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The Enduring Relevance of Dag Hammarskjöld's Characterization of Peacekeeping

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JAMES SLOAN, MAR 30 2011

Dag Hammarskjöld, as Secretary General of the United Nations from 1953 to 1961, who was seen as the "...pragmatic idealist..."[1] steered the international organisation through a period which saw the UN develop as a peacekeeper, in a mould that would set the agenda for decades to come. The United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF I) in Suez led to the publication of the "Summary Study" in which the foundations of classical peacekeeping were laid out in a way, which prior to this, had never been conceptualised. This essay shall analyse the Dag Hammarskjöld Summary Study, which was first published on 9th October 1958. Focus will include insights on the UNEF I mission, which preceded the document by two years, and the United Nations Operation in the Congo (ONUC), which followed two years subsequent to the publication. Conclusions will be drawn over the impact the Summary Study had as the first formal work on the theory of peacekeeping, and to what extent it fitted within the development of the United Nations.

"... [UNEF I] functioned under a clear-cut mandate which has entirely detached it from involvement in any internal or local problems, and...also enabled it to maintain its neutrality, in relation to international political issues."[2]

The ability of the UN to work as an agency aloof of regional or national problems was cemented in theoretical terms in the above paragraph, taken from the Summary Study.

An early aim of the document itself was to ensure the foundation of the United Nations as a truly global actor, with the ability to rise above international politics, and play the part of a pragmatic and neutral player, thus building respect towards the institution – a missing component of the League of Nations, which led to its eventual downfall. A key factor of early peacekeeping was the issue of consent. Such consent would have two clear endeavours; one would be to enshrine the legitimacy of the UN mission, with support from the international community; the other aim was to guarantee the mission had authority from the host state, where troops would be stationed.

UNEF I did indeed acquire permission from Egypt, this however, in turn led directly to another issue concerning what actors would be involved on the ground mission. The primary motive in choosing willing actors concerned those states own political leanings, and as such, they had to be chosen from a selection of politically neutral, non-aligned states. The reasoning for such a motive has to be placed in historical context. This period in time was at the crux of the developing world order in which bi-polarity would dominate the international system for decades to come. The Cold War was a time of intense geo-political relations, and as such, many states were increasingly being drawn into alignment to either one of two ideologies espoused by the USA, or the USSR. Alongside this, decolonisation had yet to occur, thus the international system had distinctly fewer states with sufficient military clout that were able to perform ground duties with proficiency. Personnel from ten states in total including Canada and Sweden, alongside the now-defunct Yugoslavia[3], took part in the UNEF I mission.

The intertwining aims of legitimacy for the status of the UN alongside the issue of state consent were the two ultimate aims in theorising the status of peacekeeping in the UNEF I mission. With the UN performing as a pragmatic and neutral host, in the first phase of peacekeeping, host states were, in theory, able to espouse their feelings upon the actors involved on the ground, and thus were able to veto an operation by removing consent, as occurred in Egypt.

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"While the United Nations must reserve to itself the authority to decide on the composition of such elements, it is obvious, that the host country, in giving its consent, cannot be indifferent to the composition of those elements." [4]

Had the UN not withdrawn once Egypt removed consent in 1967, questions would have undoubtedly been raised over what authority the organisation had in remaining in the country. In order to overcome potential conflict of interests, an early policy was that "...the Force [UNEF I, in this instance] should be recruited from Member States other than the permanent members of the Security Council." [5] This was a particularly pertinent point in UNEF I, as the Suez crisis involved both British and French military against the government of Egypt. The ideal candidates for peacekeeping would be those states who were not known to play power politics, yet had a reputable military capability, but whose motives were not deemed mistrustful when operating on ground missions on behalf of the UN, or indeed, other actors. [6] However, such a policy would be unwritten in the subsequent years due, in part, to the changing nature of peacekeeping and the evolving world order, with the collapse of the Soviet empire, and the process of decolonisation. In spite of the number of UN member states increasing, many of these states were not in a position to provide sufficient military support, and perhaps, ironically, due to their own historical links with other nations could not partake due to conflict of interest – the fact that stopped permanent members from taking part in earlier conflicts.

