

# Weapons and ammunition management and force protection: some reflections on converging agendas

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## Introduction

Reducing the illicit flow of small arms and light weapons, ammunition, and related materiel in areas of conflict is an ambitious and challenging objective. Clearly, this goal cannot be accomplished without the effective management and control of and accountability for small arms and ammunition in the PSOs that deploy in conflict zones. If we think about what it means for PSOs to be 'effective', this must be one aspect of their work. By the same token, only forces that operate effectively in this way can hope to fulfil the tasks listed in relevant UN Security Council mandates with regard to the control and reduction of illicit weapons and ammunitions in conflict zones.

The environments where the UN deploys PSOs are very complex, and it is necessary to adopt a comprehensive approach to WAM in order to have realistic expectations and achieve results. A better and more effective UN system could play a key role in reducing violence and the flow of illicit weapons, ammunition, and other war equipment into conflict areas. But the effectiveness of UN missions cannot be sufficiently improved from inside alone; it also requires external support. The UN system is also hampered by its very nature: as a political and diplomatic organization, very often the UN finds it difficult to make public the flaws and failures of its member states and PSOs.

The observations in this paper are based on almost five years spent as a force commander in a number of UN peace operations, including MINUSTAH (Haiti), MONUSCO (DRC), MINUSCA (Central African Republic), and the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) (Mali). The two last missions were undertaken during the writing of the UN's 2017 report, *Improving Security of United Nations Peacekeepers: We Need to Change the Way We Are Doing Business* (dos Santos Cruz, Phillips, and Cusimano, 2017).

The following reflections are relevant not only for UN PSOs, but also for those authorized and fielded by regional and subregional organizations.

Clearly, each mission has its own particular history and set of problems. Each is unique. Haiti and the DRC are very different countries, for example, with huge differences in terms of territorial coverage and populations. But they also have many similarities, including histories of colonial exploitation and external interference. Both countries have experienced weak governance, corruption, and persistent conflicts; have wealth concentrated in the hands of a few individuals and families; experience

a proliferation of armed groups, street gangs, and organized crime; and have a majority of their populations living in chronic poverty.

When considering the issue of managing arms and ammunition in conflict zones, it is important to consider all the various actors and sources of weapons in the field. These include:

- military and police personnel operating under the UN flag (formed units and staff officers), who are responsible for COE;
- materiel seized by the UN (troops and police) and national security forces during their regular duties;
- weapons and ammunition collected as part of DDR programmes;
- arms held by rebel groups, street gangs, militias, and members of organized crime groups;
- neighbouring countries with an interest in the conflict, which sometimes facilitate and provide support for armed groups in the conflict zone; and
- the weapons and ammunition of national security forces.

Within the UN system it is very important to establish and follow standard operational and administrative procedures in PSOs in order to have effective, practical, and transparent control of COE (including pistols, rifles, machine guns, ammunition, and grenades). The system should serve as a tool to prevent losses, illegal activities, and the mismanagement of weapons and ammunition.

Losses can, of course, occur during attacks on troops or bases and due to the inattention of staff officers. Since the loss of a weapon by a soldier is considered shameful, some TCCs may be not comfortable reporting such incidents, which hinders our understanding of the true scope of weapons and ammunition losses and diversion. Nevertheless, it should be mandatory to put systems in place for the regular and timely reporting of such losses, in addition to information sharing, investigations, inquiries, and follow-up.

Small Arms Survey research has made clear that arms and ammunition losses are a serious challenge for many missions, and that the lack of clear guidelines on the management of recovered weapons leaves open many opportunities for less-than-ideal practice. The quantities of weapons recovered from negative forces can also be quite significant in some contexts. Because there can be ineffective lines of authority between the mission command and the sector or TCC command, reporting about what is captured from—and even given away to—third parties may not always be transparent. Large, valuable weapons systems that troops from some TCCs recover may even be transported back to their capital cities as ‘prizes’ without the head of mission or force commander even being informed.

