Conflict Resolution and the United Nations: A Leadership Crisis?

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Most United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions during the last two decades were perceived by the general public to have failed. This article draws upon lessons learned from the 1990 UN mission in Namibia and identifies necessary geopolitical and institutional conditions to ensure a sustainable and successful peacebuilding process for the conflicts of today. Domestic political capacity and support from key international stakeholders are shown to be necessary for a peaceful democratic transition. However, smart timing during the preparation and implementation phases, as well as the structural design of a mission, are crucial prerequisites for support of any political effort for peace.

During the last twenty years, the world has been a witness to an increased number of international peacekeeping operations designed to ensure politically sustainable transformations. Although the number of multinational and state actors such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the United States, European Union (EU), the African Union, and others leading peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions has increased significantly, the United Nations (UN) still plays the most critical role in dealing with international conflict resolution. Today there are 15 different peacekeeping missions directed by the UN Department for Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), and many have come under immense criticism for falling short of expectations. This criticism is twofold: On the one hand, UN missions were unable to meet targets laid out by their own mandate, as observed in the missions in Cote d'Ivoire (UNOCI), Haiti (MINUSTAH) and Somalia (UNOSOM). On the other hand— and more importantly— some missions could not meet the expectations of the general public, as has been observed in the tragic cases of the Srebrenica massacre (UNPROFOR) and the Rwandan genocide (UNAMIR).

This paper argues that the United Nations should maintain a leadership role in international conflict resolution despite recent political and academic criticism regarding outcomes of its operations. In order to do so effectively, the United Nations, along with UN Security Council member states, should incorporate some important lessons learned from its own success stories. The case of Namibian independence and the success of the UN Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) to carry out constitutional elections and ensure a democratic transition there from 1989 to 1990 offer some valuable insights for the analysis of present and future UN peacekeeping missions. This paper aims to identify

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structural factors that made UNTAG one of the most successful peacekeeping operations and how these factors could be translated into the context of today's peacekeeping missions.

Historical Overview and the Development of UNTAG

Before analyzing key factors that influenced the success of UNTAG, it is important to provide a brief overview on the historical framework in which Namibia became independent and the UNTAG mission was deployed. The issue of Namibia was on the political agenda of the international community even before the founding of the United Nations. The long developing dialogue and preparation for the peace process greatly assisted later success.

The international status of Namibia has been disputed since British-led forces of the South African Union defeated German colonial forces at the onset of World War I. Though Namibia was placed under an international mandate of the League of Nations, the British-controlled Union of South Africa enjoyed *de facto* political administration of the territory. While the International Court of Justice confirmed the illegality of South African administration in several non-legally binding rulings from 1950 to 1966, South Africa continued to treat Namibia as a province of its own territory. As a consequence, the South Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) was formed in Namibia with the aim of achieving independence from South African occupation by armed struggle.

From 1966 to 1968, the UN General Assembly adopted several resolutions[1] that clarified the international status of Namibia. It was laid under direct UN responsibility and was administered by a newly established UN Council on South West Africa[2] under the leadership of Martti Ahtisaari, who would later become the UN Special Representative of UNTAG. In 1970, the UN Security Council[3] confirmed the illegality of South African presence on Namibian territory and consequently called for free constitutional elections under UN supervision in 1975.[4] While three members of the Security Council, plus Germany and Canada—the so-called "Contact Group"[5]— debated how to ensure a transition to independence, South Africa sought to keep Namibia as part of its own territory under the apartheid system.[6] In 1976, SWAPO was officially recognized by the United Nations as a relevant stakeholder and negotiating partner in the peacekeeping process.

