

IS IT TIME FOR THE UK TO RE-COMMIT TO THE UNMO CONCEPT?

By Major General (ret'd) P G Williams CMG OBE

Thank you for inviting me to participate in this important debate on how the United Nations can and indeed must step up to the mark and just how the United Kingdom can best contribute to UN Peacekeeping.

Almost 20 years ago the UNMO (UN Military Observer) organisation in the former Yugoslavia was pushed to one side and then dissolved by the incoming NATO Mission, the Implementation Force (IFOR) that saw no need for unarmed, impartial, multi-national UNMO teams to be on the ground as the Alliance set about imposing the Dayton Agreement on the former warring factions.

Why, we asked ourselves at the time in UNMO HQ in Zagreb, was DPKO (the Department for Peacekeeping Operations) in New York in such a rush to hand over all responsibility to NATO's IFOR? Why did UN HQ not wish to keep its own UN eyes on the ground in order that New York could assess how the Alliance was discharging its heavy responsibilities?

Having been told that New York had no desire to remain involved in fielding UNMO teams, we in UNMO HQ tried to 'sell' to NATO a slimmed-down, quasi-UNMO organisation, formed from the existing teams on the ground. It would have been unarmed and manned by officers from countries across the Euro-Atlantic region, including of course from the former Warsaw Pact states.

This concept was rejected by NATO. Why? The best response that we could get was from General Mike Willcocks, IFOR's Chief of Staff, who said that the 'senior ally' had rejected the idea that military observers could operate unarmed (even though the UNMOs had done so throughout the wars in Croatia and Bosnia). And so the UN Peace Force UNMOs packed their bags and left the theatre of operations.

Moving ahead to the present day, we are once again embroiled in another critical situation within Europe as the Ukraine risks melting down. It is a crisis that as part of its resolution surely cries out for credible and competent UNMO teams to be deployed on the ground.

We have seen how the early attempts to introduce OSCE (Organisation for Security & Cooperation in Europe) military observers into the Crimea were rebuffed, highlighting in a humiliating fashion that organisation's inability to impress its will on the key local players.

This was followed by the equally ineffective effort to introduce into the eastern Ukraine an 'Arms Control Inspection Team', composed entirely of personnel from Western countries and from the Kiev regime. The team's capture and humiliation by the thugs of the so-called 'Donetsk People's Republic' still further demonstrated the need to involve Russia fully in any credible attempts to introduce outside observers, including military ones, into the heartland of this crisis.

Surely, the time is now right for the UN Security Council to step up to the mark? Just as with today's other great crisis in Syria, the world stands by in disappointed and appalled wonder as it waits for the Permanent Five – the P5 – to seize the moment and to agree a concept to stabilise the situation in the Ukraine. One essential component in such a plan must be the deployment of an UNMO Mission in the Ukraine.

How should an UNMO Mission in the Ukraine differ from the UNMO organisation that served with distinction in the former Yugoslavia?

Some fundamental aspects must be included in its make-up:

First, it has to operate under clear UNSCRs (UN Security Council Resolutions). These must make as clear as possible what the UNMOs should and, by implication, should not do. Their tasks might include a mix of observation, monitoring, liaison and inspection duties, but these tasks must be unambiguously expressed in the UNSCRs.

In the former Yugoslavia the UNMO Mission suffered from 'mission creep', at times exceeding its mandate and veering dangerously towards becoming a battlefield intelligence agency for the UN armed component.

This was not what the Security Council had envisaged the UNMOs doing, allowing themselves to act in effect as Forward Observation Officers, sending 'in clear' details of the warring factions' positions. This placed the UNMOs in potentially great and unjustifiable danger and went well beyond their formal mandate.

The second essential requirement for an UNMO Mission is that it must operate under clear command and control arrangements. In theory the CMO (Chief Military Observer) works directly for the UN Secretary General, via DPKO in New York, and his command authority, expressed in the tasking UNSCRs, must be unambiguous about this.

While the CMO is directly responsible to New York for the execution of his mission and for the wellbeing of his UNMOs, he must nevertheless, coordinate closely with the Force Commander of the UN armed component, if one exists. The UN armed component will need to create and maintain as safe an operating environment as possible for the UNMOs.