The development of uniform policies and procedures designed to prevent the mismanagement of arms and ammunition in PSOs is clearly essential. The emphasis in this paper is, however, on some important areas of change that are needed within the system to ensure that policies are fully implemented. This has less to do with arms management policies as such—which were considered in more detail by other qualified experts at the workshop—and more to do with mindsets, attitudes, and related behaviours.

My central point throughout this paper is that the UN system as a whole needs to change to become more effective. Such a shift not only will yield benefits in terms of reduced COE losses, the better management of recovered weapons, and more effective efforts to reduce illicit arms proliferation in conflict zones, but will also alleviate a number of other important safety and professionalism concerns affecting PSOs.

In this regard, a number of observations are provided below for making PSOs and the UN peacekeeping system more effective, with the final goals of reducing violence, creating a safe environment for UN personnel, and protecting civilians in conflict zones. Conclusions and suggestions are provided at the end, with an understanding that it is not easy to change systems in the short term in an organization with the dimensions and complexity of the UN.

## **Posture and mindset**

Various motivations—whether political, financial, or other—drive civilians and TCCs/PCCs to participate in UN PSOs. Unfortunately, many such contingents simply do not wish to face the risks inherent to such PSOs. As a result, over the long term, in its role as a treaty supervisor or as a trusted witness to peace agreements, the UN has developed a ‘classic peacekeeping’ posture that resists change. Looking ahead, it is crucial for the UN to adopt a new posture in this regard based not only on observation, deterrence, and reporting, but also on taking action.

Building an appropriate mindset is the first step in such a process of change. While mandates, statements of unit requirement, MoUs, and rules of engagement are important in terms of providing administrative and legal definitions of tasks and related legal support, they are not enough to guarantee a PSO’s performance. Mindset change would require the UN to issue clear guidance about expectations regarding the operational and administrative behaviour of contingents in a PSO. For example, the importance of contingents’ taking the initiative when necessary; demonstrating by their actions a robust and responsive UN; developing military tactics to engage illegal forces and protect UN bases and civilians; collecting intelligence; and taking all possible legal steps to bring to justice criminals who attack peacekeepers should be included in a detailed written TCC/PCC commitment from the outset. Timely action

and reaction in situations in which peacekeeping troops should act with proportionate (and overwhelming) force should also be emphasized.

## Capacities, experience, training, and standards

We must also accept that not all TCCs/PCCs have the right profile to participate in all UN PSOs. Training is fundamental, but it must also be accompanied by, and based on, the appropriate profile and experience.

Pre-deployment training undertaken at UN headquarters is crucial and should be of an appropriately high standard. It should focus on the operational domain and include information on both legislative and administrative requirements. It is also important to introduce the standards required for the control of weapons, ammunition, and related items at this stage.

At the end of such training the UN and TCC/PCC should jointly certify that the contingent is ready for deployment, is well trained and well equipped, and has the appropriate structures in place to successfully carry out the mission.

Based on lessons learned from past missions, the UN should clarify to TCCs/PCCs from the highest to the lowest levels (from the permanent mission to the UN to the troop level) what its expectations are regarding contingents' operational and administrative behaviour. Such guidance should also be provided to civilian members of missions, as well as to relevant agencies, funds, and programmes.

To make this happen, the UN needs to identify appropriate profiles for UN Special Representatives of the Secretary-General (UNSRSGs), force commanders, police commissioners and their deputies, sector commanders, commanders of battalions and companies, and even for the rank and file involved in missions.

## Better intelligence

By and large, UN missions have very weak intelligence-gathering capacities. While attention is paid to hi-tech intelligence, for example, the basics may be neglected. Many units have only a small number of intelligence specialists. In the field units are often fragmented and deployed at three, four, or more different bases, without intelligence cells in each company and detachment. The integration of military, police, and other sectors into PSOs can also be complicated by the sheer number of actors involved. These may include the force itself; a joint mission analysis centre; police, civil affairs, DDR, and human rights personnel; a political affairs division; and groups of experts.

