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How the UN could develop an Emergency Peace Service – and why it should [H. Peter Langille](#) 28 September 2016

Sustainable common security will remain elusive until we identify better universal options to help. A UN Emergency Peace Service would improve operational prevention, protection and possibly more.



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United Nations Peacekeepers - Lebanon.

Do we really need another Cold War, a new balance of terror, or a pending [slaughter](#) to demonstrate a dysfunctional security system?

Already, the [Global Peace Index](#) reports the annual cost of war at a staggering \$13.6 trillion. In May, the [President](#) of the UN General Assembly conceded the obvious: 70 years after its founding, the organisation is still not equipped to meet its primary objective – to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.

Yet with one development – a United Nations Emergency Peace Service – effectively a ‘first responder’ for complex emergencies, the UN would finally have a rapid, reliable capacity to help

fulfill some of its tougher assigned tasks. Such a shift may not be far off; we have understood what is needed for over fifty years.

The recent reports of the [UN High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations](#) (HIPPO), the [Commission on Global Security, Justice & Governance](#) and the UN Secretary-General's '[Future of Peace Operations](#)' attracted little news or attention, largely because there was little that is really new to report. Each offered numerous recommendations that will prove helpful, but remain insufficient.

In the UN system, an ounce of prevention tends to be worth a tonne of cure

Despite calls for bold and ambitious ideas and dire warnings of worse ahead, their projected future is largely a continuation of previous efforts. Once again, there is renewed enthusiasm for a standby rapidly deployable mission headquarters (the UN briefly had a standing RDMHQ from 96-98), and some are encouraged by new pledges from troop and police contributors, as well as new financial incentives for deploying more promptly with key enablers.

But the emphasis on standby resources and regional partnerships is an approach that has been repeatedly tried and failed since the early 90s. In short, the problem is not that they are non-binding and conditional, but that they also require extensive negotiations, then national approval and national caveats stipulating terms of use before any contingents may be rented and deployed to a UN operation. And, in complex emergencies, most will only stand by.

Once again, prevention of armed conflict has been elevated to the forefront. In the UN system and in complex emergencies, an ounce of prevention tends to be worth a tonne of cure. On a yearly basis, the UN Secretary-General pleads for assistance with prevention, but the member states routinely narrow the menu to early warning and further cooperation with regional organisations. Now, as [Youssef Mahmoud](#) writes, "the three 2015 UN global peace and security reviews that frame the debate have conveyed a common message: that the political instruments, tools, and mechanisms the world body deploys to address violent conflict all attest to the failure of early prevention."

The UN approach to reform of peace operations, prevention and protection remains fixed on the official preference for pragmatic, incremental modification of existing arrangements

Across the world, people have seen that the available capacity for preventing armed conflict and protecting civilians at extreme risk – both being [R2P](#) priorities – are frequently too destructive, even counter-productive. While the UN has made headway in both areas, it remains dependent on the political will of its member states and their national police and troops, which are seldom prepared or inclined to [protect and prevent](#) when either entail risks. Instead of rapid deployment, UN operations continue to be characterized by routine delays and slow responses; on average it takes 6-12 months to deploy, once the Security Council has authorised a mission.

As a result, violent conflicts tend to escalate and spread, and then demand larger, longer and far costlier operations. In turn, the prospects for disarmament and development are set back for decades.

The UN... remains dependent on the political will and standby resources of its member states

Overall, the UN approach to reform of peace operations, prevention and protection – like discussions of disarmament – remains fixed on the official preference for pragmatic, incremental modification of existing arrangements.

The [control paradigm](#), ‘[liddism](#)’ and militarism have a peculiar hold system-wide. Slowly, we are beginning to see they are not simply outdated and dangerous; they are also costly and unsustainable. Since President-General Dwight Eisenhower warned of the unwarranted influence of a military-industrial complex, it has expanded globally into finance, banking and insurance sectors, big oil and gas, tele-communications, advanced technology and media. With its heavy investment in current approaches, even governments are reluctant to raise progressive alternatives.

For now, this may be viewed as another process of exhausting every dubious option first. When combined with austerity and the mantra of ‘do more with less’, there is little tolerance for any option which might incur costs or push the annual budget for UN peacekeeping above the sacred ceiling of \$8 billion. In turn, the UN will struggle to cope with overlapping crises. Inevitably there will be recurring calls for a [UN rapid deployment](#) capacity, a more rapid and reliable first responder, a strategic reserve, a vanguard force and a better means of protecting civilians.

But a more favorable interpretation is also possible. After all, it is critical to build a stronger UN foundation that can manage more ambitious developments. The weaknesses are easy to identify; the steps to better are less obvious.

The UNEPS option was specifically designed to help prevent armed conflict and genocide...where other actors either cannot or will not

Further, a paradigm shift depends not only on the wider recognition of an approach being inadequate or failing, but also upon an alternative being widely supported as better. Here, several recent recommendations may open new space. The Commission on Global Security, Justice and Governance asks that civil society prepare ideas and networks now to develop a more receptive political environment for global governance. They call for a World Forum on Global Institutions in 2020. Similarly, the HIPPO proposed a new Global Prevention Forum. Who knows? A few ideas might yet shift the political space from pragmatic to bold and hopefully, better.

It is not that governments don’t know how or what’s needed. As early as 1961, officials in the [U.S. State Department](#) acknowledged: "There is an inseparable relationship between the scaling down of national armaments on the one hand and the building up of international peacekeeping machinery and institutions on the other. Nations are unlikely to shed their means

of self-protection in the absence of alternative ways to safeguard their legitimate interests. This can only be achieved through the progressive strengthening of international institutions under the United Nations and by creating a United Nations Peace Force to enforce the peace as the disarmament process proceeds."

Then, it was understood that a UN Peace Force had vast potential to address perceived security concerns, serve as a legitimate security guarantor, deter crimes, prevent aggression, facilitate disarmament and free up enormous resources for better purposes. Granted, there was little enthusiasm for a UN Force and little effort to mobilise the wider support required.

Following the Rwandan genocide, both Canada and the Netherlands commenced [national studies](#) of a standing UN force (1994-95) and a [multinational initiative](#) to develop UN rapid deployment capacity. The ensuing consultative process also revealed little support for a 'UN force', 'army' or 'legion', but wider receptivity to the notion of an integrated UN service.

One idea retains traction: The proposal for a permanent [United Nations Emergency Peace Service](#) (UNEPS) stemmed largely from that process and subsequent refinement. At the outset, the twin objectives were to identify both a viable plan and a widely appealing idea that might attract a broad-based constituency of support.

The UNEPS option was specifically designed to help prevent armed conflict and genocide, to protect civilians at extreme risk, to ensure prompt start-up of demanding peace operations, and to address human needs where others either cannot or will not.

Ten core principles characterise the UNEPS proposal. It's to be:

- a permanent standing, integrated UN formation;
- highly trained and well-equipped;
- ready for immediate deployment upon authorization of the UN Security Council;
- multidimensional (civilians, police and military);
- multifunctional (capable of diverse assignments with specialized skills for security, humanitarian, health and environmental crises);
- composed of 13,500 dedicated personnel (recruited professionals, selected, trained and employed by the UN);
- developed to ensure regional and gender equitable representation;
- co-located at a designated UN base under an operational headquarters and two mobile mission headquarters;
- at sufficient strength to operate in high-threat environments; and,
- a service to complement existing UN and regional arrangements, with a first responder to cover the initial six months until Member States can deploy.

Arguably, the most distinctive feature of a UN Emergency Peace Service is that it would be a standing UN formation, prepared and ready to serve in diverse UN operations. Thus, a UNEPS would clearly be a more reliable and rapid first responder; one that could also serve as a vanguard, strategic reserve and a modest security guarantor, both to deter violent crime and respond, when necessary, to prevent and protect. States with advanced militaries could transform Cold War capacity for war-fighting towards UN peace operations. While any such a transformation will be resisted in the short-term, it's now critical to persist in efforts to shift destructive capacity towards capacity to help.

Shifting military culture toward helping the most vulnerable is another critical step toward preventing sexual abuse in peace operations.

