

## CHALLENGES FOR LEADING MULTINATIONAL AND MULTICULTURAL MILITARY UNITS

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**ABSTRACT** The paper deals with the opportunities and challenges which might face a commander leading multinational and multicultural troops, especially in peacekeeping and peace support operations. Peacekeeping missions have had an international character since their beginning. Internationalization of operations provides legitimacy to a mission and greater international support. However the combined operation causes significant challenges, especially for commanders, who have to lead these types of military units. The paper presents the benefits as well as challenges which faces the international leader in multi-ethnic environment. The author, based on his own experience gained in international deployments, presents his views and suggestions regarding the aspects of commanding multinational and multicultural troops.

### Introduction

Recent experience of conducting peacekeeping and peace support operations shows the necessity of a multinational and multicultural force. Leading such kinds of military units offers several opportunities as well as poses various challenges. The commanders of the combined military units have to realise the pros and cons of

such a situation as soon as possible. The deep knowledge about capacities as well as deficiencies of his/her soldiers from different countries, religions and cultures will allow a military leader to build a combat-effective and cohesive team of “seasoned” peacekeepers. The analysis of the benefits and problems resulting from multinationality and multiethnicity, combined with experiences of former peacekeepers could draw some conclusions which might help a commander to understand, train and assign his/her multinational troops in a more efficient and well-thought-out way.

The multinationality is the key for conducting effective and internationally acceptable peacekeeping and peace support operations. The UN peacekeeping missions had an international character from the very beginning and participating military units can be considered as the first "combined" units. The first UN mission was organized in 1948 (UNTSO Magazine 2008). It was the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) mission, which included representatives from Belgium, France, and the United States (Bielewicz 2011, p. 379). Currently, one can observe also a trend towards internationalization of operations and for several years even international military units have been established, such as the German - French Brigade or the Lithuanian – Polish - Ukrainian Brigade which is currently organised and should be used for future peacekeeping operations.

### **Benefits of multinationality**

Especially in the peacekeeping operations, multinationality is particularly a very important factor, because it shows that the giving operation is not just a “little war” of one country against another, but the mission has been organised due to the concern of the international community for peace in the world. Therefore, the United States laid particular emphasis on the establishment of an international coalition during military interventions against Iraq

leader Saddam Hussein within the operation “Desert Storm” in 1991, during the Second Gulf War in 2003 and the NATO during operation ISAF in Afghanistan. Examples could be multiplied. Another important aspect in addition to “internationalism” of the peacekeeping forces is also a cultural and religious diversity. During the Gulf War, particular attention was paid to the involvement of Arab countries as the operation should not be perceived as a crusade of Christian “Crusaders” against Islam, which was how Saddam Hussein wanted to present it to the other Arab countries.

Some beneficial factors of the multinationality can have a tremendous influence on the support for an international mission. They are:

**a.** legitimacy – As was mentioned above internationality brings a higher acceptability to the operation. Internationality shows that not only one or a couple of countries want to intervene, but the forces have the mandate of the international community which authorizes a coalition or an international organization to operate in the spirit of preserving peace in the world.

**b.** access to larger resources – An increasing number of countries participating in the operation gives planners the possibility of using larger number of resources, both human as well as material. One can apply a wider range of military technology and supply for the operation. Furthermore the multinational design sometimes allows use of the safe territory of a coalition state, its air bases, harbours etc., as APODs or SPODs (Air/Sea Ports of Debarkation). That was the case during the 1<sup>st</sup> Gulf War (Desert Shield and Desert Storm – the coalition forces stationed in Saudi Arabia). Another important factor linked to internationality is fundraising for the operation (e.g. in the case of NATO involvement, operation costs are covered by Member States participating in the campaign).

**c.** More effective diplomatic support – A large number of countries involved in the peacekeeping or other military operations also contribute for increasing of the diplomatic influence on conflict factions. It could be done through various international organizations, whose opinions the warring parties have to take under consideration (UN, NATO, EU, AU, OSCE, etc.) It allows them to force some solutions beneficial to a military operation. Moreover the diplomacy can assure international legitimacy to the campaign (e.g. The UN Resolution 1386 which allowed the official intervention in Afghanistan) (UN SCR 1386 (2001)).

