

Which Strategies and Functions of the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission and Support Office?

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In its report entitled “A more secure world: our shared responsibility”, the UN Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change recommends the creation of a Peacebuilding Commission and a Peacebuilding Support Office (part 4, section XV). To be established by the Security Council, acting under Article 29 of the Charter of the United Nations and after consultation with the Economic and Social Council, the Commission and Support Office would seek to fulfill two fundamental tasks: i) to help states avoid collapse and the slide to war, and ii) to assist states in their transition from war to peace. Given the high stakes for effective peacebuilding to avert and respond to violent armed conflict, coupled with the UN’s underperformance and institutional gaps in this area, the Panel’s recommendation merits serious consideration. In preparation for the UN Global Summit, in September 2005, on the occasion of the Five Year Review of the Millennium Declaration, the following “think piece” seeks to contribute further ideas on the shape, concrete strategies, and specific responsibilities of the proposed Peacebuilding Commission and Support Office.¹

I. Defining peacebuilding and the Commission’s mission

The Panel argues (p.71) that the long-term process of peacebuilding “in all its multiple dimensions” is critical to long-term recovery from violent conflict. However, it fails to offer a precise definition of peacebuilding that would be useful in articulating the proposed Peacebuilding Commission’s core mission. With the simultaneous references (in part 3) to peace enforcement and peacekeeping, one can assume that the Panel adopts the concept of post-conflict peacebuilding defined by former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali as “action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict.” (*An Agenda for Peace*, 2nd edition, 1995. p.11), or Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s similar conception of peacebuilding as the creation of “the conditions necessary for a sustainable peace in war-torn societies” (UN doc no. A/51/4 13 Aug. 1999).

But a growing number of scholars and practitioners have described peacebuilding as an act of *conflict prevention* as well. According to Michael Doyle and Nicholas Sambanis, “In plural societies, conflicts are inevitable. The aim of peacebuilding is to foster social, economic, and political institutions and attitudes that will prevent these conflicts from turning violent. In effect, peacebuilding is the front line of preventive action.”² Drawing on this definition and in order to provide a more strategic focus to the work of the Peacebuilding Commission, the notion of “democratic peacebuilding” is presented here with an emphasis on the political (rather than the economic or social) dimension of peacebuilding, by

¹ Note: the Panel covers the rationale, structure, and functions of the proposed Peacebuilding Commission and Support Office in only two succinct pages of its report. Future inter-governmental deliberations will require detailed elaboration, and the presentation of suitable options, if the proposal is to gain sufficient political support.

² Michael Doyle and Nicholas Sambanis, “International Peacebuilding: A Theoretical and Quantitative Analysis” (2000) *American Political Science Review* 94:4, p. 779.

focusing on creating the conditions for democratic institutions and practice to flourish in conflict-affected societies. Nevertheless, each of the three dimensions is relevant and affects the performance of the other two.

Democratic peacebuilding is premised on the fundamental belief, rooted in empirical research, that *building stable and democratic governing institutions is essential to mediate competing domestic interests and to address the root causes of a conflict peacefully*. At its core, democratic peacebuilding is a dynamic, long-term process of expanding *democratic political authority* within a weak state or territory to reduce the propensity toward violent conflict. To date, the UN has managed or recently initiated twenty-three democratic peacebuilding operations since the end of the cold war, an *Agenda for Democratization* was introduced by the UN Secretary-General in 1996 followed by increased UN involvement in national elections and other forms of democracy assistance, and over half of the UN Development Programme's technical resources are now devoted to supporting democratic governance in 166 countries. These trends reflect the commitment made by world leaders, in September 2000, when they stated in the Millennium Declaration, "We will spare no effort to promote democracy and strengthen the rule of law ...".