With an integrated multidimensional service, a UNEPS can provide a more comprehensive response to violence at various levels. Clearly, military elements are needed to deter and stop direct violence while improving security as police units restore law and order. Humanitarian assistance, medical and civilian peacebuilding teams are often critical to address human needs and counter the structural violence of exploitation and exclusion.

Public information units and human rights monitors and educators help to stem the cultural violence of extreme politics, religion and media. Conflict resolution and mediation teams can help at every level. Together, by minimising direct, structural and cultural violence, they improve the prospects for more positive, sustainable peace.

Further, a UNEPS would help to develop higher standards system-wide. Individuals volunteering to serve would be recruited, screened and selected on the basis of merit, skill and commitment, then hired on a basis similar to the UN civil servants in the Secretariat. As a dedicated UN service in a coherent formation, with advanced doctrine, training and equipment, UN operations could get off to a good start quickly. National police and troop contributors would likely improve in response. Both would improve the UN foundation for peace operations. And, shifting military culture toward helping the most vulnerable is another critical step toward preventing [sexual abuse](#) in peace operations.

A UNEPS would inevitably entail major start-up and recurring costs. Given a full complement of 13,300 personnel, the start-up costs would be in the range of \$3 billion, with annual recurring costs of approximately \$1.5 billion and, incremental costs for field operations of approximately \$1.2 billion. These costs would likely be shared proportionally among 193 Member States as part of each nation's assessed share of the UN regular budget.

For some, that may appear as an unwarranted cost, but this option merits further consideration as both a life saver and a cost saver. A UNEPS would not only help to prevent the escalation of volatile conflicts and deter groups from armed violence; it could also drastically cut the size, the length and the frequency of UN operations. Even with success in just one of these areas, it should provide a substantive return on the investment.

A United Nations Emergency Peace Service merits consideration as both a life saver and a cost saver

Clearly, a UNEPS is no panacea or cure all. It's neither intended nor capable of mid-to-high intensity war-fighting or large-scale enforcement operations. It's to provide prompt, legitimate help in complex emergencies, with an array of useful services. Unlike previous proposals, the objective is to complement the existing foundation for UN peace operations. As such, it would remain dependent on national standby resources and partnerships for prompt replacement and rotation, as well as augmentation and extraction if necessary.

Notably, in 2004, the UN made a bold call for [defence transformation](#), encouraging member states with advanced militaries to transform Cold War capacity for war-fighting towards UN peace operations. Few responded. To their credit, the numerous members of the [African Union](#) have done much of the heavy-lifting in UN operations while developing five regional standby brigades, a rapid deployment capacity and the subsequent African capacity for immediate response to crisis. [China](#) is also among the more promising exceptions, with its recent pledge to develop a well-equipped 8000 troop standby force for UN peace operations. These are encouraging precedents. Now, it's critical to persist in wider efforts to shift destructive capacity toward capacity to help.

Of course, there will be powerful resistance to national defence transformation and development of a UN Emergency Peace Service. For many, both are an unrealistic, non-starter, especially with conflict threatening an extension of the long war and leaders inclined to oblige.

Yet a system of sustainable common security, with a more effective UN isn't a naïve dream; it simply requires cooperative decisions to make the UN work as intended. A big joint project may be the crucial first step.

A UN Emergency Peace Service would improve operational prevention and protection, as well as prompt higher standards in operations abroad. That it would also improve prospects for the deeper structural prevention required is evident. In an earlier period, officials acknowledged a similar entity was a pre-requisite to a wider disarmament process. No one expects the shift from a war system to a peace system will be easy. Yet a more effective UN appears key to each.

In short, developing a UN that can fulfill assigned tasks is about shifting from a dysfunctional war system that provides profits for a small minority, but risks all, to a legitimate peace system with wider benefits for people and the planet. Perhaps, that's also an overdue shift from a 'lose-lose' history of violence to a 'win-win' future.

Now, it's time to build a broader network of support among civil society and officials of inclined member states. After all, ideas seldom work unless we do.

About the author

H. Peter Langille (MA- NPSIA, PhD- Bradford) specialises in peace and conflict studies, independent defence and security analysis and UN peace operations. His latest book is [Developing a United Nations Emergency Peace Service: Meeting our responsibilities to Prevent and Protect](#), (New York: Palgrave Pivot, 2015).