political and diplomatic attention will be devoted to the conduct of fighting and at best to immediate conflict management issues such as securing a cease-fire. Finally, the fact that the international community has provided peacekeepers may serve as a signal to the disputants of the international community’s willingness to commit additional resources to any settlement that would follow such a deployment.

Consistent with these arguments, former UN Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali argues that peacekeeping “expands the possibilities for . . . the making of peace.” Yet these are not the only perspectives on the peacekeeping–peacemaking relationship, and represent wishful thinking more than reality.

**Alternative Viewpoints**

Though the optimistic view of peacekeeping and conflict resolution noted above is pervasive, there are some competing observations. These views highlight the important role the costs of conflict play in pushing warring sides toward a peace agreement. Furthermore, as indicated in the next section, our empirical evidence strongly supports these alternative arguments.

Considering war from a Rationalist or cost-benefit viewpoint, the roots of conflict can be seen as an “informational” problem. When two contending sides seek to impose their own preferred solution in a dispute, there is uncertainty about the outcomes of a potential war. The actual distribution of capabilities between the disputants is unknown, as is the level of resolve each opponent has in pressing forward with a claim. The incentives for the two factions to overstate both their capabilities and the credibility of their threats as a means of achieving more favorable settlement terms over the issue in dispute further exacerbates the informational problem.

Absent uncertainty, the two sides should be able to reach an agreement that settles the disputed issue before fighting occurs, thereby avoiding the costs of conflict. Given
the lack of information, however, war provides a mechanism for the two sides to gain knowledge about the opposing force’s capabilities and resolve. War ends when each side has gathered sufficient information about the other to determine the likely outcome of the confrontation. Peacekeeping, interrupts this flow of information, leaving uncertainty among combatants about who would win if the conflict were to continue and, in such a circumstance, what the terms of settlement would be.

Peacekeeping can also undermine the conflict resolution process in a second fashion. Zartman points to the importance of the “hurting stalemate,” a condition in which conflicting sides reach a point where neither can defeat the other militarily and impose its own terms of settlement, yet each continues to bear unsustainable costs. Intense conflict imposes these costs upon the warring sides as each continues to experience casualties and the loss of resources devoted to the conflict. In turn, as a hurting stalemate develops, the pain it produces can create incentives for the belligerents to look for a way out of the conflict, making them more amenable to peace settlements.

The deployment of peacekeepers to a conflict, while potentially helping to quell the violence, also lessens the “ripeness” of a conflict for a peace agreement. In dampening the level of conflict, peacekeepers also reduce the costs faced by the two sides. At the same time, the presence of peacekeepers can ease the time pressure placed on the combatants to reach an immediate settlement. To the extent that peacekeeping missions undermine the development of a hurting stalemate between combatants and reduce the pressures for an immediate settlement, peacekeepers might also, if unintentionally, lessen the incentives of warring sides to make the compromises necessary to achieve a peace agreement. Instead, the belligerents may choose to “kick the can down the road,” postponing concessions in the hopes that better terms of settlement will be available in the future.

**Empirical Findings**

Our study of UN peacekeeping operations and various kinds of war (e.g., civil and interstate war) since 1945 has explored the peacekeeping-peacemaking link. We examined the historical impact of peacekeeping efforts on conflict mediation and negotiation as a means of rendering a judgment on the optimistic viewpoint. Although highlighting the interconnectedness between peacekeeping and mediation efforts, the findings lend strong support for the pessimistic view of the peacekeeping-peacemaking relationship. In general, peacekeeping actually reduces the occurrence of diplomatic efforts aimed at settling conflicts.

