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Ireland's Chance To Sway Security Policy In The EU

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UN Battle Groups

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's call for highly mobile, rapidly deployable UN 'battle groups' reflects a growing requirement worldwide for what are termed 'third generation' peace-enforcement operations. First and second generation operations would typically describe the 'classical' UN peacekeeping mission mounted during the Cold War. Such operations dating between the 1940's and 1990's were normally deployed with UN Security Council approval and with the prior consent of the belligerent parties involved. The political maneuvering necessary to secure such consent allied with the typically large numbers of peacekeepers deployed during this period normally meant that it was usually several months, even years before peacekeepers arrived in the zone of conflict.

The bitter experience of UN peacekeepers deployed to the Balkans in the 1990's led the UN to reassess the manner in which future operations would be configured and deployed. In particular, the mass murder of thousands of Muslim men and boys at Srebrenica in July 1995, despite the presence of Dutch peacekeepers, forced the UN to conclude that future military interventions would have to be more robustly configured and – crucially - allowed the adequate mandate and 'operational consistency' necessary to mount sustained, high-tempo combat operations.

This assessment was confirmed in the UN commissioned Brahimi Report of 2000 which endorsed rapidly deployed peace-enforcement as a viable mode of military intervention - one that would in all likelihood become increasingly necessary in a time of post Cold War political flux and upheaval. The Brahimi Report provides the blueprint for the UN's brigade-sized multinational battle groups proposed in Dublin yesterday.

It would be an aspiration of the UN that the new battle groups follow the precedent set by US and French troops in recent years in trouble spots such as Sierra Leone, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo. These forces - the US 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade in Operation Shining Express in Liberia in 2003 and the French army in Operation Artemis in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2003 - were deployed at very short notice and in relatively small numbers. At brigade strength, these deployments were remarkably similar to the 1,500 strong battle groups envisaged by Kofi Annan.

Like the UN's proposed battle groups, these forces were equipped with their own self-contained transport, logistics, air and artillery support. These dramatic and rapidly mounted operations were adjudged a success by the French and US Governments. Such direct and often blunt military interventions are not without risk and would differ from traditional UN operations in that they could be mounted without the consent or invitation of all parties to the conflict involved. Despite these inherent risks, many military commanders with peacekeeping experience believe that rapid intervention, however imprecise, is infinitely preferable to the scenario of an international community standing idly by as genocide is perpetrated – as for example in Rwanda in 1994 and in the Darfur region of Sudan today.

Whilst Kofi Annan's appeal for such a rapidly deployable force may be new for the UN, the Irish Defence Forces are already committed to such a set of arrangements under our obligations towards the EU European Rapid Reaction Force (ERRF) and the pre-existing and more cumbersome UN Standby Arrangement System (UNSAS). Consistent with these requirements, Ireland is already committed to providing a light infantry battalion along with a number of special forces troops to the ERRF. Such troops, numbering approximately 850, are required to be available for deployment within a short period of time and to be sustained in the field – as part of an EU military operation, either within Europe or up to 2,500 miles beyond its borders – for up to a year. Under the UNSAS system, we are committed to supply a similar number of Irish troops for UN missions.

The Irish Defence Forces are also experienced in the type of high tempo combat operation envisaged by the UN for its battle groups. Irish troops fought a number of conventional battles in the Congo in the 1960's as members of the ONUC UN peace-enforcement mission. Significantly, the Irish – despite being peacekeepers as opposed to peace enforcers – fought a conventional battle in the south Lebanese village of At Tiri in 1980, preventing its ethnic cleansing by an Israeli-backed Lebanese militia under the command of Major Saad Haddad. More recently, Irish men and women participated in robust peace enforcement operations in Somalia in the mid nineties, in East Timor in 1999 and currently in the Finnish-led Battle Group in Kosovo and in the UN UNMIL peace enforcement mission in Liberia.

The men and women of the Irish Defence Forces are well placed to respond to the challenge posed by Kofi Anan's call for multinational battle groups. The experience gained by Irish troops at home and abroad in peace-keeping and peace-enforcement operations qualify Irish officers to take a major leadership role in the manner in which the international community responds to emerging threats and crises.

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