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Peacekeeping passé

Why isn't Canada a peacekeeper any longer?

Lester Pearson's model for the first peacekeeping mission, sparked by the 1956 Suez Crisis, resulted in three decades of deployments for Canadian troops under United Nations auspices. Peacekeeping was, we believed, in our national DNA, and commentators, journalists and politicians boasted that this was the Canadian Forces' default setting.

As the Iron Curtain fell in 1989, giving former Soviet Bloc and Western European nations a common European home, the UN added five new peacekeeping missions to the five already in operation. Only 13 missions were established in the previous 40 years.

Peacekeeping briefly became even more popular. The UN launched as many missions in the decade following the end of the Cold War as in the previous 45 years. UN Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar enthusiastically called these events "a renaissance of peacekeeping."

But with the new millennium, our military became less engaged with peacekeeping. Our proud peacekeeping heritage is replaced by the images of the Canadian Forces deploying to war. To many Canadians, our military was undergoing fundamental change.

But it was the nature of conflict that changed.

Cold War conflicts were generally conducted between states. Ceasefires allowed a UN peacekeeping force to deploy between the factions to observe and report violations to the Security Council, and permitted invading forces to return to their own territories.

Although sanctioned by the UN Security Council, the 1990-91 Gulf War ended traditional peacekeeping. Unprepared to see our military employing robust force, Canadians saw subsequent missions as a dramatic departure from our national calling.

Somalia: The UN intervention was in response to a civil war, compounded by a drought and famine that killed 300,000. In December 1992, the U.S. military deployed to protect food aid, and the following month Canadian troops joined America's humanitarian efforts to provide relief, assisted by 10,000 troops from 23 other nations.

Beginning as an effort to stop warlords from hijacking relief supplies, the mission went from a Chapter VI operation (peacekeeping) under the UN Charter to Chapter VII (threats and breaches of the peace, and acts of aggression). This permitted UN forces to use military force to accomplish mission objectives.

Balkans: Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnia-Herzegovinian leaders used the decade following Tito's death in 1980 to develop strategies that led to widespread ethnic cleansing. As Yugoslavia fragmented into inter-ethnic violence, the Security Council created the United Nations Protection Force in February 1992. Its mission was to ensure the safety of the UN Protected Areas; protect non-combatants; continue operation of Sarajevo airport; monitor the "no-fly" zone in Bosnia-Herzegovina; and monitor the border of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Truro's own Maj.-Gen. Lewis MacKenzie became a worldwide household name as commander of task force Sarajevo.

Sarajevo: The Bosnian Serb Army's (BSA) disregard for UN resolutions and directives for "Safe Areas" and "heavy weapon exclusion zones," and its Aug. 28, 1995 shelling of the Sarajevo marketplace that killed 38, sparked NATO's air campaign targeting BSA forces. This was NATO's first military operation in response to a United Nations request for support.

Rwanda: Rwanda's brief ethnic cleansing was on a scale unseen since the Second World War. Hutus slaughtered 800,000 Tutsis, against which the Maj.-Gen. Roméo Dallaire's UN security force of 5,500 was powerless. When the UN ordered Gen. Dallaire to withdraw, he and his small peacekeeping force refused, staying to do whatever he could to halt the genocide.

Kosovo: Kosovo was a semi-autonomous Yugoslavian province with a largely ethnic Albanian population. NATO met Slobodan Milosevic's campaign against the Albanian Kosovars with an air campaign against Serbian forces, from March to June 1999. This forced the Serbian security forces to withdraw and established an international military force for security (KFOR). The human cost of Milosevic's efforts was an estimated 10,000 ethnic Albanians killed and hundreds of thousands driven into exile.

Conclusion:

Peacekeeping was the UN's technique of conflict management, control and resolution, in which peacekeepers maintained the status quo during peace negotiations.

As Cold War interstate conflicts disappeared, they were replaced by neighbour-against-neighbour intrastate conflict that, as University of Toronto's Professor Janice Stein noted, is more difficult to control, requiring extraordinary abilities by military leaders who are unfamiliar with the local culture.

We are witnessing the end of the age when peacekeeping was an effective mechanism of management and resolution of interstate conflict. Intrastate violence is much more aggressive and conscienceless, and has, so far, defied international capabilities to manage and resolve it.

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