THE ETHICS OF PEACEKEEPING

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Traditionally the use of military force has been for the protection and furthering of the interests of a community in war. However, since the Second World War we have seen the increasing use of military force as an integral part of peacekeeping missions. Australia, in particular, has been a significant contributor to peacekeeping missions, and within the last ten years has sent substantial contingents of soldiers to Namibia, Cambodia, Somalia, and Rwanda.

Peacekeeping presents a different set of problems for the military to that which they are traditionally faced with. The intention is to prevent bloodshed, and the interests being furthered are likely to be those of the communities in which the peacekeepers are stationed, rather than those of the nation sending the military force. An additional problem is the unwillingness of some of those for whom the peace is being kept to accept the presence of the peacekeepers: this means that the military force, instead of facing a conventional military opponent will face either guerilla resistance or civilian non-cooperation. In an extreme case two or more of the parties in conflict may not really desire peace, and will attempt to continue the conflict with each other.

With this different emphasis comes different ethical problems. Two examples might help illuminate some of the ethical problems involved in peace keeping. The first represents the strong option to peacekeeping: that is, the use of overwhelming force to suppress violence. The second represents the "softly, softly" option, where there is not sufficient force to suppress violence: the presence of peacekeepers is to provide humanitarian aid or to act as observers.

The "Strong" Option

In Somalia Australian soldiers were detailed to take control of the city of Baidoa, to enable aid agencies to carry out their humanitarian tasks. Our forces occupied the city for less than a year. In that time they suppressed local militias and gunmen, trained a local police force, helped provide medical care to the local inhabitants, and provided a secure haven for the aid agencies to provide food to relieve the famine. Within a year of leaving Baidoa the situation was the same, if not worse, than before: it seems that our efforts were for nought. We were clearly successful in achieving our limited objective of maintaining peace and providing aid. Yet this did not resolve the underlaying social problems, so that violence resurfaced almost as soon as the overwhelming force supplied by the Australian soldiers was withdrawn.

The "Softly, Softly" Option

In Rwanda, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) was responsible for providing the medical services to the United Nations peacekeeping forces stationed there: the medical contingent was accompanied by support troops and infantry as guards. Thus, in an unusual twist for the ADF the fighting soldiers were there to support the health services, rather than the other way around! Once again, the ADF acquitted itself very well. However, one incident epitomises the ethical quandary in which the peacekeeping forces often find themselves.

A team of Australian medics, accompanied by a small guard of 20 infantry soldiers, were present at a refugee camp in the south of Rwanda when the victorious forces of the new Rwandan

government decided to disband the camp and send the refugees home. This had occurred before at various camps, with relatively little blood shed. However, in this case there was a massacre, over a period of several hours, in which up to 4,000 refugees were killed by two battalions of government troops. What were the ADF troops to do? Legally they were entitled to intervene, with force, to end the massacre. However, there is little doubt that had they done so they would have been overwhelmed by the far greater fire power of the government troops; who probably would have then resumed the massacre with even greater vigour. So, the ADF troops stood on the sidelines, watching the massacre, occasionally venturing forth with great courage to treat the wounded. This is not meant as a criticism of the ADF troops: they took what was the only reasonable and moral course. The problem is that of humanitarian missions in general - do they end up only prolonging the agony and warfare, by providing an infrastructure of medical care, physical nurturing and rest which allows the madness to continue? Do they make things better or worse?

Summary

One approach to the moral problems is to look at the consequences of military intervention: will the intervention cause more good than harm, or vice versa. Unfortunately, when we embark upon these endeavours it is quite hard, if not impossible, to tell what the consequences of the use of military force will be. Sometimes the results can be quite successful - such as in Namibia and Cambodia, even though the situation looked foreboding. In other cases - such as in Somalia - intervention seems to have been largely futile.
On the other hand, there is a strong human urge to do something: it is simply wrong to watch individuals die and suffer if it is in your power to intervene. Very often the only thing that can be done is use the military in a peacekeeping role.
If you provide overwhelming force - as Australia did in Baidoa - how long are you willing to keep that force there to secure the peace? And if you use insufficient force to keep the peace - for example in a humanitarian mission - are you merely prolonging the agony of war? Another ethical problem is the duty that a nation owes to its armed forces: it should not unnecessarily endanger the safety of its troops. Peacekeeping is a risky occupation: the welfare of the peacekeepers needs to be considered, as well as the welfare of those whom they are protecting.
So, to conclude: is peacekeeping moral? It responds to a deep moral urge to help others; but arguably it often fails to do so. Finally, is it ethical to keep the peace where those for whom you are keeping the peace don't seem to want it kept?

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