With the above definition and rationale in mind, the Peacebuilding Commission's Mission Statement could read:

In order to ensure prompt and effective action by the United Nations, its Members confer on the Peacebuilding Commission primary responsibility for facilitating long-term efforts to mediate competing domestic interests and to address the root causes of conflict peacefully, by fostering conditions for democratic institutions and practice in fragile or war-torn states and territories. The Commission shall further harness concerted action for social and economic peacebuilding that together reinforce the expansion of legitimate and representative local political authority. The Commission shall provide policy guidance, resources, and coordination to all international peacebuilding and reconstruction actors contributing to field operations, and in discharging these duties, it shall act in accordance with the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

II. *Elaborating the strategy and structure of the Commission and Support Office*

If the Peacebuilding Commission's strategy refers to the priorities adopted and execution of those priorities, with sufficient technical, human, and financial resources, to achieve its core mission, then the Panel refrains from clarifying a detailed and realistic strategy, except to note (p.83) that the UN's capacity for peacebuilding in the widest sense should be strengthened and that it "needs to be able to act in a coherent and effective way throughout a whole continuum that runs from early warning through preventive action to post-conflict peacebuilding." Springing from the mission statement outlined above, four general priorities could include:

- Ensure that all international peacebuilding interventions receive adequate political support (from national counterparts and UN member states, particularly key donors), clearly-defined mandates with realistic time-frames, and appropriate technical, human, and financial resources to achieve their objectives;
- Sequence the expansion of representative political authority—to lessen the need for outside assistance over time—by striking a proper balance between local governance capacity-building and near-term political-security imperatives;

- Foster conditions for long-term local dialogue, compromise, consensus-building and conflict resolution (ie, through the introduction of democratic institutions and practice) as the only viable path toward a just and durable peace; and
- Establish and maintain the trust of the local population from the outset of a field operation and regularly re-asses steps to reduce dependency on external support.

Under the current proposal (p.84), the Peacebuilding Commission would report directly to the Security Council, while involving representation from the Economic and Social Council, international financial institutions (IFIs), principal donors and troop contributors, relevant regional and subregional organizations, and the country under consideration at a given time. Until the UN Security Council is reformed and expanded (perhaps in line with one of the Panel's two proposed options), it is unlikely to garner the requisite legitimacy among many poor and rich UN member states needed to establish new initiatives such as the Peacebuilding Commission (however timely and relevant). In the meantime, the General Assembly, acting under Article 22 of the Charter, should establish the Peacebuilding Commission.

Alternatively, the Peacebuilding Commission concept could be upgraded to that of an official UN organ, acting under Article 108 of the Charter. Ideally, the proposed Peacebuilding and Reconstruction Council could replace the long dormant and neglected Trusteeship Council (Chapter XIII of the Charter).³ Even though addressing internal violent conflict and organizing massive reconstruction efforts are not mentioned in the UN Charter, they are now arguably the most visible activities associated with the work of the world body. Indeed, elevating the Commission to the status of a major UN organ would help to ensure that make-or-break field operations (in terms of the UN's reputation, legitimacy, and future funding prospects) receive adequate resources, professional staff, and daily political oversight. The composition of the Peacebuilding and Reconstruction Council could be small (to ensure adequate political backing from major powers), yet regionally representative among UN member states. Various consultative channels, along the lines proposed by the Panel, could also be introduced.

In support of the Peacebuilding Commission, the Panel calls for (p.84) the creation of a Peacebuilding Support Office that would "ensure that the Secretary-General is able to integrate system-wide peacebuilding policies and strategies, develop best practices and provide cohesive support for field operations." Remarkably, the Panel recommends only a tiny Support Office staff of around 20 from diverse peacebuilding backgrounds. With such a limited configuration, the Support Office would barely fulfill the Commission's secretarial, monitoring, and analytical needs, let alone provide much-needed substantive and administrative support to field operations.

