



UN Peacekeeping: the worm is in the fruit

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Histoire & stratégie

The pacifist ideology and culture of compromise that underpin the spirit of United Nations peacekeeping operations (PKOs) make any long-term success against determined actors illusory. Demonstration by Lebanon.

February 2016. Hezbollah fighters are harassing the Merkavas who are advancing rapidly on the frozen ground of the Metulla plain in southern Lebanon. Simultaneously with an air raid on Iranian nuclear sites, Israel launched a pre-emptive offensive on Hezbollah launch sites identified north of the Litani River.

Not a single shot was fired by the 12,000 peacekeepers despite the robust rules of engagement that had been the subject of heated discussions in September 2006. Whose fault is that?

This imaginary scenario of UNIFIL's passivity is a feature of the current situation.

France is discredited because the UNIFIL command did not give any orders. Or rather, it only gave orders to withdraw to the camps, ensuring that all patrols returned to cover.

In 1982, during the Israeli invasion, French anti-tank gunners had valiantly blocked the road to the Merkavas, who ignored them, simply not opening fire and keeping the UN soldiers within the straitjacket of their then rules of engagement. Since 1992, however, France had learned its lesson: it had not committed troops under the responsibility of the UN since the hostage-taking and the tragic sniping in Sarajevo. Rightly so, since UNIFIL had still proved powerless to prevent or moderate the 2006 conflict. After 33 days of war, Security Council Resolution 1701 (UNSCR 1701) had been snatched away by our diplomats thanks to the acceptable solution of the return of the Lebanese army south of the Litani River, until then the exclusive territory of the Party of God militia. The French requirements for a post-conflict deployment were therefore clear: a head of mission and a chain of command, both military, solid rules of engagement with powerful weapons.

Thus, since 2006 and until today, it has been clear in the minds of the French soldiers that

there was no alternative to retaliation in the event of a new Israeli attack. They knew that the unfavourable balance of power in terms of the number of devices would be rebalanced by the diplomatic sounding board of the international community if Tsahal fired on Western soldiers. Of course, the situation was not without risk in the face of the Hezbollah mujahideen, haloed with the title of resistance fighters, who took their weapons out of their hiding places to hinder the action of the Force and to measure themselves against the "Zionist enemy". But from reducing the Force to passively observing the deteriorating situation without intervening, there were several steps to be taken...

From compromise to compromise, UNIFIL involuntarily gave up its freedom of action. The reasons for this gradual shift are manifold; however, one of them has led to the others.

Whose fault is it, then, that the force's unbalanced posture, deployed geographically to one of the protagonists, has gradually led to a shift in perceptions? Its multinational character and its contingents with varied motivations, combining peacekeeping professionals with a lack of inclination to be firm with Westerners who are sometimes more proactive? To the general commanding UNIFIL, who, despite the efforts of his French Chief of Staff to influence the situation, has insidiously entered into a logic of safeguarding tranquillity at all costs, losing his role as an arbiter? To France's high-ranking political leaders, who, if they insist on maintaining a French military presence in the most "crisis-prone" area of the planet, will be forced to take the decision to withdraw from the UNIFIL mission. The French political leaders who, while they are keen to maintain a French military presence in the most "crisis-prone" area of the planet, have not sufficiently asserted their will to retaliate, which would have enabled the Force to remain a deterrent and to influence the decision? To the French military high command, which has forgotten the reason for the presence of powerful means in the theatre and is content with a training logic for its mechanised units that is comfortable in many respects?

Certainly. But fundamentally, **the UN** is primarily responsible, because it has not been able to **get rid of a certain ideological pacifism underlying its interventions for peace, which has always made it incapable of using force precisely when it should have done so.**

The origin of this widespread failure is in the mindset and thinking of the peacekeeper, for whom force is not meant to be used. Peacekeeper is, moreover, a revealing expression which contains neither the word nor the idea of a soldier, contrary to its improper translation "peacekeeper". For the UN official, using weapons becomes a failure. Their use is incompatible with the maintenance of peace, which also explains the organization of its command structures in which the influence of the military is diminished. In this frame of reference, powerful means of warfare have no place in Lebanon. The exception of having a military head of mission has not overshadowed this mindset in UNIFIL, perhaps because the Force Commander signs a United Nations staff contract, the spirit of which is gradually rubbing off on him.

In a sound approach, force is in the service of the law. For UNIFIL, it can be used legitimately within the framework of the Security Council resolution. Success is possible in the long term, taking the time and the means to achieve it, if it is accompanied by real political will on the part of all actors, including, of course, the contributing States. However, the biased approach to the use of force negates that will. For it leads to the search for a seemingly calm situation, which is supposed to provide proof of the progress made towards peace, as it has since the end of 2006. The decision-makers strive to lower the tension following any incident, with an unacknowledged fear of using weapons. Strong statements are not sustainable and often give way to a cheap deal and a general

sense of satisfaction, giving the illusion that peace is moving forward. The relief of those responsible is great when they have not had to use the force they threatened to use, thanks to a negotiation which, however, insidiously led them to lower their guard, lowering their demands in order to reach a compromise. The resulting reluctance to negotiate with the protagonists risks turning into demagoguery because of the illusion of progress towards peace without any real willingness on the part of the actors to achieve it. A politically correct discourse finally makes it possible to clear one's conscience and mask this precarious situation.

By dint of fear of taking the slightest action under the pretext of not aggravating a situation with a fragile and complex balance and, ultimately, of restricting the room for manoeuvre every day The culture of compromise for a false peace at all costs is surreptitiously sliding towards long-term ineffectiveness, negating the PMO's purpose^[1].
1) Troop-contributing states must therefore have a superior political reason that gives meaning to the action of their soldiers who are committed, and that weighs on the course of events in accordance with the purpose of the deployment of their units.

For, despite globalization, we are still not dying for the UN. The next conflict will be possible when the protagonists have acquired the intimate certainty that UNIFIL will not react, mired in its inhibition of UN pacifism. Peace without force is a utopia, history teaches this harshly to all dreamers who forget it for ideological reasons.

1) Peacekeeping operations

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