

Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2006.

The UN's Mandate Gap

by Anne-Marie Slaughter

The United Nations peacekeeping operations now underway in Lebanon offer a big opportunity for the UN to demonstrate its relevance and impact on the world stage in the 21st century. If only those member states who claim to be the UN's biggest supporters put their money where their mouths are.

Many world leaders, particularly those in Europe, decry the Bush administration's undermining of the UN, especially since 2003. Yet leaders in France, who expressed outrage when the US sidestepped the UN and invaded Iraq without the international community's blessing, stunned the world in August when they backed down from their promise to send 2,000 peacekeepers to intervene in southern Lebanon, and instead only committed 200.

Fortunately, France has reconsidered, Germany will provide limited naval assistance, and Italy has stepped up to contribute 3,000 peacekeepers. In addition, China has recently pledged 1,000 troops. But Europe's response, like the US response in other cases, highlights a critical issue for all supporters of the UN and international institutions more generally. If we cannot do what it takes to make them more effective, we will increasingly find that nations will bypass them altogether.

UN Security Council Resolution 1701 "calls for Israel and Lebanon to support a permanent ceasefire." It thus set the stage for UN officials to establish the "Rules of Engagement" (ROEs) for its peacekeepers, which dictate when and under what circumstances UN troops can fire their weapons to defend themselves. But as the current UN mission in Lebanon (UNIFIL) well knows, defending yourself is not the same as protecting yourself from hostile fire in the first place.

In this context, the French are understandably worried about the fate of their soldiers – soldiers charged with supporting the Lebanese government in its efforts to establish control over the Hezbollah-controlled south. The terrible French peacekeeping experience in Bosnia in the early 1990s, in which France lost 84 soldiers serving in a humanitarian capacity under restrictive ROEs, justifies their fears.

But ROEs are only the symptom of a deeper problem. The real issue is a yawning gap between paper and practice. In the heat of an international crisis, the Security Council passes resolutions to great public fanfare, establishing an official UN "mandate." But then the UN Secretary General is left, resolution in hand, to ask UN member states for the actual, tangible resources necessary to implement what has been commanded. In the overwhelming majority of cases, those resources fall far short of what is required to successfully intervene in a crisis.

A 2006 UN mandate review finds that UN member states adopt hundreds of mandates each year, conferring “additional responsibilities with neither corresponding funds nor guidance” on how resources should be used. In American domestic politics, these kinds of commands from the US Congress to states are known as “unfunded mandates;” ordering results without providing the resources necessary to achieve them. It’s political theater - big headlines, small results.

The UN’s experience in Lebanon is not encouraging. According to the UN’s Department of Peacekeeping Operations, up to now UNIFIL has operated on an annual budget of \$94 million and suffers chronic budget shortfalls due to unpaid assessments from member states.

Now consider what an expanded UNIFIL is mandated to do under Resolution 1701: peacekeepers must monitor the ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah; support and accompany the Lebanese armed forces as they deploy in southern Lebanon; assist Lebanon’s government in securing the country’s borders and ports to keep illegal weapons from getting into Hezbollah’s hands; and “help ensure humanitarian access to civilian populations and the voluntary and safe return of displaced persons.” This is a Herculean task. But over a month after the resolution, barely 5,000 troops are deployed.

Even if all 15,000 UN troops could be found and deployed, the challenges in Lebanon will remain daunting. The UN insists that Resolution 1701 does *not* mandate that the UN disarm Hezbollah; almost no nation other than Israel is willing to charge its soldiers with that task. Instead, the job falls to the Lebanese government and armed forces, who need all the help they can get from the international community.

That is only the military aspect of the peacekeeping effort. Lebanon’s infrastructure – especially in the south – has been decimated. Homes and livelihoods have been destroyed. Who will build or re-build hospitals? How will communications infrastructure be rebuilt? Who will repair Lebanon’s bridges and roads?

The mandate gap reflects the way the world has done business with the UN for decades – big promises, small pay-outs, much scapegoating if the UN then fails. But today the international community has a tremendous window of opportunity to secure a small but significant peace in the Middle East along the volatile border of Lebanon and Israel. How member states respond now – especially those who believe in the purpose and value of the UN - may help shape the outcomes of other, wider ongoing regional conflicts, notably with Iran and Syria, both of which support Hezbollah.

The UN provides the mechanism for a global response, but as Kofi Annan often repeats, it does not exist apart from its member states. It is up to those members – to all of our governments - to provide both the necessary will and the required resources. Otherwise the UN is nothing more than a handy mechanism for outsourcing political blame. Our commitment to bring peace to the Middle East, or Darfur, or Congo, or Kosovo, or Haiti, is not measured by our words but by our wallets. The world gets what it pays for.

Anne-Marie Slaughter is Dean of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, and the author of the forthcoming book,
The Idea That Is America: Keeping Faith with Our Values in a Dangerous World.