In 1978, the mandate for the UNTAG peacekeeping mission was finalized[7] to ensure a democratic transition for Namibia to independence. Nonetheless, UNTAG would not be deployed until eleven years later, when a cease-fire between SWAPO and South African forces came into existence on April 1, 1989. The time lag between the adoption of the UNTAG mission by the UN Security Council and its implementation was due to wider geopolitical bargaining within a Cold War framework which has become known as the "linkage" and which will be subsequently analyzed. The UNTAG mission lasted for twelve months and ended with certification of the elections of the constitutional assembly by UNTAG Special Representative Ahtisaari on March 21, 1990.

Key Factors for Success

The Mandate

In order to draw comparisons between UNTAG and other UN peacekeeping missions, one must first understand the different types of mandates that can be granted. Not only does the nature of the mandate imply important consequences for the use of force by UN personnel but it is also defines the point at which a mission can be termed a success.

One of the most important distinctions to be made when negotiating the mandate of a UN peacekeeping mission is whether it will be based on Chapter VI or VII of the UN Charter. Whereas Chapter

VI provides a UN mission with the use of force only in the case of self-defense and requires the *consent* of all sovereign parties, Chapter VII provides a robust mandate to use military force *without* the consent of all sovereign parties. It is often argued that a mission's capacity for success increases with a robust Chapter VII mandate, since the mission does not require consent and allows for more direct military involvement and political pressure to stop violence and enforce peace. The cases of the genocide in Rwanda and the Srebrenica massacre support this argument, since both UN missions were only given a Chapter VI mandate and could not interfere directly in the conflict. In both cases, the mandate did not fit the mission's requirement.

Depending on the conflict conditions and the level of consent between parties, a Chapter VI mission may still provide a suitable, and in the case of Namibia, successful framework for a UN peacekeeping mission to achieve a sustainable peacebuilding process without the direct use of force. Moreover, the process of finding and securing consent arguably does increase the level of ownership of the conflicted parties towards the peace process, as could be observed in the long lasting diplomatic negotiations between SWAPO and South African Forces in Namibia.

Ultimately, there does not seem to be a clear preference for either a Chapter VI or Chapter VII mission to ensure a mission's success. However, a successful outcome may rely on whether the mandate reflects the mission's unique requirements on the ground. This responsibility clearly lies with the UN Security Council and its member states.

International Capacity

In academic literature,[8] the success of UNTAG is frequently attributed to the effective collaboration of the member states within the UN Security Council. This was especially true for the role of the United States and the Soviet Union due to the changing dynamics of Cold War politics. In this respect, it is not surprising that the adoption of the 1978 UN Security Council Resolution 435—the legal basis of the UNTAG mission—and the actual deployment of UNTAG occurred towards the end of the Cold War in 1989. Chester Crocker, who at that time led consultations for UNTAG's implementation of the Contact Group on behalf of the United States, points out that "during the final phase of the Cold War, the Southern African conflict's structure was directly affected by the age of bipolarity."[9]

The so-called "linkage" of Namibian independence and the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola were in effect the primary reason for the late implementation of UNTAG eleven years after the ratification of Resolution 435. While during the 1970s, South Africa still followed its own plans for Namibian "independence" under a system of representation based on apartheid,[10] it soon followed a strategic partnership with the United States under the Reagan administration: South Africa traded its acceptance for an independence process under UN leadership with a US-South African alliance against the spread of communism from Angola and Mozambique towards South Africa.[11] Moreover, South Africa used its support within the United Nations for Namibian independence as political leverage in its relationship with the United States concerning its involvement in South African domestic politics.[12]

The United States, on the other hand, would only be able solve the question of Namibia's independence under free and fair democratic elections, given South Africa's acceptance of a Chapter VI peacekeeping mission (and hence based on mutual consent of the warring parties). The United States did not have an interest in a direct military intervention in Angola or Namibia, as this region of Africa was not of much geopolitical importance from its perspective.[13] Moreover, it wanted to avoid a costly proxy war with economic, political, and public relations costs in the wake of the Vietnam War.[14] Given US and South Africa interest in Namibian independence, the United States consequently managed to draw the rest of the Contact Group towards accepting the conditionality of the linkage.[15] Although

the linkage was never a conditional part of Resolution 435,[16] it remained persistent until the deployment of UNTAG in 1989.

