Being Different Together

“I would rather fight a coalition than be part of one.”
- Napoleon Bonaparte

“There is at least one thing worse than fighting with allies – and that is to fight without them.”
- Winston Churchill

The United Nations (UN) was established in the hope that a strong international organization could foster enough cooperation between nations in order to prevent future conflicts. In the realm of the UN Security Council’s (UNSC) main responsibility of maintaining international peace and security, the UNSC performs three major functions: mediation, peacekeeping, and enforcement. Since 1948, the UN have launched 69 peacekeeping operations of which sixteen missions are currently deployed. The total number of uniformed personnel serving in these sixteen peacekeeping operations is 97,947 (August 2014), all coming from 123 different countries which causes an extreme diversity of nationalities.

The quotes above indicate that both Bonaparte and Churchill already acknowledged that working together in a multinational operation is challenging. This essay emphasizes what accounts for the challenges for UN peacekeeping efforts by looking at the causal relation between diversity and its influence on the effectiveness of peacekeeping operations. In addition, this essay explores ways in which the UN could improve peacekeeping missions' performance. Although the way ‘diversity’ and ‘effectiveness’ are conceptualized can vary enormously, I refer to diversity in terms of the multi-national interaction among the participating countries in a mission themselves. The effectiveness is discussed in terms of the coordination, cooperation or in other words the interoperability between UN peacekeepers which is a precondition for an effective peacekeeping mission.

So far, many academics have stressed the urgency of changing the division of labour in terms of peacekeeping contributions, referred to as the main cleavages between ‘the boots on the ground and the people who pay the bill’. This should ultimately increase the effectiveness of UN peacekeeping efforts. Like O’Clery states, the common argument is that “most UN Peacekeepers are provided by a core group of developing nations including Pakistan, Bangladesh, India,

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Nigeria, Nepal and Rwanda. Not one of the P5 Nations, those holding a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, is a major-troop contributing nation”.\(^3\) In contrast to providing manpower to peacekeeping mission, Western or richer countries dominate in terms of providing financial support to UN operations. Data presented on the UN website confirms that none of the ’P5’ are in the top five of troop and police contributors but they are in the top ten of countries financing peacekeeping: United States 28.38%, France 7.22%, United Kingdom 6.68%, China 6.64% and Russian Federation 3.15%.\(^4\)

The debated problem is that exactly the P5 of the UNSC are calling the shots and make the decisions in terms of what resources will be assigned to the peacekeeping mission in order to perform the tasks written down in the mandate. However, since the penholders do not provide troops but do pay the bills, they might have an incentive in limiting the size and duration of the missions and therefore focus on cost-efficiency and not necessarily on the key success criteria, namely the mandate implementation. Like O’Clery makes clear, it is imperative “that those who constitute the World’s leading powers (...)extend a material hand to the United Nations and refrain from employing their elevated status at the UN merely as a tool for diplomatic games in the greatest of arenas”.\(^5\) Nevertheless, the political decision by the ’P5’ “can be enacted with no regard or concern for the consequences on the ground”, as for instance Cunliffe concludes in the article ’The Politics of Global Governance in UN Peacekeeping.’\(^6\) This results in extremely ambitious Christmas trees in mandates that do not correspond with the assigned resources. Therefore, there is little doubt that poorly crafted mandates have played a large part in some of the UN’s most infamous peacekeeping failures.

In short, many look upon the failure of peacekeeping operations as the failure of the UN system itself with a particular focus on the preparation phase of peacekeeping missions. Along the lines of making the UNSC more representative and making UN peacekeeping efforts more effective, especially the ’G4’ – Brazil, Germany, India and Japan – advocates that the contribution a member state makes to peacekeeping operations in terms of money, but also in terms of troops, should play a determining role in P5 membership. I agree that this might restrict the possibility for financial imperatives to drive the organisational agenda in the future. Ultimately, it could


help crafting mandates of which the assigned resources better correspond with what is needed for UN peacekeepers to effectively fulfil their tasks. Perhaps, it would be possible to increase the number of non-permanent members based on the same criteria as proposed by the G4. However, any change to the composition and power of the P5, seems unlikely since the issue of equitable representation, and enlarging the UNSC has been on the agenda of the General Assembly since its 34th Session in 1979, with – unfortunately – little progress.

I do not argue that the international community should give up their commitment to fight for a more representative and legitimate UN. However, I claim that member states should not lose sight of more small-scale initiatives that can positively impact the peace operations’ effectiveness but does not need a radical change of the UNSC, on which we have been focusing for many decades.

Between April and August 2014, I have conducted twenty interviews in New York, the United States as well as in The Hague, The Netherlands, with experts, military advisers at Permanent Missions to the UN, civilian senior officers working at the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations as well as Field Support and Force Generation Service, civilian as well as military people working at the Dutch Ministry of Defence and former military advisers or leaders of UN peacekeeping missions. Supported by their input, I argue that the tangle of participating countries in a mission leads to different performances of the daily military activities across countries. Consequently, this discontinuity in military behaviour undermines the interoperability between the peacekeepers which is perceived as an indication for the ineffectiveness of peacekeeping missions. But what exactly are the determining factors for the differences in military behaviour as a result of diversity in a mission?

