

OSINT FOR PEACE SUPPORT OPERATIONS: PERSPECTIVES FROM UN OPERATIONS

By

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Introduction

In an article in the Spring 1999 issue of *The Journal of Conflict Studies*, published by my Centre, our host - Robert Steele - advanced the concept of “Information Peacekeeping” (IP). His idea was to exploit a triad of elements - Intelligence, Information Technology (IT), and Electronic Home Defense - in an integrated fashion as “the ultimate *countervailing force* against emerging threats and the most cost-effective means of devising diplomatic and other response intended to *avoid or resolve conflicts* [emphasis added]”.¹ I am going to concentrate only on the first leg of the Triad - Intelligence - and only, as Steele did, on Open Source Intelligence (OSINT). Like Robert, I will make the case that OSINT meets almost all of the policy-makers’ and commanders’ intelligence requirements for effective peacekeeping, either before a conflict breaks out, during it, or in the post-conflict resolution/reconstruction phases. I will also demonstrate that OSINT has always been available for peacekeeping, but has not always been used properly, especially by the UN. Recent developments in IT make OSINT easy to collect, analyse, and distribute. But, it is the changing character of conflicts and thus of peacekeeping operations that make effective exploitation of OSINT a *necessity*.

Blue Beret OSINT: Open Sources in UN Peacekeeping Operations

It is probably accurate to assert that OSINT was central to UN peacekeeping operations during the Cold War, *out of necessity*. The United Nations, itself a creature of the Cold War, and sensitive to the concerns of both the Superpowers and emerging nations, *had to be seen to be impartial*. It could not be seen as taking sides in any dispute in which it was the intervening third party, especially since peacekeeping operations under Chapter 6 of the UN Charter required the

consent of the host state.² Therefore, UN peacekeeping operations were based on the principle of *transparency*; peacekeeping forces had to operate openly, and this applied to the collection of intelligence. In fact, since in the Cold War context *intelligence* carried with it a *clandestine* image, the UN eschewed the use of the word, referring instead to “military information.” This, of course, left it open to the double entendre that “The UN has no intelligence.”³ Strictly speaking that wasn’t true, but the UN’s efforts in this regard clearly were constrained. This forced the UN to rely almost entirely on OSINT.

In the field, at the tactical level, collection was from “open” sources: visual observation by patrols and authorized flights, or from observation posts (OPs); open communication and contact with belligerent forces and the local populations; and the use of “public” information, such as newspapers and published documents.⁴ Furthermore, because Article 2(7) of the UN Charter also prohibits the UN from interfering in domestic matters of its member states, that limited the scope of what peacekeepers could collect and report. In effect, they could gather information on only those subjects that were contained within the mandate of the force - usually, the movements and activities of belligerent forces.⁵ Political activities and violence lying outside the scope of the mission, however relevant and significant, also lay outside the scope of the peacekeepers’ intelligence collection. This led to ludicrous situations, as in Iraq in July 1990. There, the United Nations Iran-Iraq Military Observer Group (UNIIMOG), deployed to monitor the ceasefire between Iran and Iraq, openly observed Iraqi preparations for the invasion of Kuwait. However, since this activity lay outside the UNIIMOG mandate, they could not report on it. In fact, Iraq threatened to expel the UN mission if it did so.⁶

At UN headquarters in New York the situation was little different, even though it was responsible for planning, organizing, and mounting peacekeeping operations. As Paul Johnston points out, “there is little shortage of ‘strategic intelligence’ for the UN. Academics, the media, and other open sources provide a wealth of background to all the disputes ongoing and looming around the world.”⁷ However, UNHQ was not oriented to using that intelligence, even OSINT, for strategic analysis and planning until almost the end of the Cold War era. The first step was the creation of the Office for Research and the Collection of Information (ORCI) in 1987; ORCI did make use of open sources. In 1993, in response to criticism from UN commanders in the field, the UN established a 24/7 Situation Centre within the Department of Peacekeeping Operations

(DPKO), and the following year an Intelligence and Research (I&R) Unit was set up within the centre. Staffed by professional intelligence officers, it relies first on OSINT, including on-line sources, and turns to national/classified sources only if requirements cannot be met from OSINT.⁸ Of course, having the capability is one thing; using it effectively is another. The UN's recent failure to prepare to contain violence in the wake of the referendum in East Timor, in spite of ample evidence and warning from publicly available sources,⁹ suggests that the UN is still a long way from making the best possible use of OSINT to keep the peace before trouble breaks out.