**d.** Greater flexibility – Internationality assures the opportunity of using soldiers from different contingents with various nationalities' religious and cultural backgrounds. In some particular areas, soldiers from certain nations or ethnic groups might be more easily accepted for stationing as the peacekeeping forces in the given areas. For example, in the case of the operation Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the local community in Bihac town (an overwhelming number of the population is Serb origin - Slavs and Christian Orthodox), demanded stationing there of Polish forces, due to the reason that the inhabitants trusted much more the soldiers with a similar ethnic background. They did not consent to allow the presence of the Turkish military, perceived as supporters of the Bosnian Muslims.

The above mentioned examples show the numerous advantages offered by the multinational structure of peacekeeping forces. However the “internationality” of the military brings not only the benefits but also causes several challenges, especially for military leaders at all levels of command.

### **Challenges in commanding of multinational forces**

There is a large number of factors that affect, impede and complicate commanding of the international troops. This is the

price which has to be paid by the leader of combined forces for the benefits of the international structure of his/her military subunits. Overcoming these problems is one of the key challenges and problems which will face the commander of the multinational troops.

*Challenges in the professional area*

- Different training/professional standards. The training of soldiers is a national issue, based on various national military standards, different TLPs (Troop-Leading Procedures) and TTPs (Tactics, Techniques and Procedures). Therefore, the peacekeeping soldiers present a very different level of preparation and military skills, not only due to their individual abilities, but the level of training applied by the Armed Forces of the given country. For example, in Lebanon, UNIFIL soldiers from the Ghanaian contingent used Finnish made APCs (Armoured Personal Carrier) SISU. For many of these drivers it was the first contact with such large vehicle and they had to be taught how to use those APCs, which hampered the combat readiness of the contingent. Therefore, the commander of the international military unit must estimate very quickly the military skills and knowledge of his/her soldiers to be aware of some limitations but also extra capabilities which they represent. If necessary, the commander has to arrange additional training.

- Command and Control (C2) arrangements. C2 is a very difficult area which a multinational leader has to cope with during the operation. The issue of commanding combined units is simpler in the case of NATO Peace Support Operations, where affiliations between the commander and the subordinates have been defined in NATO doctrinal documents called Allied Joint Publications, inter alia AJP-1 (Chapter 6) and AJP-3(B) Section XIII. A much more complicated situation faces a commander in a UN operation, because such a relationship is not defined so clearly. Full Command is never given to the UN by participating states, only

Operational Authority is exercised by the UN commanders in accordance with the Mandate, Memorandum of Understanding and the mission's Standard Operation Procedures. Moreover, national caveats have an enormous influence on the possibility of employment of subordinate troops. The issue will be addressed later.

Other factors which create problems are different national standards for C2. The NATO widespread standard is "mission command", where subordinates have the huge confidence of the commander and they have broad freedom in making decisions and taking actions. However, in the case of certain non-NATO countries, the subordinate commanders expect detailed and specific orders how they should act and they do not show any initiative. The reason is not lack of motivation or skills, but it is due to the "command culture" applicable in the given armies where initiative and freedom of command is severely restricted. Also in this case the international leader has to identify at the very beginning of the operation which tasks cannot be carried out by his/her subordinates. However, he/she has to be observant to ensure that any "unusual" and undesirable national command habits are not transferred to an ongoing operation hampering it.

Additionally, some countries try to develop the commanders' competences for Peace Support Operations even in a very early stage of the officers' education, during their studies in military academies. However, "such leadership competences can be developed during multinational exercises and officer cadets' education still at the military academies" (Bielewicz, Kozubek 2013, p.93). This solution can dramatically shorten the adaptation period and multinational unit cohesion process during deployments.