At present, no one UN Secretariat department or agency maintains adequate resources to effectively backstop peacebuilding interventions (and the civilian component of peacekeeping operations). The Department of Peacekeeping Operations is thinly staffed with personnel more suited to political reporting and assisting the military aspects of peacekeeping operations, and any qualified staff in the Department of Political Affairs and Department of Economic and Social Affairs are professionally over-stretched to provide dedicated support to a peacebuilding field operation. Further to the recommendations of the Brahimi Report (August 2000), it is not inconceivable for the UN Development Programme (with its now 100 strong Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery) to

³ Many long-time UN watchers might recall that the Trusteeship Council was expected to assume some of the responsibilities related to democratic development proposed now for the Peacebuilding and Reconstruction Council.

integrate its backstopping operations more closely with the Department of Peacekeeping and Department of Political Affairs. To an extent, this is happening already through the creation of Integrated Mission Task Forces at headquarters, more cohesive UN country teams in crisis situations, and the establishment of Deputy-Special Representatives of the Secretary-General, who normally serve concurrently as the UNDP Resident Representative. With the recent appointment of Mark Malloch Brown, the UNDP Administrator, as Chef de Cabinet for Secretary-General Annan, one could expect operational cooperation “across First Avenue” to accelerate to the benefit of peacebuilding operations in the field.

However, a bold and arguably more suitable proposal (given the close linkages between the UN’s performance in crisis situations and its perceived legitimacy and relevance) would be to create a new Department for Peacebuilding and Reconstruction.⁴ Professionally staffed with highly competent and motivated political and technical specialists equipped to carry out the specific functions presented below in the next section, this permanent and well-resourced body within the Secretariat would ensure dedicated, around-the-clock support to the Peacebuilding Commission (or Council) and multiple, concurrent field operations worldwide. It would further help to significantly reduce confusion, overlap, *ad-hocism*, contradicting mandates, and the wastage of precious resources among the range of actors in the UN system (including the IFIs) vying for a central leadership and coordination role in peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts.

On the issue of funding, the Panel recommends (p.72) the establishment of a peacebuilding fund “at the level of at least \$250 million that can be used to finance the recurrent expenditures of a nascent Government, as well as critical agency programmes in the areas of rehabilitation and reintegration.” If one considers solely the \$27.5 billion in aid over seven years (with \$6 billion going directly to the government budget) requested by the Afghanistan government at last March’s Berlin conference—not to mention the urgent needs of Sudan, Liberia, Iraq and other conflict-affected countries, the sum proposed by the Panel appears woefully inadequate.

In addition to annual assessed budgetary contributions for UN peacebuilding operations mandated by the Commission (or Council) and authorized by the General Assembly (once deemed consistent with the host Government’s priorities), *a standing UN Peacebuilding Fund of at least \$2 billion* should be made readily available for a range of “quick impact” peacebuilding projects (including government budgetary support) intended to jump-start government activity and credibility at key junctures of a peacebuilding process (eg, following an election or new legislation to devolve more power to local authorities).⁵ The Commission would be required to pre-approve all expenditures totaling more than \$25 million, and an “Aid Absorption Assessment” would need to be carried out by a UN team prior to the disbursement of sums exceeding \$2 million (to ensure that proper delivery and accountability systems are in place).

III. Identifying specific functions of the Commission and Support Office

The Panel states (p.83) that the “core functions of the Peacebuilding Commission should be to identify countries which are under stress and risk sliding towards State collapse; to organize, in partnership with

⁴ Alternatively, the current Department of Political Affairs could establish a new section for Peacebuilding and Reconstruction, led by a dedicated Under-Secretary-General (note: in 1993, the Department of Political Affairs was led by two USGs: Marrack Goulding and James Jonah).

⁵ Present Japanese contributions to the notoriously slow and bureaucratic UN Human Security Trust Fund could be transferred to the proposed UN Peacebuilding Fund.

the national Government, proactive assistance in preventing that process from developing further; to assist in the planning for transitions between conflict and post-conflict peacebuilding; and in particular to marshal and sustain the efforts of the international community in post-conflict peacebuilding over whatever period may be necessary.” Additional functions performed by the Commission (or Council) could include:

- (a) Regularly review efforts and recommend improvements for strengthening UN system conflict prevention machinery, resource mobilization, and strategies;
- (b) Design, approve, and amend mandates for UN peacebuilding operations, monitor the functioning of peacebuilding operations through quarterly reports prepared by the UN Secretariat, and recommend responses to changing situations on the ground;
- (c) Facilitate, through diplomatic and other channels, the constructive engagement of regional powers in a peacebuilding process where UN involvement is high; and
- (d) Pressure, through diplomatic and other channels, uncooperative local factions (whether along regional, ethnic, or sectarian lines) away from violence and toward the political mainstream through formal & informal types of democratic participation.