Green Helmet: The New Face of Peacekeeping

Until relatively recently, the UN's 'traditional' approach to intelligence was probably sufficient for the kinds of missions it undertook during the Cold War. Only the major operation in the Congo in the early 1960s required anything more than a rudimentary intelligence capability.¹⁰ Normally, the UN operated in 'permissive', even benign, environments, where the threats and risks were low, for both the peacekeepers and those whom they served.

The chaos in East Timor represents a new kind of operational environment, in which the UN's old rule book no longer applies. This was seen first in the Balkans in the early 1990s, then in Somalia and Rwanda. The "failed state" syndrome is characterized by complexity of: political demographics, sources of authority and control over local belligerents, the emergence of factions, and the use of information warfare (IW). The use of politicized discourse for IW defines the conflict in manichean zero-sum terms that demonize the 'other', leading to a loosening of moral restraints on the use of violence. Whole groups are identified as the enemy and disproportionate means are sanctioned. This is aggravated by the state losing its monopoly over control of the means of violence. The military and other security forces disintegrate and are merged into multiple armed factions of eager fanatics, who offset their lack of skill with excess firepower and ruthlessness. They use conventional weapons in unconventional ways; war takes on a 'scorched earth' character. The result is a 'free form', non-linear, multi-textured battlefield.¹¹

This has serious implications for peacekeeping operations. First, there may be no peace to keep. Second, there may be no consent for the presence and actions of international forces. Third, some factions may not regard the peacekeepers as 'neutral', and thus may actively oppose them. Finally, the mandate and mission may extend well beyond restoring and maintaining peace.¹²

In these environments, the term ‘peacekeeping’ takes on a whole new meaning. Instead of merely monitoring a static, quiet cease-fire line, the peacekeepers may find themselves: protecting and distributing humanitarian aid; rebuilding damaged infrastructure; disarming belligerents and destroying or storing their weapons; assisting and protecting returning displaced persons; doing civil affairs activities; negotiating and mediating disputes; conducting internal security operations (including riot control, cordon and search, roadblocks, and snap searches); and conducting surveillance on and arrests of suspected war criminals.¹³ Since these activities are taking place in a ‘non-permissive’ environment, peacekeeping forces may become engaged in combat, either to defend themselves, to protect others, or to enforce their writ. As such, the term ‘peacekeeping’ - as it is usually understood - may be inappropriate. Indeed, the operations may take on the character of a counter-insurgency campaign; thus, Low Intensity Conflict or Operations Other Than War may be more accurate, although the ultimate objectives of the latter (defeat of an insurgent enemy) are different. Since these new operations involve more than just peacekeeping, but less than peace enforcement, a more appropriate descriptor might be High Intensity Peace Operations (HIPO).

HIPO Intelligence Requirements

In these conflicts and in the HIPOs that attempt to contain and ameliorate them, “knowledge is power”. But, it is knowledge of a different kind. The peacekeepers’ intelligence requirements (PIR) extend well beyond the traditional who, what, where, when, why, and how - into subject areas that normally are not part of conventional military planning. Moreover, the boundaries between strategic, operational, and tactical intelligence are blurred. The Commander’s Critical Intelligence Requirements (CCIR) model is useful for identifying those vital elements of information that commanders at all levels need to ensure the success of the mission.¹⁴ Applying the CCIR model to HIPOs produces the following PIRs.¹⁵