*Political restrictions*

The peacekeeping missions have been and are not only military actions, but primarily they have a political nature. Therefore, important political considerations influence the way of conducting the military aspects and determine military objectives. As a rule, the political factors outweigh the military arguments. That is why so called “national caveats” cause enormous challenges for the military leader. The caveats are defined as “restrictions placed by nations on the use of their forces on multinational operations” (House of Commons Defence Committee 2008). These political-military constraints are imposed unilaterally and without any consultations with multinational bodies or commanders involved in the combined operation.

The problem of national caveats is a very sensitive and challenging issue which has been said to be even an operations’ “cancer” by the Atlantic Council of the United States. “National caveats that restrict the commander’s ability to use forces as needed, especially in emergency or in extremis are a cancer that Allies should attempt to remove, much as the Alliance did in Kosovo in 2004” (the Atlantic Council of the United States 2008). The commander of the multinational forces has to be aware of these limitations from the very beginning of the mission, and has to appreciate them and incorporate into in his/her operational planning and employment of the forces.

*Language considerations*

Currently, the primary communication language in international operations is English. During the mission the commander could be exposed to different levels of language proficiency, even to lack of language skills, especially among

soldiers of lower ranks. He/she can experience various pronunciation styles, accents and even unusual sets of vocabulary. The international leader should quickly figure out what is the level of language knowledge among his subordinates. He/she should issue the orders in a clear and understandable way, use 'simple' vocabulary and make sure that his subordinates understand his/her way of speaking and check if they understand the issued tasks. Linguistic misunderstandings can sometimes lead to tragedy and even death of soldiers or civilians. The long-term peacekeeping operations have a tendency to develop an unofficial "mission language" consisting of various abbreviations, acronyms or words referring to equipment, geographical locations, terrain features in the Area of Responsibility etc. Sometimes these expressions are understandable only to members of the mission. Therefore, the commander should quickly acquire this type of vocabulary in order to understand the other members of the mission.

### *Religious and cultural restraints*

Religious and cultural aspects are very broad themes, which very seriously can affect the way of conducting the operation. One can find many studies, both military and civilian, how to cope with this issue. They can help the future commanders of multinational military units to deepen their knowledge about this important factor of the international operations. The issue is particularly crucial for a commander and the mission because some nations are very sensitive especially towards religious aspects. Religious and culture-related differences can cause tensions and misunderstandings among the contingents' members and affect the success of the mission.



Commanders must know the basic principles of the religion of their subordinates, and be familiar with their culture. Moreover the international leaders have to accept the religious practices of their soldiers and civilian employees. On the other hand, a commander has to be sensitive to attempts of any religious indoctrination that could be conducted by his/her subordinates. Moreover the responsible superiors should understand the religious, cultural and historical conditions of the country of operations in order to avoid unnecessary cultural and religious clashes. A commander has to be aware that cultural differences might hamper the building of a trusted and combat-effective team of peacekeepers.

Another sensitive topic in the area of cultural factors is the participation of women in peacekeeping operations, especially in case of female personnel being in commanding positions. While in this case, soldiers from European nations generally do not cause any problems, the situation might be more complicated in the case of military contingents from other continents. For example, the Indian soldiers of the very elite, but the very exclusive Sikh Regiment serving in UNIFIL in 2005 had some difficulties in recognizing the authority of the female directing staff, although the Indian Armed Forces have women in their ranks. Moreover one can observe that they have problems to accept the authority of some higher ranking Indian officers from other ethnic groups. This problem is particularly evident among countries where women cannot serve in the military or they do not occupy the higher commanding posts. However the majority of the Armed Forces accept the fact that women are commanders in international operations. In the case of female soldiers or civilian employees a commander has to pay attention to the obeying of general rules and laws of human beings and mutual relations, and he/she should react very strongly to all forms of human rights violations and attempts of sexual harassment.

Of course, during a combined operation there are much more factors that pose a challenge to the international commanders that have not been listed as such. Climatic factors, standard of welfare or even personal relationships and frictions inside the national contingents drawn from tribal differences to point out only some examples. The international leader is not able to predict all of them, but he/she has to be prepared for the “unknown” and react to accordingly to the emerging challenges.