From the perspective of the Communist bloc, represented by Cuba and Angola with political support from the Soviet Union, the strategy of maintaining Cuban presence in Angola soon came to an end. The dynamics of Cold War politics changed with the onset of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Additionally, South African forces, along with troops from the Frente Nacional da Liberaçao de Angola (FNLA) and the National Union for Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), with financial support from the United States, increased their attacks on Angolan and Cuban troops on Angolan territory. This led to rising costs of waging war for both political blocs.[17] Consequently, by 1984, Angolan president Jose Eduardo Dos Santos indicated that Cuban troops would be withdrawn under the following three conditions: First, South Africa would have to remove all of their troops from Angolan territory. Secondly, Resolution 435 calling for Namibian independence under UN leadership would have to be implemented. And thirdly, the US and South African support in Angolan domestic issues would have to be ceased.[18]

The political indication from the Soviet-led bloc created a basis of an international, multi-party support for the UNTAG mission. In other words, the international community confirmed a vital interest and hence capacity to develop ownership for the implementation of Resolution 435—a crucial prerequisite for success for any UN peacekeeping mission. The Brazzaville Protocol, which was signed and observed by all relevant international actors (including the United States and the Soviet Union as observers) on December 13, 1988, confirmed the withdrawal of Cuban troops and hence gave way for the implementation of Resolution 435 and the deployment of UNTAG on April 1, 1989.

It has been shown that the post-Cold War geopolitical framework brought an end to the stalemate of the UN Security Council and enabled it to deal with global conflicts effectively. Moreover, the case of Namibia demonstrates that a strong backing of UNTAG's mission by the international community and all relevant stakeholders—which I term here as *international capacity*—greatly enhanced the positive outcome of the mission. Any UN peacekeeping mission that lacks the full support of the UN Security Council, its member states, and also the wider international community (such as the general public or multilateral partner organizations) will fail to provide the political and financial support necessary for success.

Domestic Capacity

Whereas the support of the international community greatly influenced the outcome of UNTAG, it might seem obvious that an effective domestic capacity would be needed to support any electoral peacebuilding process. The latter requirement has been less debated in academic literature, but in the case of Namibia, it proves equally vital to the success. From a structural point of analysis, three points have to be noted. Some seem unique to the situation in Namibia, while others serve well as lessons learned to be applied to recent and future UN peacekeeping missions.

First, the nature of the Namibian conflict and structure of the involved parties both supported a successful peace process from the beginning. There was a relatively clear line between the conflicted parties, and the conflict was between only two rivals.[19] This simplified the ability of UN military observers (MILOPS) to monitor the cease-fire agreement. Furthermore, bilateral consultations between the conflicted parties with the support of an international mediator, such as the United Nations, were easier to achieve and more prone to success. Second, the nature of conflict was more or less one-dimensional on the issue of political representation as border disputes, ethnic tensions, and access to resources did not pose a great threat to peace. Recent UN peacekeeping missions in Cote d'Ivoire and Sudan represent a greater challenge for a sustainable peacebuilding process, as the nature of conflict is more complex. Third, the capacity of Namibian institutions and infrastructure before the deploy-

ment of UNTAG allowed for a greater level of effectiveness, as Namibian infrastructure was not heavily damaged by the civil war between SWAPO and South African forces. Access to remote locations across the country and existing government structures helped UNTAG execute its mandate and prepare the constitutional elections. The experience of the UN peacekeeping mission in Congo (MONUC) and its supervision of the 2006 elections underscore the crucial role of institutions and infrastructure in this context.