Strategic

Understanding the situation and the conflict is the fundamental prerequisite to establishing mission objectives for a peacekeeping operation. Without a clear understanding, the operation can go badly awry; this obviously occurred in Somalia after UNITAF handed over to UNOSOM II.¹⁶

Therefore, in addition to the normal military factors, such as order of battle, mission planners and force commanders need to understand:

1. The origins, development, and patterns of the conflict;
2. The issues and stakes of the dispute;
3. The current situation and trends;
4. Background or context information (situational/cultural awareness), which includes:
 - A. *political culture*: who's who, who's in charge, what do they want and why, what they have, do, and how; how power is exercised, formally and informally (this includes both domestic and foreign actors), what constitutes political legitimacy;
 - B. *socio-economic culture*: the backdrop to politics and conflict - social structures, macro and micro economy (including relative distribution of wealth between social groupings), religion, ethnicity, language and dialects, customs and practices, demography, media, and attitudes of the population to leaders, opposition movements, foreign involvement, and to the conflict itself; and,
5. Mission planning data: deployment and internal distances, topography; climate and weather; public health conditions; infrastructure, including ports of entry (access, security, facilities), lines of communication (type, quality, security), telecommunications (type, quality, serviceability), and sustainment factors (food, fuel, water, repair, and medical services).

While situational awareness is essential at the strategic level, is vital for peacekeepers at the operational and tactical levels as well. Those who are in direct contact with the population and belligerents probably need it most, since their actions can have strategic consequences.

Operational

This includes routine military intelligence requirements, such as the intentions, plans, capabilities, disposition, movements, and activities of belligerent forces (and the relation of these to any ceasefire terms and lines, or to disputed areas or other political/military flashpoints). The 'non-traditional' requirements include the disposition of vulnerable populations, such as threatened minorities and displaced persons, and the location and activities of foreigners, such as NGOs, businesses, diplomats, visitors/tourists, media, and any foreign combattant, training or advisory units and personnel. Belligerent propaganda and other IW activities also need to be understood. Propaganda/IW analysis must include themes, dissemination methods, audience, its receptivity, and mobilizing effects, both inside the country/theatre and internationally.

Tactical

In addition to normal tactical intelligence requirements related to operations and security, the peacekeepers will need to understand the local dimensions of the conflict: the 'grass roots' level political culture, social/political/clan/family relationships, beliefs, attitudes toward the various factions, issues, and the conflict, the local media, the local economy (official and black market), and criminality (including drugs and/or arms trade). They need to become familiar with these to the point where they recognize any changes that might indicate potential trouble.

One common thread unites these PIRs. What is most striking about them is that the most important ones do not require secret intelligence methods; they can be met by OSINT.

OSINT for HIPOs

The changing nature of conflict, of peacekeeping operations, and of their information needs has coincided with the "Information Revolution." This has opened up a wide range of open sources, some of which did not exist a decade ago. That said, the utility of each of these will vary from situation to situation, depending upon access, collection and analysis methods, and source reliability. Just as requirements overlap from level to level, so do OSINT sources.

Strategic

1. Print and electronic publications. At the strategic level, this is a potentially rich vein of source material. The news media, government agencies, academia, business, think tanks, risk analysis firms, NGOs (including development, relief, and human rights groups), belligerent groups and their front organizations, and individuals with knowledge and experience, publish relevant data and analysis, in both print and electronic form. With the growth of the Internet during the last decade, electronic sources are rapidly overtaking print because of their accessibility and immediacy. Monitoring the media can serve two useful functions: "breaking news" of major events, and data collection for trend analysis that can provide "early warning" of developing conflicts or of changes in ongoing ones. Other open sources can provide the mission planning data, as well as the vital background and context information that is needed for situational awareness and for sensitizing the peacekeepers to the culture of the conflict. So, there is no shortage of OSINT sources for strategic level mission planning and direction.