### **Effective leadership in multinational operations**

As was mentioned above, the military leader of the multinational peacekeeping forces has to be aware of the benefits of such a situation, but he/she also must be prepared for the challenges waiting for him/her in the Area of Responsibility (AOR). Additionally he/she must have thorough knowledge about the AOR, geography, religion, culture and social conditions of the local population. Commanders have to gain such knowledge, even in the pre-deployment phase in his/her native country, by studying books and documents, exchanging views and experiences with former participants of the mission and through participation in in-place reconnaissance before the final deployment. However, after arriving to the Area of Responsibility the commander should practically verify his/her knowledge during the adaptation period.

D. Cremin, along with a group of other co-authors, proposed in 2005 ”Top 10 tips for multinational commanders” which are still valid and have not lost their relevance (Cremin 2005, p. 59).

- 1) If you don’t already have it, build your ‘national knowledge’ of the historical, social, political, economic makeup of other nations in your command (along with a database of multinational experience).
- 2) Be prepared to adapt your command style.

- 3) Prioritize relationship building. Mutual respect is key. The goal is to foster a communicative, collaborative, and co-operative relationship.
- 4) Understand national contingent capabilities. Do not over task contingent forces, but build the level of challenge in tasks slowly.
- 5) Don't assume your way is the only way. Different approaches may be needed.
- 6) Negotiation is commonplace; command by discussion.
- 7) Be prepared for variations in the standard of spoken English (and be careful about the use of acronyms). Always seek closed loop communication when conveying important information.
- 8) Establish a common sense of purpose.
- 9) Where possible, establish a Common Operating Procedure (COP) (e.g., when shared doctrine and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) are lacking, create a unifying set of COPs/SOPs).
- 10) Promote equity of risk and reward.

Based on the author's own experience gained during his service in the UN, NATO and EU missions and employments in the Middle East and the Balkans, he wants to suggest some measures which might help the multinational commander to understand and effectively lead his/her multinational troops. The international leader should:

- be familiar with educational background and training system of the Armed Forces of their foreign soldiers;
- present a flexible style of command;

- have general knowledge about his/her foreign troops' environment, history, culture, religion etc.;
- present respectful behaviour and mutual respect;
- be able to accept diversities;
- present so called "cultural intelligence";
- try to "enter" socially into their troops' communities;
- assimilate some basic sentences of his/her foreign troops.

A commander, through his/her formal and informal activities should integrate commanding troops into a cohesive team, which he/she can trust in crisis situations. An international leader has to be aware about the troops' potential and combat capabilities. Only in this case will a commander be able effectively to employ his/her soldiers in order to achieve the objectives of the operation.

## Conclusions

The specificity of commanding multinational and multicultural military units presents many challenges for the military leaders, especially for those who had no previous experience in commanding such types of military structures. A commander is a key constituent to the success of the military operation or the peacekeeping mission. His/her ability to create mutual trust, to integrate the subordinates and to establish one coherent and efficient military "toolbox" in the form of an action-ready military unit, can determine the success or failure of the whole mission. A military leader must be aware of the problems arising from commanding international troops. He/she has to understand that the composition, structure and equipment of his/her multinational subunits are very often the result of a political compromise which imposes restrictions on the ability to act militarily in a mission area.

Furthermore the international military leader must realize that the multinationality can often result from circumstances and strategic goals which not always go along with the objectives at the operational or tactical level. A commander has to wisely use the opportunities allocated to him in form of the multinational forces. He/she has to build an efficient and trusted team of peacekeepers who know each other very well, have mutual trust and present a common understanding of mission goals. The clever, well-balanced and flexible behaviour of the commander could only enhance the building of a coherent team with peacekeepers' spirit.

The effective multinational leader should be aware about the differences among his/her soldiers, should tolerate diversities, equalize divergences, integrate the team, and bring the attention of his/her soldiers to the necessity of the common effort. Such conduct could help him/her to build so called "Esprit De Corps", necessary for fulfilling operational and strategic objectives of every peacekeeping operation.

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