Maybe it sounds really logical, but we do have to take into account that the differences in the use of language, equipment, training and the differences in the way commands are interpreted are important conditions in terms of explaining the negative effect of diversity on UN peacekeeping missions’ performance. Due to these differences, the disunity in military behaviour leads to strained coordination and cooperation or a lack of interoperability among the national troops in the field which results in the mission’s inability to implement the UN mission’s mandate effectively.

However, I think it is even more important to acknowledge that the aspect of domestic politics being a double-edged sword for the UN is a determining and often underestimated factor for the
differences in military behaviour in the mission field. In other words, different participating countries might possess national caveats which could influence the way military activities are conducted during the implementation phase. While national contingents are expected to act in a way that serves the overall objective of the mission mandate, there is still an understanding that there will be national reporting lines between capitals and national contingents. As Van Dullemen, working at UN DPKO, confirmed, often the Force Commander orders the commanders from different nationalities to fulfil a certain task, those national commanders often “go back to their Capital and ask the Capital whether he or she can execute the order”. So metaphorically, national commanders can play ‘red cards’ if their interests as specific nationals are not met during the mission.

Of all the different ways ‘red cards’ could be used by participating countries, I argue that especially the differences in terms of the willingness of national contingents to use force could negatively influence the interoperability in a mission and ultimately the effectiveness of an UN peacekeeping mission. Krokeide, working as counsellor/Deputy Military Adviser Peace Operations and Political Affairs at the Norway Mission to the UN, for instance stated that “the ideas of the Africans and the ideas of the South-East Asians on what peacekeeping should be, is quite different, particularly when it comes to the big issue of to what extent you should be able to use force”. Especially, “there is an increased division also between the Southerners”, as Krokeide explained, because “the Africans are more willing to take risks, (...) whereas the South East Asian countries, particularly Pakistani and Indians, believe that you should stick to the traditional peacekeeping mandates with an emphasis on the limited use of force”.

Furthermore, a lot of countries have the power to say what part of the country they want to be deployed to. Next to this geographical limitation and the willingness to use force as two forms of national caveats, countries also possess rules and limitations in terms of with which countries they want to work with when the mission is actually deployed. This third form of national caveats complicates the cooperation between participating countries and in the end could negatively influence the effectiveness of a mission. For example Luitenant-Colonel Van der Leest, Head of Section Current Operations of the Netherlands Air Force Staff, stressed that with regard to the intelligence network that is build up in Mali, they are selective in terms of with which countries they want to closely work with. As he elaborates on this, “we work with weapon systems that are secret and therefore we have a lot of criteria for securing those weapon systems”. Furthermore, he stated that “there are a lot of countries contributing to a mission, of which we think the quality of their aircraft is not good enough and therefore we do not give
permission for our soldiers to fly with those aircraft". Lastly, countries might only want to work with some specific national contingents of which they think they will provide the health care that they are used to in their own country.

These examples show, that in order to really make UN peacekeeping missions more effective it would not be appropriate to keep addressing the failure of peace operations as the failure of the UN system itself. Despite of focusing on the preparation phase of peacekeeping contributions, it is time to pay more attention to the disunity in military behaviour during the implementation phase of a mission. But could this lack of interoperability among the national troops being solved more viable than trying to change the division of labour in terms of peacekeeping contributions by aiming at reforming the UNSC?

Maybe the conditions of diversity causing disunity in military behaviour among national contingents will not go away and are inherent in any multilateral military effort. However, in order to improve the effectiveness of peacekeeping efforts, the negative effect of the disunity in military behaviour can be mitigated by small-scale initiatives.

While bearing in mind that the implementation phase of a mission is always connected to the preparation phase, it would be really beneficial if member states try to build strategic partnerships with like-minded countries. This means that meetings have to be arranged with groups of current contributors and/or groups of countries that are interested in participating in peacekeeping efforts in the future. A strategic dialogue between those different groups of countries would provide a better understanding in terms of what capabilities and mind-set each country has and thus would clarify what the differences are in terms of training, equipment, command structures and moreover what the national caveats are of the different countries. Too often, participating countries face these differences when they are already deployed. This makes it really difficult to achieve real interoperability during the implementation phase of the mission, in which each contingent is often already under pressure if the violence is escalating.

Furthermore, I claim that building these partnerships is not something that solely has to be initiated by the UN DPKO. On the contrary, it is also something the member states themselves have to work on since they simply have to ‘do the job’. In that regard, under the name of ‘Being a Peacekeeper Series’, the International Peace Institute, in collaboration with the UNDPKO and UN DFS, has already taken the initiative in 2010 to organize a series of high-level meetings in each region of the world, which has brought together not only existing but also potential contributing
countries and senior UN officials. During these meetings, lessons, future opportunities and concerns with regard to the participation in UN peacekeeping missions were discussed. By doing so, not only the quality of individual contributions to UN peacekeeping but especially the interoperability among participating countries during the deployment of peacekeeping missions will be improved. Therefore, I claim that many more initiatives like the ‘Being a Peacekeeper Series’, should follow. In this way the possible negative effects of the conditions of diversity on the effectiveness of the mission can already be mitigated before every national contingent is exposed to the challenges of maintaining international peace and security. A radical change of the UNSC is not needed to achieve that.

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