Sometimes mandates or terms of reference can also become blurred or be misinterpreted. Political affairs divisions, for instance, are dedicated almost exclusively to

elections and politics in host countries, often forgetting that they should also analyse and interpret the political objectives of armed groups and their supporters (both internal and external). It is fundamental, therefore, to develop a combination of hi-tech intelligence and operational intelligence, based mainly on human sources.

The UN's field administration, under UNDFS, does not have an operational mindset. This is understandable because of the bureaucracy involved, but the problem could be resolved if administration in the field were subordinated to the SRSO instead. For instance, it is neither efficient nor sensible to wait almost a year to negotiate a bid to hire a boat to patrol a lake while a riverine unit waits for suitable conditions to carry out its work, as happened in MONUSCO. This kind of mismanagement imposes huge financial and operational costs on a mission. Similarly, upwards of half of all patrols are undertaken without interpreters due to cost-cutting measures, because the budget for operational intelligence is negligible. Patrols without interpreters are unable to interact with local populations to gather intelligence.

To be more effective, PSOs need not just better intelligence, but also to use it to take appropriate action. This is in order to protect civilians from violence; restrict freedom of movement to legal forces (including the UN); and prevent armed groups, street gangs, militias, rebels, and other criminal groups from accessing arms and weapons.

## Limitations to possible reforms

Efforts to improve the effectiveness of PSOs, including their WAM procedures, face a number of challenges, including the following:

- **Weak control of weapons and obstruction by the host country.** Due to member states' sovereignty, the UN has no influence on a host country's control of its own forces' weapons and ammunition. This is aggravated when a host government is a source of illegal activities and violence against its own population, or has connections with illegal armed groups either internally or abroad. Indeed, in some countries that host UN PSOs, not only do host country armed forces not have structures to control their own materiel, but they may also have elements of rebel movements inside their structures.

Furthermore, some host governments fail to cooperate with UN PSOs and impose travel restrictions on peacekeepers. There are also many cases of attacks targeting UN forces that are likely supported by local troops. It is a fact that governments often accept the presence of UN peacekeepers simply because they profit from the situation, mainly financially, and do not want to suffer sanctions by refusing the peacekeepers' presence.

- **Porous borders and interference from surrounding states.** It is impossible for the UN to control a country's borders and prevent or reduce the flow of goods across

them, including weapons and ammunition, without the engagement of both local and neighbouring governments. Host states may also not be able to do this effectively.

In both Haiti and the DRC huge financial resources were spent on related efforts without any results and without creating local structures to control the porosity of these countries' respective borders. In the DRC, almost all the armed groups are located near surrounding country borders that are accessible by land and water, including via hundreds of kilometres of lakes in the Great Lakes Region of Africa.

Solutions need to be based on practice, not theory. In the DRC, two radar stations were installed close to the lakes, which was a good idea in principle. But they were operated by UN military observers without any specialization in this field, including the ability to interpret radar images, and without any connection to an intervention system or integration with other intelligence sources. In such cases, financial resources are spent with no effective results.

The easy circulation and illegal trade of weapons and ammunition are common in many conflict zones. There are about 50 armed groups in the DRC, each with its own strengths, interests, and structures. All of them have easy access to weapons and ammunition, which are paid for by the smuggling of minerals, illegally harvested timber, and goods across land borders and lakes bordering neighbouring countries. Clearly some neighbouring countries are not interested in joining efforts to prevent illegal activities from crossing their borders. Some even benefit from not doing so and are protected from being held accountable. In the fight against M23, for example, many people died—civilians, Congolese troops, peacekeepers, and M23 combatants, with most of the latter being young boys and men co-opted by criminal leaders living out their irresponsible political adventures. After the group's defeat no attempts were made to sanction its leaders or their supporters. We must conclude that in the international political arena such decisions are political and not people-centred, despite the rhetoric to the contrary.