In the former Yugoslavia, the uneasy relationship between the Force Commanders and the CMO was exacerbated by the disparity in the ranks held by the Force Commanders (4- and 3-star generals) and the CMO (a 1-star officer). All too often this led to a degree of passivity on the part of the CMO.

In future I would recommend that a CMO needs to hold a rank that is closer to that of the Force Commander, if he is to be reasonably expected to fight his own corner in the UN command decision-making debate.

The third critically important aspect for any UNMO Mission is multi-nationality because it alone can hope to ensure that UNMO teams can be made acceptable to all the warring parties and to other local and regional players.

In the former Yugoslavia, three of the P5 (Permanent Five UN Security Council member) states were represented in the UNMO organisation and in its deployed 8-man teams: France, the UK and Russia.

By providing UNMOs and senior UNMO staff officers, these P5 states demonstrated that the UNMO Mission had the highest level support and was not to be messed with without severe consequences. Indeed, no UNMO lost his or her life as a result of warring faction operations in the former Yugoslavia and all UNMOs who were taken hostage were released unharmed.

So, if an UNMO Mission were to be deployed in the Ukraine, it would once again need to include officers from as many of the P5 states as possible in order to demonstrate that the Mission represented the will of the key global states.

Multi-nationality also delivers explicit impartiality. The structure of 8-man UNMO teams by its very nature ensures balanced and even-handed reporting.

This is something that, for example, an individual UN battalion reporting to the Force Commander on events in its own area of operations is unlikely to do because it will gloss over its own failings and will embellish its perceived successes. It will also have to satisfy its own national authorities, whereas UNMOs have only the CMO to satisfy. Furthermore, individual UN battalions have an understandable tendency to favour local factions with whom they share the same religion, culture or ethnicity.

In the case of the Ukraine, we can see today how the OSCE and Arms Control Experts, as well as NATO and EU (European Union) observers, are sure to be perceived as partisan and unbalanced in their reporting by the pro-Russian factions and their external supporters.

In the same way, pro-Kiev factions and Western states would view observers sent by the (CSTO Collective Security Treaty Organisation) or the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) as unavoidably partisan and biased in their reporting.

The answer must therefore be to deploy an UNMO Mission whose command structure and teams are manifestly impartial, not least because its officers are drawn from a wide spectrum of UN member states and, in particular, from as many of the P5 members as possible.

My final point is that of competence. UNMOs can only be as effective as the individual and collective training and mission-specific preparation that they have received prior to deployment.

To be frank, in this regard the UK did not meet the highest standards in the former Yugoslavia.

We were very fortunate that the officers of the other 30 or so countries represented in the UNMO organisation operated in English. It allowed our Ministry of Defence to select as UNMO team officers individuals who had minimal mission-specific training and no linguistic qualifications, but who were fit, young enthusiasts with basic infantry and staff skills.

In contrast, most other countries prepared their UNMOs with great care and sent more experienced officers, many of whom were remarkable linguists and veterans of other UN missions.

In addition, the UK only sent its officers for a 6-month tour, while every other contributor sent its UNMOs for the standard one-year tour of duty. So, after serving a 6-month apprenticeship in an UNMO team, British observers were posted back to the UK before they could take command of a team, thus missing out on the full 'UNMO experience'.

Unfortunately, British commanders, both in theatre and back in London, had little understanding of or indeed interest in the UNMO organisation. At first COMBRITFORs (Commanders of the British armed component in UNPROFOR) even refused to have any UNMOs deployed in areas controlled by BRITBAT (the British battalion).

It was only during BRITBAT's third rotation in late 1993 that my battalion opened its doors to UNMOs ... and it proved to be a most fruitful collaboration, even if having a Russian GRU linguist and an Irish Army lieutenant colonel in our Operations Room was an interesting novelty for us!

So, to conclude, the time must be right for the UN Security Council to consider deploying an UNMO Mission to the Ukraine as a key part of an overall UN-sponsored solution to the crisis.

The UN alone has the credibility and authority to introduce military observers into this region of crisis, where all other security organisations can reasonably be accused of demonstrating bias.

Any such UNMO missions must be multi-national and must operate under clear and explicit UNSCR mandates.

The UK has a patchy record where supporting UNMO missions is concerned. As a P5 member it needs to engage fully in any such missions.

And the UK needs to match the commitment shown by other contributing states by sending British observers who are thoroughly trained and prepared for the specific mission and who serve a full one-year tour.

Thank you for your attention.