When looking into the socio-psychological characteristics of Namibian society and their influential role on the success of the mission, it becomes clear that domestic actors' level of ownership of the peace process was also crucial for success. These domestic actors included political parties, the media, and religious institutions. It became apparent within the general Namibian population that the level of ownership towards the elections proved higher than anticipated by the international community. In fact, the number of voting registrants exceeded UN official predictions by 2.4 percent, and 97 percent of registered voters cast their vote.[20] More importantly, both SWAPO and its domestic opposition, the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance,[21] accepted their shares of government participation after the final polling of the constitutional assembly.

The Mission's Capacity

Along with international and domestic capacity to support the mission, the general structure of UNTAG and efforts by personnel ensured the positive outcome of the electoral process. The mission's mandate fit the requirements to monitor and implement elections in Namibia and hence matched the situation on the ground. The mission must also meet operational benchmarks and, perhaps more importantly, public expectations. It is noteworthy that no previous UN peacekeeping mission held a political mandate to conduct democratic elections: UNTAG sailed unknown waters. The United Nations as an institution for conflict resolution and all involved international actors risked a significant decrease in their political legitimacy if the election process failed. Consequently, all actors—except for South Africa to some extent—had their own distinctive incentives to support UNTAG.

Given this political pressure for success, a highly effective collaboration between the different military, civilian, and police components of UNTAG became crucial. Not only did the mission have to maintain and observe the cease-fire but it also had to promote and ensure a fair election process through the civilian and police sector. This integrated, multidimensional approach required a high level of flexibility and communication in all vertical and horizontal UNTAG structures of command. This was a complex task, especially when taking into account the multinational background of personnel[22] and different external institutions[23] involved.

Regarding communication, the "post-April 1 incidents," in which the cease-fire was temporarily breached, demonstrated the success of the mission's supervisors, in collaboration with UN headquarters in New York, in dealing with a sudden and serious threat posed to the peace process. Immediately after Ahtisaari arrived in Namibia and the cease-fire came into effect, South Africa accused SWAPO of carrying out attacks on South African forces after having moved into Northern Namibian territory from their original bases in Southern Angola. SWAPO countered that its forces intended to commence with the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) process as laid out in the peace agreement. Consequently, it claimed, it was moving towards UN weapon collection sites in Namibia.

The cease-fire was breached frequently in the following days, and fighting intensified between both parties. Since UNTAG was not yet fully deployed, and Athisaari was still awaiting most of his military observers, he was unable to assess the situation using his own personnel or verify any of the accusations laid out by SWAPO or South African forces. Only through top-level diplomatic efforts by the UN Secretary General in New York was it possible to motivate all relevant national and international ac-

tors[24] and convene at Mount Etjo in Namibia to reconfirm UNTAG's mandate and thus proceed with the election process. Consequently, SWAPO withdrew from Namibian territory and started to participate in the DDR process only after UNTAG was fully deployed.[25] From these incidents, it is clear that the UNTAG command was able to quickly react to the mission's threats and that a highly effective network of communication across all UN hierarchies enabled quick conflict resolution. The contrasting experience of communication failures within the UN ground forces and headquarters during the UN-AMIR peacekeeping mission in Rwanda underscores the crucial role of communication.[26]

The role of the police was also crucial to the development of local ownership of the election process. The UN police component, CIVPOL, was assigned by the mandate *not* to take any direct punitive action but rather was responsible for monitoring the existing police force, SWAPOL, under South African administrative authority, until Namibian independence could be officially declared. CIVPOL's tasks included the promotion of rule of law and to ensure unbiased public security during the election period. This was more easily said than done. The Namibian population had yet to develop an understanding of the duality of the police structure. Also, CIVPOL had to undertake substantial efforts to build trust with the local population. Moreover, South Africa frequently undermined CIVPOL's efforts. This was especially visible in South Africa's use of ex-Koevoet counter-insurgency forces within SWAPOL, which engaged in military-like fighting with SWAPO troops. Again, thanks primarily to effective communication and collaboration within UNTAG, the counter-insurgency forces were quickly withdrawn following a diplomatic initiative of the UN Secretary General with the South African foreign minister.[27]