- **High-risk missions.** While all missions should receive the same attention, there are a small number in which the risks are very high and where troops and bases are more likely to experience attacks and, consequently, suffer more casualties and losses of weapons, ammunition, and other military equipment. Practically all cases of attacks against UN peacekeepers occur in Africa currently and African TCCs are paying a heavy price in terms of lives lost. The UN needs to pay due attention to this problem. Take, for example, the attack on the Simulik Bridge combat base in North Kivu, DRC, in December 2017, when 15 Tanzanian peacekeepers were killed (*Daily Nation*, 2017). Almost a year later the UN is unable to make public a report clarifying these events and defining who was responsible for them. It is hard to understand how the UN, MONUSCO, and Tanzania might be

unaware of what happened in this incident. The delay in releasing the report is, in fact, a reflection of the lack of political will needed to identify those who were responsible. Ascertaining the truth is not only important for learning lessons from such an incident, but is also a question of consideration for the soldiers (and their families) who sacrificed their lives.

## Conclusion

The UN has experienced and highly qualified personnel, and should use this capacity to refine regulations on and the supervision of the quality of COE inspections, paying special attention to small arms and ammunition. This should occur mainly after specific events take place.

Before setting up a PSO, it is important to negotiate the possibility of establishing a joint administrative system with the host country for the control of weapons, ammunition, and national borders. In some cases it may also be important to negotiate with neighbouring countries as well, when they form part of a mission's wider context.

It is essential for the UN to share responsibility with TCCs for pre-deployment training, as well as the appraisal and certification of contingents before deployment. The quality of pre-deployment training is the starting point for achieving the mission's objectives, and must be emphasized for all operational and administrative procedures. Supplementary in-mission training may also be important for a TCC's troops, civilians, and administrators.

Special attention should be paid to supporting African TCCs/PCCs that take on practically all the high-risk operations within that continent. They are excellent and willing combatants, even in the most dangerous missions. As a consequence, it is important to pay attention to their training and to change the reimbursement system in order to anticipate the financial resources required to improve their training and acquire the necessary equipment.

Contingents and the UN administration should also pay attention to reinforcing force protection by paying equal attention to both basic needs and high-level technology. Fences, gates, walls, sensors, cameras, and drones all have the same importance. Furthermore, field administration should be subordinated to the SRSG, not to UNDFS.

Overall, the adoption of a strong posture is safest for missions, one that is based on overt action and not just deterrence. This prevents attacks against UN bases and troops and better protects local civilians. UN missions should not give criminal groups the opportunity to obtain weapons and ammunition by force or due to mismanagement. If rebel groups, militias, and organized criminal groups are given the opportunity to take weapons and ammunition from UN personnel, they will try to do so.

Furthermore, the UN should not permit perpetrators to enjoy impunity after attacks on civilians, UN bases, and personnel; assassinations of peacekeepers; and the theft of weapons and other UN equipment.

Currently, in some missions the development of integrated intelligence-gathering capacity is proving vital. But let us not forget that the ultimate goal of intelligence gathering is not only to obtain information, but also to use it as the basis for action. Similarly, in some PSO contexts police action against drug trafficking should receive greater attention due to its association with the illegal trade of weapons and ammunition.

Finally, it is understandable that it is difficult for the UN system to be transparent and courageous enough to assign political accountability and apply appropriate sanctions. However, because it deploys personnel in high-risk contexts where they may be killed or injured and is responsible for protecting civilians, it is not unreasonable to expect the UN to have the courage to hold countries, authorities, and individuals providing or facilitating access to illicit arms and ammunition accountable, and to impose sanctions on individuals and governments stimulating or feeding conflicts and violence.

PSOs may receive assistance from independent experts and institutions to assess illicit flows of weapons and ammunition, to refine regulations and procedures to deal with them, and to propose solutions to challenges related to WAM. These external actors are less restricted in terms of investigating and monitoring situations characterized by illicit arms flows and elaborating related proposals to deal with such situations than UN personnel. However, peacekeepers should also strive to improve their performance and not be afraid to use force to protect both themselves and civilians.

## References

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