The UN intervention in the Congo was a considerably different mission, in size alone, in contrast to UNEF I. Whilst Hammarskjöld envisaged peacekeeping only being operational for a short term, temporary basis, this idea would be amended in relation to ONUC, when it was decreed that peacekeeping operations from then on would have to receive a new mandate every six months. [7] Indeed some missions, including the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) has been in continual existence since 1964. This differing approach occurred due to the more pro-active stance taken by the UN mission involving themselves within the politics of the state, something that the UN was not mandated to partake in. This alongside military involvement from the USSR thus appeared to indicate the flexibility of interpretation of the Summary Study in practice on the ground. [8] This move would allow the permanent members of the Security Council to have a greater say on peacekeeping operations, after earlier instances in which it was made clear that such members would not be allowed to partake in missions.

Classical peacekeeping would follow voluntarily with "...an invitation from the conflict parties to monitor the cease-fire, followed by deployment of military personnel, while negotiations for a political settlement continued." [9] Something that contemporary cases would not necessarily follow would be the issue of invitation; rather the UN would approach cases of injustices without requiring consent

The composition of peacekeeping forces, particularly in this early period of development, was a critical aspect in affirming the integrity of the UN. It perhaps could be suggested that such a strict stance had to be taken in order to ensure the United Nations did not suffer the same fate as the League of Nations, with lack of legitimacy, and general contempt. However, one must also consider why such a paper was not legalised by becoming formal international law. The fact that peacekeeping provision was not outlined in the United Nations Charter was down to the fact that it was simply not envisaged as an act that would be partaken by the UN. This itself is an underlying theme that Secretary General Hammarskjöld tried to project in his study, the idea that peacekeeping was a voluntary act, and not Chapter VII enforcement. Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter has often been highlighted as the antithesis to peacekeeping due to the conflicting natures of what characterises each side, and as such, peacekeeping was not initially envisaged as a concept, let alone a task that would operate under UN support. A key element of Chapter VII is that under collective security, imposed military force can be used. Classical peacekeeping, as outlined in the study is a more consensual model, yet does retain harder elements of Chapter VII including the need for states to provide military back up should the UN call for such required action. Whilst Chapter VII implies more heavy warfare, peacekeeping in practice was more along the lines of policing a situation rather than means of enforcement. Yet enforcement would occur later, when the UN believed state consent would not be achieved, as highlighted in the case of the former Yugoslavia, during the ethnic cleansing crisis of the mid-1990s. [10]

Dag Hammarskjöld was a strong believer in the ability of the UN to promote a strong international community with respect for international legal norms. [11] Yet, despite such strong beliefs, his conceptual study of peacekeeping, whilst becoming a blueprint, never became legally enshrined within the United Nations Charter. As such ambiguities

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and changing politics allowed the UN to alter their focus in relation to peacekeeping activities. Perhaps the ambiguity between the UN Charter and what Mr Hammarskjöld proposed would have proved too complex to merge, thus rather than rewrite the Charter – itself a relatively new product – keeping peacekeeping as a more informal activity would allow such missions to develop and expand as the world around it changed.

The changing role of peacekeeping could be summarised in the fact that “World order no longer meant [only] stopping wars between states. It also meant responsibility for domestic order...”[12] As the “...neutral third party...[preventing] conflict escalation...”[13], UNEF I set the standard as to how peacekeeping would be both policed and practiced, yet in the coming years, such guidelines proved to be far more flexible than those set out in the UN charter. Consent and neutrality are the two key concepts which can be drawn from the Summary Study. Thus, as such, the document became the blueprint, to which the UN would undertake peacekeeping operations, in spite of the document's status as a non-international law paper, the formative actions taken by the UN would abide by the written principals of this paper. Simultaneously the paper asserted the role that the UN would be that of a neutral actor on global issues and not merely as a political vehicle for the permanent members of the Security Council. The publication of this document enshrined the legitimacy of, not only the United Nations as an international actor, but also the legitimacy of it as a body with the ability to intervene in both inter- and intra-state conflicts as a non-aligned actor. Alongside this, the Hammarskjöld study gave light to the attitudes and thinking behind the Secretary General, and his pragmatic stance, understanding that peacekeeping under the UN was “...not created in order to bring us to heaven, but in order to save us from hell.”[14] The problem in analysing the Hammarskjöld study is that it was created in a period when the global order was very different to today, and whilst many attributes of the document are still relevant, the document was produced with very little experience in peacekeeping and as such was more of “...an ad hoc response to particular problems, rather than ... a rigid blueprint for international action.”[15]

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