

Understanding the Negotiations Towards the UN's Peacebuilding Architecture

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Introduction

This paper explores the origins of the United Nation's (UN) Peacebuilding Architecture (PBA) with a specific focus on the reasons for its creation at a particular point in time (2005). The paper is concerned with the negotiation dynamics and what those involved in negotiations at the time hoped they would achieve. It thus starts by placing the PBA in context: the specific historical moment that made the creation of PBA possible and, at the same time, shaped it in ways that may in retrospect appear far from satisfactory. In preparing the paper, the author conducted informal interviews with individuals that were part of the negotiation process towards the PBA.¹ The key points recurring in the conversation were about the international politics of the moment, the UN's institutional restrictions and possibilities, and the role of vested state interests. This brief paper will not aim to examine the successes or failures to deliver and what the expectations of those involved were at the time. It will begin with a brief description of the PBA, followed by a discussion of the context in which the design was negotiated and the flaws that this context evidently produced.

The PBA in a nutshell

The PBA was created as a result of the agreements at the September 2005 World Summit in New York, billed as the 'largest gathering of world leaders in

¹ This paper was mainly built upon existing literature on the PBA, UN resolutions and other public documents, as well as interviews with a select group of policymakers (UN officials, diplomats and others involved in the negotiations that led up to the World Summit). The author encountered two key methodological problems. The first was that the interviewees approached were often unable to recollect details of negotiations; the second was that their views about the outcome were inevitably coloured by the evolution of the PBA over the past decade.

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history.' Despite concerns about the United States' (US) position – sparked by the aggressive nature of Washington's recently appointed UN Ambassador, John Bolton – the Summit endorsed a number of significant proposals, such as the 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P) and the creation of new Human Rights Council. The Summit also closed the curtains on the Trusteeship Council. The broad UN reform agenda that had been discussed and debated, however, was mostly postponed, much of it indefinitely.

The 2005 Summit did agree upon the creation of the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC), an inter-governmental advisory body that would help countries in their post-conflict recovery. Three months later, on December 20, 2005, the UN Security Council (UNSC) formally created the PBC by adopting Resolution 1645. The new Commission's main purpose was to 'bring together all relevant actors to marshal resources and to advise on and propose integrated strategies for post-conflict peace building and recovery.'²

Aside from the PBC, the three-pronged PBA came to include the Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) and the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF). The former was created as a type of experts' bureau that aimed, as the name suggests, to support the PBC by drawing on existing expertise – the World Summit Outcome Document specifically requested the Secretary-General to create the PBSO 'within the Secretariat and from within existing resources'. In turn, the Peacebuilding Fund was established to raise and allocate resources for countries in post-conflict situations. By the end of 2008, the PBF had raised close to \$300 million.

At the time of its creation, the three-pronged Peacebuilding Architecture (PBA) – and particularly the Peace Building Commission – was innovative in a number of ways. On a general level, it recognised the need to move, and plan beyond, peacekeeping or peace enforcement towards prevention. The whole idea was, after all, that the UN system could help fragile states towards economic and political stability. More concretely, for such an undertaking to be successful, the structure supporting peacebuilding needed to be, paradoxically, at the same time flexible and centralised. Thus, the PBC was to be a single organ that would be able to draw upon the expertise within various parts of the UN system in order to best achieve its overall mission (of building peace). The mission – the measures needed to set a post-conflict nation on course for recovery – would define the specific institutional coalition (built mainly upon existing parts of the UN) necessary.

This may all sound reasonable and perfectly logical: for complex problems – and peacebuilding surely qualifies under these criteria – you need flexibility, as well as political and economic support. The terms of the PBC and the composition of the PBSO would provide the ability to tap on the many different forms of expertise available within the UN system; the broad membership of the PBC would guarantee that any mission it approved would have sufficient political backing; the PBF would raise and have at its disposal the funds necessary to undertake long-term missions, even if the 'headline value' of a specific post-conflict nation's evolution declined. An architecture indeed.

But, there were several flaws within the PBA, recognised by many at the time of its creation and endlessly criticised later on. Institutional rivalries, specific goals of nation states and the international political climate of the day all conspired to shape the PBA into something that was clearly not a radical break with the past, but rather a somewhat innovative way of meeting the needs of a host of stakeholders.

² Resolution 1645 (2005). See: [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1645\(2005\)](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1645(2005)).

The broader context of the PBA

As with any project within the UN system, the evolution from an idea (or set of ideas) to actual resolution with practical consequences included so many actors and compromises that it would be futile to try to pin down a specific founding coalition. Moreover, the chronology depends on whether we look at the specific proposals and discussions in the immediate turn or in the *long durée*, or whether one examines the PBA as part of an intellectual evolution or a pragmatic response to specific challenges on the ground. Yet, a few general points emerge fairly clearly.

First, reforming peace operations had been on the UN agenda since the early 1990s. It was related to the apparent increase in the number of intrastate conflicts that, in turn, made policymakers and academic observers focus on peacebuilding, a concept crystallised in Secretary-General Boutros-Boutros Ghali's 1992 'Agenda for Peace'. The 2000 'Brahimi Report' and the 2004 'High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change' further developed the notion of the importance of mechanisms that would prevent recurring conflicts in areas that seemed to be caught in never-ending cycles of violence, producing what are at times called 'failed states'. In short: times were changing and pressure was building for the UN to change its approach to building peace as well.

Second, the PBA emerged as part – and perhaps even somewhat as a substitute for – broader UN reform. While discussions about reforming the UN Security Council stalled, criticism of the UN's ineffectiveness did prompt another report and an initiative by Kofi Annan. 'Delivering as One' honed in on the need to increase effectiveness and coherence in the UN's development, humanitarian and environmental activities. The PBA was in large measure part of this broad thrust for reform.

Third, for some involved in the process that culminated in the World Summit and the PBA, the substance may not have been the key point. Some UN member states, for example, allegedly used the negotiation process as a means of building connections and support for their own national agendas. For instance, some small European and African states teamed up – by organising workshops or via diplomatic networking – to propose and advocate the creation of an organisation very close to the eventual PBC as a means of promoting its candidacy for a non-permanent seat in the UNSC.³

Equally significant, turf battles between UN institutions – 'the absurdity of continuing rivalries', as one former UN official put it – may well have prolonged and complicated the process that ultimately produced the PBA. Given the 'transversal' nature of peacebuilding – economists, humanitarian workers, doctors, security specialists and experts from many other fields were bound to contribute to any successful post-conflict statebuilding effort – it was of concern for numerous UN agencies. Add to this any number of humanitarian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the end result was an alphabet soup of real and potential stakeholders. Searching for acceptable compromises became a necessity if any agreement was to be found during the negotiations leading up to and following the World Summit.

Fourth, the international political climate of the early 21st century when the negotiations took place was extremely volatile. 9/11, the war in Afghanistan, and the US-led invasion of Iraq had produced tensions within the UN Security Council and, perhaps more importantly, called into question the relevance of the UN system writ large. This had two likely consequences for the negotiations. On the one hand, those – and they were undoubtedly the majority – who wished

³ The bid was successful – Denmark and Tanzania were non-permanent members of the UNSC in 2005-2006.

to demonstrate the relevance of the UN in post-conflict situations were even more keen to work towards a successful outcome. On the other hand, such eagerness probably increased the likelihood of compromises that watered down the potential efficiency of the PBA: to achieve a positive outcome – and hence a demonstration of the UN's continued significance – became a goal in its own right. