

Challenges to UN Peacebuilding¹

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Abstract

Peacebuilding and Peacekeeping are two distinct but complementary operations. The article examines four cases where in the first three, the causes of the conflict result from reasons which may be classified as due to 'Sacred Geography', and in the fourth due to other reasons. The article brings out the challenges faced in Peacebuilding and Peacekeeping and ends by stating that the practical way forward will be the regular evaluation of the peace process, reappraise the policy, and review the organisational structure without hurrying up for a quick exit after the restoration of the security situation.

Introduction

The end of the Cold War did not usher in a peace dividend as was expected earlier. The myth regarding the shared feelings of the sufferings of the colonial past preventing the outbreak of wars amongst the newly independent nations, mostly in Africa, was broken. There were not only conflicts between the states but also intra-state conflicts. In Africa, after a short decline in the conflicts in the early 2000s, there was a steady rise in the armed conflicts in the the region.² While the United Nations (UN) is struggling to institute more robust structures to rebuild the states, it is confronted with secessionist struggles amongst the belligerent groups. Peacekeeping missions are now expected to get involved in the internal affairs of the states but are finding it difficult to keep the peace. Within the states, there are contestations for power at the central level with political objectives.

At the local level, the motivations for the belligerents for the continuation of the conflict are triggered by a desire for physical control of the space due to either ideological reasons or financial

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gain. Since most current conflicts are in the African Region and given the ambiguity of the violence, the process of peacebuilding has become messy, complex, and challenging in the shrinking space. As I wrote earlier in one of my previous articles, the failure of peacekeeping in establishing peace could vary from strategic to tactical reasons.³ The French-American author, and researcher, Severine Autesserre noted that fight over the primacy of land causes and produces violence.⁴ To the belligerents, the continuation of the conflicts could be inspired by their obsession with the sacred nature of space or geography. How does the sacred geography then impact the process of peacebuilding?

This article will cite examples from one relatively older conflict in the Balkan Region in 1999 and two of the contemporary conflicts in Africa, as it relates to peacebuilding and as the author understands the meaning of *sacred geography*. To refer to the geography or space as sacred and linking it to peacebuilding is slightly puzzling. We will try to deconstruct the puzzle first by establishing the relationship between 'sacred geography' and the conflict, and then delve into its linkage with peacebuilding.

Sacred Geography and Peacebuilding

While to some, the territory for which the fight is on is sacred because of religion, to others it may be sacred because of historical reasons. Geography also denotes the complex contours of these conflicts. Hence, one could interpret the meaning of '*sacred geography*' as the unique curves of the complex intra-state conflicts where most of the current UN peace operations are deployed. Regardless of its changing explanation, control of territory remains very sacred to the disputants, who may benefit from either continuation or termination of both inter-state and intra-state conflicts. I will begin with the story of the sacredness of Kosovo.

Kosovo. The legend goes that in the battle between the Serbian Christian forces and the Ottoman Turk forces in Kosovo on 28 June 1389, Serbian prince Lazar sacrificed his earthly empire for the heavenly empire. This as expounded by the American University professor, Julie Mertus, is also known as '*Kosovo Myth*'.⁵ Kosovo, therefore, is sacred to Serbia and hence untouchable. For the Serbs, the memory of Kosovo has become a *Sacred Grief*. Mertus, however, concluded, after her interview with Serbians and Albanians, that the myths are more persuasive than the facts to

trigger hatred and endanger the truth. Stripping the autonomy of Kosovo and making it part of Yugoslavia simply helped President Milosevic to use Kosovo in pursuit of his power. Therefore, even after the declaration of independence by Kosovo in 2008 and despite its recognition by 103 out of 193 UN members, Serbia has refused to recognise Kosovo with consequential effect on the post-war peacebuilding activities. Further, because of Russian opposition, United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), which was established by Security Council Resolution (SCR) 1244 to govern Kosovo, never left.⁶

Kosovo has a population of less than 2 million with 92% Kosovo Albanians and 8% other communities. Serbians comprise only 1.5% of the population.⁷ This population, which now lives in a divided society in isolated enclaves and being guided by Belgrade's political life, refuses to move out of Kosovo. The Declaration of Independence of Kosovo was based on the plan proposed by Ahtisaari, the former UN special envoy to Kosovo.⁸ Ahtisaari plan seemed to have been the only alternative to give shape to the status of Kosovo, which included a new constitution for Kosovo, the creation of enclaves, and the segregation of minorities. It essentially meant the partition of Kosovo. Presently, the international community is trapped in a situation of not knowing which side to go. The unresolved status of Kosovo is being perceived as a security threat by the communities. Kosovo Albanians are afraid of losing their freedom, Serbia fears losing Kosovo, and Kosovo Serbians worry of revenge — being the minority. The current situation has also not helped to address massive Human Rights (HR) violations, delay in justice to war crimes, the allegations of corruption, and the population's losing faith in the government. The current situation in Kosovo is such that though the Kosovo Albanians expected UNMIK to bring autonomy, a large part of the blame now goes to UNMIK for Kosovo's unresolved status. Soon after the riot of 2004, UNMIK hurriedly handed over a lot of responsibilities to the Kosovo authorities for which they were not prepared. Some were transferred to the European Union (EU) also. But when several EU members have not recognised the independent status of Kosovo, state-building activities have taken a hit. As for the Kosovo Serbs, mostly those from the north, they refuse to recognise the legitimacy of the newly declared state and do not engage with the government

of Kosovo. They continue to believe that they belong to Serbia. The cumulative effect is that while the unresolved status of Kosovo has become a hostage to international and European politics, its contested legitimacy is the challenge to the peacebuilding efforts because of Serbia's obstinate stand on the so-called sacredness of Kosovo.

Mali. Mali, intertwined with security and governance challenges, is the latest challenge to the international community. It is slightly different in the sense that one of the disputants — Tuaregs consider the northern part of the country as sacred because of their belief that their right over that territory, which was taken away from them by the French in the 19th century, is sacrosanct to them. The first uprising by the Tuaregs took place in 1911 and again later in 1963, which was brutally suppressed by the Malian Army. The latest rebellion took place in 2012.⁹ The key provisions of the peace accord of 2015 remain unimplemented. Humanitarian relief has been constrained because of droughts, security threats, poor infrastructure, and limited donors. In addition, lack of political will, spoilers, jihadi threats, and implication of Malian soldiers in grave HR abuses have undermined the peace process. While the Tuaregs are now sitting on the side of the government, the armed groups, who have signed the peace accord, are changing their alliance and are yet to be demobilised. While United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), which is mandated to provide logistical support to G 5 forces, is facing stark challenges, the US is constantly trying to block the effort of France to reinforce the UN effort in Mali.¹⁰ Even though defeated in 2012, internally divided and their movement hijacked by the jihadists, Tuaregs, however, still cling to their national dream of complete independence from Mali. As if it was not enough, in August 2020, Col Assimi Goïta has seized power in Mali, detaining transitional President Bah Ndaw and Prime Minister Moctar Ouane after accusing them of failing in their duties and trying to sabotage the West African state's transition to democracy.¹¹ Such circumstances, with the jihadi movement spreading to central Mali and the violence creating an 'unprecedented humanitarian emergency', have become a challenge to the state-building activities in Mali.

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). DRC is another example where despite so many peace agreements, the current situation is

still in a mess. According to Autesserre, what began as the grass-root conflict over access to land and power politics between the so-called indigenous Congolese in Kivu (eastern Congo) and the Congolese of Rwanda descent who migrated to Congo, first escalated into a national political issue and then into a regional conflict. Even after the end of the war in 2003, the micro-level antagonism continued to fuel the insurgencies. But the strategy to build peace has been based on the dominant narrative that the current situation is a fallout of the large-scale violence of the two Congo wars. Autesserre gave two conventional explanations for the failure of international peacebuilders in Congo. First, despite sincere interest to establish peace, there are contextual constraints that hamper the peace process. Second, because of institutional vested interests, some peacebuilders deliberately encourage or ignore peace agreement violations. She reported that the popular belief that some Westerners actively exploit rich mineral resources of Congo and hence encourage the continuation of violence is flawed because of the lack of adequate statistics.¹² She, however, later noted that “The illegal exploitation of Congolese mineral resources thus holds a central place as one of the primary motivations for violence waged by regional and national actors”.¹³ The ‘illegal exploitation’ being looked at as a desecration of the motherland.

Other Challenges

In South Sudan, severe droughts and floods, because of climate change, force large population migrations within South Sudan and some even crossing the border to Sudan looking for shelter and food. According to the author’s interview with one Indian Army officer who recently returned from his tenure with United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), the migrating population gets harassed by the corrupt security forces and, at times, get caught in the crossfire between the warring armed groups. There are also occasions when the hungry population even plan to rob the storage of the World Food Program (WFP). During the dry seasons, it is not that the Nile River fully dries up but the water level recedes and the wealthier ones who reside next to the riverbank are still able to use the water. Even during heavy flooding, the rich ones manage to survive. It is only the poorer ones from the hinterland who lack the resources to survive the drought and excessive flooding are forced to migrate to other places.¹⁴

Protection of civilians being the core objective of the mandate, a sizeable number of peacekeepers get diverted to the protection duties of the food granary, the workers, and other UN and non-UN agencies associated with humanitarian work. When the armed rival gangs fight for their survival, even a strong, well-armed, and well-equipped UN patrol does not seem to be strong enough and the deterrence by the UN patrols rarely work. On the contrary, if an armed group decides to train its guns on the UN patrols, using force even in self-defence may not work. Addressing these challenges will always be at the cost of the mandated tasks, and peacebuilding activities take a beating.

Despite the challenges, United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) brings in some rays of hope.¹⁵ While peacemaking has slowed down in Abyei, one of the eight disputed areas between Sudan and South Sudan, mostly because of lack of cooperation on part of Sudan and South Sudan, peacebuilding is still progressing, albeit slowly. In Abyei, threat to security comes mainly from local crimes and fight between Nogk Dinkar and Misseria communities. The situation, however, is kept under control by the UNISFA and the local community, providing some breathing space to the peacebuilding activities regardless of how much progress has been made in other critical areas.

Peacebuilding and Substantive Skill

Military and civilian peacekeepers work side-by-side in a peace operation and, at times, in overlapping issues. However, among others, some of the activities where civilians have better expertise and hence can make a significant contribution are humanitarian assistance; rehabilitation and economic reconstruction; resettlement of refugees; monitoring and improving human rights situations; establishment of interim administration; mediation and confidence-building measures; and, finally, transition of authority. Such expertise can be classified broadly under two categories — UN and non-UN.

UN Agencies. Barring a very few in the department of political and civil affairs, the UN mostly comprises staff with administration as their core competency. But they lack the skill required for numerous peacebuilding activities. Whatever little capability they have is limited to support the operations of the peacekeeping mission. Therefore, the required skill, perforce, will have to come

from UN agencies like United Nations Development Program (UNDP), United Nations Children Education Fund (UNICEF), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) etc. which comprise some trained hands and can execute selected and limited substantive mandated programs. Unfortunately, governed by different board of directors and having different sources of funding, these agencies are independent in their functioning. In addition, since the budgetary process for both peace operations and UN agencies are completely different, it is difficult to align and execute the UN agencies' tasks along with the UN peace operation activities.¹⁶

The Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General is double hatted and is responsible to coordinate the activities of these agencies. However, being considered only as one among the equals, he is also constrained by the limited say of the UN Secretariat in the policy and employment of the UN agencies. It is important to conceive, develop, and cater for the required resources for all developmental programs, which fall in the core competency of the civilian experts, as early as possible, preferably even before the signing of the peace accord. In the case of a peacekeeping operation, once the mandate and operational parameters and exact requirements of men and material are spelt out, planning and providing administrative support becomes relatively easier. But it is difficult to determine and establish such parameters for peacebuilding activities during the initial stages of the peace process.