Of even greater importance to the mission's success was the civilian component and its coordination with UNTAG. As mentioned before, UNTAG's mandate was principally political; to ensure free and fair democratic elections of a constitutional assembly. As Kühne points out,[28] elections in post-conflict countries are complicated and prone to risk. Elections can lead to an improvement—or they may undermine a country's stability. The provision of public security during elections, development of a suitable electoral timetable, inclusion of traditional structures, process of voter registration, the choice of electoral system, and availability of a complaint system are all of great importance.[29] Even given a free, democratic election, long-term political stability and legitimacy remains susceptible if the former non-democratic political elite is able to remain in power in the new, democratic system.[30]

In the case of Namibia, almost all of these critical factors were addressed with great success. As the Namibian population did not have any prior experience in democratic voting, electoral education was of specific importance. UNTAG managed to publish and distribute 590,000 information items within only a few months. It worked closely with local opinion leaders and religious institutions to raise awareness of the upcoming election as well as the nature and aim of the UN mission. UNTAG accomplished these tasks despite a 40 percent reduction in its financial budget. The mission absorbed these cuts without compromising on a single issue area of the mandate.[31] UNTAG's reaction to the decrease in financial support—often cited as a cause of failure in other, less-successful UN missions—shows how the *quality* of a mission's structure and capacity may be more important than its *quantity* in financial assets. Indeed it was UNTAG's capacity in terms of professionalism, flexibility, and—most importantly—effective coordination that accounted for the successful outcome.

The Issue of Time

Along with the international, domestic, and internal capacity to implement the mandate, *timing* also played into the hands of UNTAG's success. Timing was important in two aspects: First, UNTAG managed to keep up with its own schedule with respect to the election process once the mission was deployed. Consequently, UNTAG's legitimacy as a supervisor of the electoral process was affirmed.

Second—and perhaps more importantly—the "time gap" between the approval of Resolution 435 in 1978 and its implementation in 1989 allowed for intensive preparation on all levels in anticipation of the mission.

It is important to note that the blueprint for UNTAG barely changed before its implementation in 1989.[32] Hence, on the international and domestic levels, all involved parties could develop an increased *ownership* of the election process and the mandate. The legitimacy of the United Nations as the supervising authority was solidified as it continuously pushed forward with the implementation of Resolution 435 and convened high-level talks between all parties of interest from 1978 to 1989.[33]

Furthermore, most of the UN and international personnel dealing with the process of peacebuilding worked on the Namibian question throughout the time lag. This provided a high level of continuity, efficiency and capacity building between the involved actors. For example Ahtisaari, who certified the elections in 1990 as the Special Representative for Namibia, had worked on the peacebuilding process since 1977 as the UN Commissioner for Namibia. In the case of Namibia, the lengthy preparations for both the mission's *structural* and *personnel* requirements greatly supported UNTAG's successful outcome.

Lessons Learned

UN Peacekeeping missions across the world face a legitimacy crisis. Not only do academics question the purpose and success of the liberal peace agenda, but the recent UN peacekeeping missions in Afghanistan, Cote d'Ivoire, Haiti, and Sudan are either openly criticized by the public or lack any reliable future perspective for sustainable stabilization or democratic transformation.

Academics and politicians alike struggle to measure the success of peacekeeping missions. Each mission is different in its requirements, its complexity, and ultimately, in its prospect for conflict resolution.[34] However one might define success in a specific case, structural factors do exist which at least increase the *effectiveness*. Although UNTAG seems to have dealt with a less complex conflict at a favorable time in history compared to other UN peacekeeping missions, the Namibian experience provides a set of crucial lessons learned applicable to all missions.