That said, OSINT sources suffer from all the limitations of other forms of intelligence: data gaps, reliability problems, timeliness problems, “information overload”, and conflicting interpretations of data and its significance. It would be a mistake to assume that the media will always get the story right, or that the NGOs’ reports are completely neutral and objective. Moreover, when trying to understand the subtle nuances of a conflict, such as whether it is rooted in ethnic, cultural, linguistic, religious, or economic issues (or some combination thereof), it is important to recognize that not all ‘experts’ will agree. Indeed, they may differ substantively on important points, which can have profound implications for planning. Thus, relying on OSINT can be a mixed blessing, when it comes to turning information into knowledge. As one analyst noted about the UN, “The problem is an overabundance of information and a shortage of knowledge.”¹⁷ This points to the need for a qualified intelligence staff to collate, validate, analyse, and interpret the data and turn it into the strategic intelligence the decision-makers and the mission planning staffs require.¹⁸

2. Human Sources. The term HUMINT is usually associated with clandestine spies, but, in fact, many people can serve as OSINT sources. As Robert Steele says, “knowing who knows” may be the most important knowledge possessed by any intelligence analyst.¹⁹ This includes: refugees and exiles; NGO members, media correspondents, business and other travellers with in-country experience; and academic experts. Refugees and exiles potentially can provide detailed, first-hand accounts of people, events, and situations. However, they are also prone to bias, exaggeration, myth-making, and propaganda; like any eyewitness, they can overlook or forget vital details. The value of the other human sources will depend on their knowledge of the country and language(s), where they have been, for how long, what they have seen, and who their contacts were. NGO members who have had a long presence in a given area may be the most knowledgeable, but they often are unwilling to share their knowledge with official agencies, for fear of compromising their relations with the community (including belligerents) or of putting themselves at risk of physical harm. Moreover, NGOs (and academics) have their own unique perspectives and political agendas which may colour their perspective on the situation. All of this means that human sources must be treated like any other. They must be evaluated and validated, then questioned, de-briefed, or interrogated by intelligence personnel, who require the appropriate language skills and sufficient knowledge of the area and situation to sort out fact from fiction.²⁰

3. Imagery. Long regarded as a most secret intelligence source during the Cold War, Imagery has “come out of the closet” during the past decade. While governments still control most of this capability, commercial firms such as SPOT Image Corporation and LANDSAT increasingly are able to compete with national systems in terms of image quality sufficient for peacekeeping operational requirements. This ranges from Russian 2 meter resolution to Canadian 25 meter (from RADARSAT). SPOT, for example, now has most of the earth in its archives, almost 100% cloud-free, at 10 meter resolution, and less than three years old; in short, excellent for mapping. However, the utility of even commercially available Imagery is constrained by technical limits: coverage (the number of platforms, their location or flight paths); flexibility (flight schedules and time required to change them); sensor type; resolution; weather; and cost.²¹

Operational

These sources are also relevant at the operational level, once the force is deployed. But, their relative value will vary according to the situation in-theatre. The force commander and the senior political officials won't have the need or the time for academic studies, for example. However, they will need to be informed of impending or actual changes to the local or external political landscape that could have an impact on their operations. So the news media will retain considerable relevance at this level. The international media may have to be monitored elsewhere and the appropriate reports “pushed” down to the theatre commander and others. With regard to human sources, the leaders and opposition groups, whose perspectives on the situation may be quite different from those of exiles and refugees, represent the primary HUMINT source. Their current local knowledge can enhance the force's understanding of the political, military, and humanitarian situation. The same can be said for NGOs and the media. However, in both cases, as noted above, their information and views will have to be weighed carefully. Moreover, as the media and the NGOs are in contact with the conflict and the belligerents, it may be more difficult to consult them openly unless the force can ensure their security from reprisals. Imagery is also valuable for identifying major features, buildings, LOCs, military and other fixed positions, mass burial sites, minefields, clusters of people and vehicles and their movements. This data also can be used for monitoring ceasefire lines and cantonment sites, and the Imagery can be collected openly.