Non-UN Agencies. To execute important peacebuilding projects, the know-how is available partly with the national governments but mainly with non-government agencies. Even the ability of the governments to make available such services are limited to only a few areas and, that too, when not in use in their own countries. On the other hand, the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), who have the expertise and capability, contribute under bilateral arrangement with the host government/nation. Influenced by explicit agendas and with independent sources of funding, the NGOs take pride in their freedom and dislike oversight and accountability. The net result is duplication of work and wastage of resources. That aside, at the local level, in places like South Sudan where displacement of the population is because of climate change, the peacebuilding activities should aim at helping the local population

to stay put in the same place and go through the difficult days with assistance.

Conclusion

With multiple stakeholders in the conflict zone who are genuinely interested in rebuilding the broken society but with varying interests, peacebuilding will be fraught with challenges. The best option, therefore, will be to try to avoid duplication and achieve prioritisation of their activities by making them partners at work from the very beginning. The leadership to implement such an ambitious plan must have the ability to coordinate and synergise the activities of all agencies in the field. The present type of heads of missions or special representatives of the Secretary-General of the UN is to a great extent remain focused on the peace agreement, cessation of hostility, democratisation, the conduct of election, and exit. A person who has been a successful former head of a government, or has good potentials to head a government, is likely to meet the qualitative requirements of such leadership demand.

Progress on the security situation, or decrease in violence, and peacebuilding need not be sequential. These two activities can run concurrently. Taking a cue from Abyei, when the security situation remains under reasonable control, at some stage peacebuilding may kick in the peacemaking. It is, however, difficult to predict how long does it take for both peacemaking and peacebuilding to march forward at a good speed and in tandem. The major challenge to the peacekeepers, therefore, is time. The practical way forward will be the regular evaluation of the peace process, reappraise the policy, and review the organisational structure without hurrying up for a quick exit after the restoration of the security situation.

Endnotes

¹ This article is an updated and modified version of the author's talk delivered on UN Day Seminar in New Delhi on 29 May 2019.

² Sandy Africa, "Challenges of Peacebuilding in Africa", <https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/challenges-of-peacebuilding-in-africa/>, accessed August 17, 2021

³ A K Bardalai, "United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Causes for Failure and Continuing Relevance", *Journal of Defence Studies* 12, no. 4 (October-December 2018): 5-34.

⁴ Severine Autesserre, “The Peacebuilding World”, *The Trouble with the Congo* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2.

⁵ Julie Mertus, *Kosovo: How Myths and Truths Started a War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

⁶ UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (June 10, 1989)

⁷ Kosovo Profile, *BBC Monitoring*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18328859>, accessed August 17, 2021; Statistical Yearbook of Republic of Kosovo, 2021, <https://ask.rks-gov.net/media/6111/vjetari-statistikor-2021f.pdf>, accessed August 17, 2021

⁸ Jr. H. Perritt, *The Road to Independence for Kosovo: A Chronicle of the Ahtisaari Plan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), doi:10.1017/CBO9780511635410.

⁹ The UN, <https://minusma.unmissions.org/en/history>, accessed August 17, 2021

¹⁰ UN Security Council Resolution, 2100 (April 25, 2100); MINUSMA was established to support political processes in that country and carry out several security-related tasks; UN Security Council 2164 (June 25, 2014)

¹¹ Paul Melly, Mali coup: How to solve the conundrum, BBC News, May 27, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-57255601>, accessed August 17, 2021

¹² Severine Autesserre, “A Top-Down Problem”, *The Trouble with Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacekeeping* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 17.

¹³ Severine Autesserre, “A Top-Down Problem”, *The Trouble with Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacekeeping* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 62.

¹⁴ Author’s interview with an Indian Army Officer who has served with UNMISS.

¹⁵ UNISFA was established through United Nations Security Council Resolution 1990 of June 27, 2011 to provide security and protect civilians under imminent threat of violence in the disputed border region.

¹⁶ Author’s experience from his service with the UN.