In addition to serving as the Secretariat for the Commission (or Council), the Support Office (or Department of Peacebuilding and Reconstruction) could also assume the following responsibilities:

- (a) Backstop all peacebuilding interventions (and the civilian component of peacekeeping operations) with an innovative and highly skilled cadre of technical specialists in each of the disciplines required in a comprehensive field operation (eg, political-institution building, security sector-reform, demobilization and reintegration, elections, human rights, civil society, and economic development). Specialists from the Support Office should form the nucleus of an advance team to establish a new peacebuilding operation (over a period of 3-6 months). Besides serving as desk officers and being on daily call for technical and administrative assistance to field operations, Support Office staff should be made available for regular field missions and to serve as stop-gaps for key field positions under recruitment;
- (b) Advise the Secretary-General on appropriate Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) and UN Resident Coordinator (RC) appointments following a rigorous vetting process of potential candidates held every two years and the maintenance of an up-to-date roster. All SRSG and RC’s should possess seasoned leadership skills, comprehend the major components and strategies for successful peacebuilding, and understand the peacebuilding strengths of bodies across the UN system and in the broader international community;
- (c) Provide advanced training to prospective SRSGs and RCs and their deputies, and intensive introductory training modules to new recruits for peacebuilding interventions (and the civilian component of peacekeeping operations) on the fundamentals of peacebuilding, affording special attention to techniques for conflict prevention and building local capacity for democratic self-governance. Specifically, instruction will emphasize methods for empowering local, progressive change-agents and attracting back talented diaspora to serve in government;

- (d) Establish a Best Practices, Research and Evaluation Unit (similar to the one located in the Department of Peacekeeping Operations) to map, measure, and conduct rigorous analysis on peacebuilding trends (eg, regular “ Early Warning States at Risk” reporting), as well as document and disseminate (through various mediums, such as seminars and the Internet) lessons learned from peacebuilding successes and failures;
- (e) Prepare documentation for the Commission (or Council) to consider the approval of UN Peacebuilding Fund requests exceeding \$25 million. The Support Office should also prepare, for review by the Commission, a bi-annual progress report summary of all “quick impact” peacebuilding projects supported through the Peacebuilding Fund.
- (f) Prepare a cadre of skilled peacebuilding personnel from developing countries through support for new master’s level training opportunities at, for example, The Institute for Development Studies (Sussex), The Fletcher School (through its interdisciplinary Human Security Program), and The Graduate Institute of International Studies (Geneva). Through the “UN Dialogue with the Global South Project” sponsored by the UN Foundation, developing country research on peacebuilding can also be tapped through the creation of new networks formed by the placement of Support Office staff in developing country universities (as researchers and teachers) for short periods.

IV. Conclusion: Advancing the New Peacebuilding Agenda at September’s Global Summit

On the occasion of the Five Year Review of the Millennium Declaration, this September’s UN-sponsored gathering of world leaders, in New York, provides a unique opportunity to advance a reform agenda leading to the creation of a UN Peacebuilding and Reconstruction Council, as an appropriate successor to the UN Trusteeship Council. In preparation, the Secretariat could organize a global series of deliberations between national representatives and UN officials about challenges to peacebuilding and institutional gaps in the current international architecture. Linkages to successful implementation of the many goals presented in the Millennium Declaration could also be highlighted. Following these consultations and the September Summit, the Secretary-General could proceed to erect a new Department for Peacebuilding and Reconstruction. With lawlessness increasingly spilling across borders, growing concern about genocide, and the effects of UN performance in many troubled spots now felt across the globe, the time is ripe for UN reform. In fulfillment of the spirit of the Millennium Declaration, establishing a UN Peacebuilding and Reconstruction Council will depend on a near universal consensus involving compromise, skillful diplomacy, and a shared political vision.

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