I conclude with three key points. First, it is absolutely crucial for the UN Security Council to develop a mission's mandate in terms of the mission's specific circumstances. Second, developing ownership for the mission, on both domestic and international levels, is crucial for any successful mission and should be supported by raising public awareness about the mission's goals and by a transparent approach. Finally, timing and early preparation matters. The ability to meet a self-determined schedule increases legitimacy. Thorough preparation, where possible, allows for improved capacity to quickly react to unforeseen circumstances, which are certainly to be expected in all of the UN peacekeeping missions.

1. UN General Assembly, Resolution 2145, "Question of South West Africa," October 27, 1966, and Resolution 2248 (SV), "Question of South West Africa," May 19, 1967.
2. The UN named the Namibian territory "Namibia" only after 1970.
3. UN Security Council, Resolution 276, "The Situation in Namibia," January 30, 1970.
4. UN Security Council, Resolution 385, "Namibia," January 30, 1976.
5. Members were Canada, France, the Federal Republic of Germany, United Kingdom, United States.
6. See South Africa's initiative of its own constitutional conference with the "Turnhalle group" and see Laurent C. W. Kaela, *The Question of Namibia* (London: MacMillan Press, 1996), chapter 5.
7. See the Settlement Proposal S/12636, the report of the Secretary General S/12827 and the Security Council Resolution 435.
8. Chester A. Crocker, "Peacemaking in Southern Africa: The Namibia-Angola Settlement of 1988," in *Herding*

cats: Multiparty Mediation in a Complex World, ed. Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela R. Aall (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1999), 207-244, and Lise M. Howard, "UN Peace Implementation in Namibia: The Causes of Success,*" International Peacekeeping,* 9 No. 1 (2002), 99-132.

9. Crocker, "Peacemaking in Southern Africa," 89.

10. As expressed by the Turnhalle Group and their Constitutional Committee draft constitution of 1977, which included a three-tier government to be "central," "ethnic," and "municipal" in Kaela, *The Question of Namibia,* 89.

11. Kaela, *The Question of Namibia.*

12. Ibid.

13. Crocker, "Peacemaking in Southern Africa."

14. Kaela, *The Question of Namibia.*

15. Ibid., 106.

16. Ibid., 106.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., 107.

19. This refers to SWAPO and South African forces; for a comparison to more complex peacekeeping missions with multiple warring parties, refer to Somalia or Afghanistan.

20. United Nations, "UNTAG," in *The Blue Helmets: A Review of United Nations Peacekeeping* (New York: United Nations Department of Public Information, 1996), 201-230.

21. This was supported by South Africa before the implementation of UNTAG.

22. Personnel came from Australia, Austria, Bangladesh, Barbados, Belgium, Canada, China, Congo, Costa Rica, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Egypt, Federal Republic of Germany, Fiji, Finland, France, German Democratic Republic, Ghana, Greece, Guyana, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Kenya, Malaysia, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Panama, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Singapore, Spain, Sudan, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, Togo, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, Soviet Union, United Kingdom, and Yugoslavia.

23. Examples include the Jurist commission, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), and local NGOs.

24. These include the Contact Group, Joint Commission of Brazzaville Protocol, SWAPO, and others.

25. United Nations, "UNTAG."

26. Compare to the DPKO's treatment of UNAMIR Force Commander Roméo Dallaire's "cable" warning of an outbreak of ethnic violence Rwanda.

27. United Nations, "UNTAG."

28. Winrich Künhe, "The Role of Elections in Emerging Democracies and Post-Conflict Countries," *International Policy Analysis* (Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2010).

29. Ibid.

30. See the experiences of the election of Charles Taylor in Liberia during the UNMIL mission.

31. United Nations, "UNTAG."

32. Howard, "UN Peace Implementation."

33. United Nations, "UNTAG."

34. Winrich Kühne, "Friedenseinsätze der Vereinten Nationen," in *Einsatz für Frieden. Stabiliät und Entwicklung in Räumen prekärer Staatlichkeit*, ed. Josef Braml, Thomas Risse, and Eberhard Sandschneider, *Jahrbuch Internationale Politik* 28 (2010), 279-287.