Tactical

At the tactical level, HUMINT predominates, but much of this can be treated as OSINT. Constant patrolling will bring the peacekeepers into contact with the local population. If the force can provide adequate security and if the troops can understand the language, they may learn a great deal simply by asking questions and listening. The same applies to locally-based NGOs. The local media should be monitored more for attitudes (editorial opinion) and for rumours, than for news. Liaison Officers are the force's eyes and ears on the local leaders, factions, and the active or former belligerents. They talk to all sides, and must do so openly, since 'transparency' builds confidence.

One example illustrates the utility of OSINT at all three levels. When the UN re-deployed to Rwanda after the 1994 genocide, the UNAMIR II force included an intelligence staff. Its Canadian head (July 1995-January 1996) made extensive use of OSINT to prepare the deploying forces for the situation. During the pre-deployment phase, his staff used the Internet and other public sources to collect essential background data on Rwanda. Their sources included official publications, such as the CIA's *World Factbook* and the Department of the Army's *Area Studies*, and news magazines, such as *The Economist*. This allowed them to produce reports and briefings for senior staff (strategic/operational levels) and a handbook to be issued to the soldiers (tactical). The *Rwanda Handbook* contained maps, insurgent force OB, situational awareness information (geography, history, political structure, infrastructure, weather, medical), a phrase guide, and pictures identifying poisonous snakes. The staff produced two editions of the handbook, and were able to cut production time for the second edition by nearly 50% by using "the wealth of digitized information and graphics data that had become available on the internet."²²

The production and the use of the handbook not only blurs the lines between strategic, operational, and tactical intelligence in modern conflicts and peacekeeping operations. It also demonstrates the accessibility and utility of OSINT from the wide range of sources now available, sources that lie outside the military's traditional domain. Indeed, as Robert Steele points out, most of that information and those sources reside outside government; it is privately owned "knowledge capital."²³ Janes and Oxford Analytica, both in the UK, and the Texas-based Stratfor company are good examples of the powerful OSINT sources available in the private sector.²⁴

Conclusions

The wars of the present, and those likely to occur in the near future, pose unique challenges for those seeking to contain, terminate, and resolve them. Linear warfare between disciplined professional standing armies is being overtaken by ‘free-form’ warfare between plundering gangs of well-armed brutes. Increasingly, it is the professionals who are being called upon to restore order in the wake of excessively violent disorder. They deploy into situations of political chaos, violence, and social disruption. The old ways of peacekeeping no longer apply, and the blue beret is being replaced by the green helmet, under the authority of the UN, NATO, or some other international body. High Intensity Peace Operations (HIPO) are now the rule. But robust power and rules of engagement alone are not enough; in these situations, “knowledge is power.” A poorly informed force will flounder and fail.

HIPOs require a substantial commitment of intelligence resources. However, the intelligence and the commitment required are of a wholly new kind. Controlling the ‘free-form’ battlefield requires an intelligence methodology that thinks “outside the box.” The information needed is less military than cultural, and the process involves exploiting new sources that lie outside the traditional military domain. OSINT sources can provide the overwhelming bulk of that information. But, since governments don’t own or control most of that information, the post-modern peacekeepers must acquire it from information entrepreneurs; they must become consumers in a free market for OSINT. Moreover, they will have to become better shoppers than the opposition, since whatever is available to the peacekeeper is also available to the belligerent.

That said, it would be a mistake to regard OSINT as a single source panacea. While it may serve as a ‘reality check’ on intelligence generated from secret sources, it is not without its own limitations. As the foregoing indicates, OSINT’s widest application and greatest value is at the strategic level. The closer one gets to “the new face of battle”, the more that peacekeepers must rely on the full range of intelligence sources and methods, collection platforms, and analytical techniques. The secret to success at the operational and tactical levels will lie in the ability to fuse OSINT, traditional military intelligence, and clandestine sources to generate an intelligence synergy that leaves the peacekeepers dominant in “intelligence power”.²⁵ That, as much as robust military power and prowess and the will and mandate to use it, will allow them to keep the peace.

Endnotes

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25. The term comes from: Michael Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 2, and n. 6.

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