Among both interstate and civil conflicts, when peacekeepers are deployed, the likelihood that conflicting parties will attempt direct negotiations or accept offers of mediation to help settle their conflict is sharply reduced. Instead, the development of a “hurting stalemate” between the belligerent parties plays a more important role in bringing them to the bargaining table than does the presence of peacekeepers. Some of the most prominent mediation successes, such as the Vatican-mediated settlement of the Beagle Channel Dispute and the US-brokered Camp David Accords, took place in the absence of peacekeeping forces, with renewed peacekeeping deployment between Israel and Egypt taking place only after a peace settlement was already in place.
Not only does the presence of peacekeepers reduce the likelihood that mediation and negotiation efforts will take place, but the on-the-ground performance of peacekeepers in managing the conflict also strongly influences the occurrence of diplomatic initiatives to settle it. When violence subsequently flares up after peacekeepers are deployed, mediation and negotiation become even less likely. In this respect, when renewed fighting breaks out after the deployment of peacekeepers, third parties and the conflicting sides each become soured on conflict resolution efforts and are less willing to entertain new peace initiatives. Thus, when peacekeepers fail to keep the peace, it has negative effects beyond the possible loss of life caused by the violence. It also weakens any push toward settlement (viewed favorably as a result of conflict costs or gains in information) made by the belligerents. For example, failed peacekeeping efforts in Somalia only dampened expectations among the warring parties—and, indeed, the international community as a whole—that a diplomatic settlement of differences was possible.

Despite the tendency of peacekeeping to undermine the occurrence of mediation and negotiation, policymakers might still hope that the presence of peacekeepers could increase the likelihood that those fewer mediations and negotiations that do take place might at least have a greater chance of producing a settlement. After all, the presence of peacekeepers can potentially provide a mechanism for the conflicting sides to overcome the commitment problems and monitoring challenges that are significant impediments in achieving a peace agreement. Nevertheless, there is no evidence that peacekeeping actually improves the prospects for the achievement of a mediated or negotiated agreement when talks do take place. In fact, there is some indication that it undermines the chances for success. Not only does peacekeeping inhibit disputants from “coming to the table,” it also makes a negotiated settlement less likely when they do manage to start bargaining.

When peacekeepers are deployed to civil wars, the presence of peacekeepers appears to offer no improvement in the chances that diplomatic efforts to manage the conflict will be successful. For interstate conflicts, peacekeeping actually reduces the odds that diplomacy will produce a settlement. Indeed, consistent with the pessimistic view of the peacekeeping-peacemaking link, ongoing violence during an interstate conflict increases the chances that diplomatic efforts to settle the conflict will be successful. Yet when renewed conflict ignites during an interstate peacekeeping mission, mediation and negotiation efforts aimed at ending the conflict become much less likely to result in a treaty or other form of agreement. Most notably, there have been repeated failures at a settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli and Syrian-Israeli conflicts despite the presence of several peacekeeping missions in the region.

The Peacekeeping-Peacemaking Dilemma

The negative link between peacekeeping and peacemaking confronts policymakers with a difficult dilemma. The instability and human suffering produced by an ongoing conflict can provide powerful political, moral, and humanitarian motivations for outside powers to intervene in these conflicts via peacekeeping operations. The effects of a conflict may be so dire, particularly when they create a humanitarian emergency or are accompanied by genocide, that they demand action by the international community.
to stabilize the conflict and stop wrong-doing. Peacekeepers could be the best hopes for managing an especially grave situation. Without the intervention of peacekeepers and left to their own devices, it may be impossible for some combatants to achieve a cease-fire themselves. As the international community witnessed during the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and in Cambodia, in some instances, conditions on the ground can deteriorate to such a level that international intervention is required to help manage the conflict and prevent it from getting worse. The benefits are obvious—efforts can stop the bloodshed, increase the chances of a cease-fire and the possibility of deploying a peacekeeping force.

At the same time, in the most extreme conflicts, the stability brought by peacekeepers may only provide a short-term fix, limiting the impact of the conflict on civilians, but hindering conflict resolution efforts focused on establishing a settlement that produces a durable, stable peace. Our research suggests that this is the likely consequence of recent peacekeeping operations in the Congo and Haiti.

Policymakers might conclude that it is more beneficial in the long-term to bear the short-term suffering produced by a conflict and delay the deployment of peacekeepers until after a peace agreement is put in place. Indeed, the most successful peacekeeping operations, by a variety of metrics, are those that are deployed after a peace agreement. At that point, peacekeepers can monitor cease-fires as well as assist in troop demobilization, election monitoring, and other peacebuilding tasks. Using this logic, it might be advantageous that a conflict be left to resolve itself, allowing the warring sides to experience the costs and pain necessary to reach a hurting stalemate in order to provide them with the motivation to reach a peace settlement.

Yet although such a policy choice might seem appealing in the abstract, in practice it comes with significant downsides and risks. First, in the gravest situations, which produce the most human suffering, such an approach would force policymakers to resist calls for intervention from their constituents as a humanitarian crisis plays out on their television screens. Of course, the international community has made this choice in the past, waiting for a lull in the fighting in the Congo before sending peacekeepers and waiting for a halt in the killing in Sudan. Second, a hands-off policy assumes that the conflict will not expand beyond its present boundaries. The longer a conflict continues, however, the more likely neighboring states may become involved, either by being drawn directly into the conflict or by having to absorb refugees produced by the fighting. This in turn creates even more regional instability, making an already difficult situation more challenging to manage. The Congo exemplifies such a case—the tardy UN action failed to prevent intervention by a number of the Congo’s neighbors. Finally, waiting for a peace agreement.
agreement may be similar to waiting for Godot, as there is no guarantee that conditions will ever be favorable enough for the warring sides to negotiate a peace agreement and, even if they ultimately do, such an agreement may be a long time coming.

The peacekeeping-peace-making dilemma suggests that policymakers must be judicious in their use of peacekeeping. Applied before the warring sides are motivated to compromise and reach a peace agreement, the presence of peacekeepers could effectively freeze the status quo, limiting the death and destruction while simultaneously preventing an eventual settlement. This form of frozen conflict is precisely the situation that has persisted over the decades following the deployment of UN peacekeepers to Cyprus in 1964. Peacekeepers have generally been instrumental in stopping the inter-communal violence on the island, but in doing so, they have also undermined the incentives for Greek and Turkish Cypriots—not to mention their patrons, Greece and Turkey—to make the concessions necessary to establish a peace agreement. On the other hand, when applied too late, peacekeepers may miss the opportunity to prevent the worst consequences of a conflict and stymie their ability to limit the civilian suffering. When considering whether to deploy peacekeepers, policymakers should not only consider the near-term impact on a conflict that the peacekeeping force will bring, but also the ways in which it will shape the environment for a peace settlement later.

Is there a way out of this dilemma? Although our research provides a bleak outlook on the relationship between peacekeeping and mediation/negotiation success, there are some ways in which peacekeeping operations might enhance efforts at conflict resolution. It may be that the prospect of peacekeeping, rather than the actual presence of peacekeeping forces, promotes diplomatic success. Disputants may be willing to commit to an agreement if they know that peacekeepers will be there afterward to guarantee the settlement. By acting as guarantors of agreements, peacekeepers may serve to lessen the possibility of renewed fighting when disputes over the implementation of agreements arise. In addition, the prospect of peacekeeping may positively influence the content of peace agreements. Protagonists may be more willing to commit to detailed settlement provisions as well as those that address a broader range of disputed issues if there are some guarantees that the provisions will be implemented with full compliance, facilitated by peacekeepers. Peacekeeping missions may also promote the durability of agreements by making disputants feel less exposed to the consequences of unilateral defection by the other side. In this sense, when disputants perceive themselves as more secure, peacekeepers can provide a powerful solution to the security dilemma often faced by long-standing state rivals and civil war combatants—even after an agreement is reached between them. As a consequence, peacekeepers may be able to reduce the tendency of disputants to build up their arms or may lessen the degree to which disputants feel that they must strike first in the event of renewed conflict. In each of these ways, peacekeeping forces may be able to exert a positive long-term effect upon conflictual relationships, beyond simply encouraging cease-fires.

– Audrey Latura served as Lead Editor for this article.
NOTES


7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.
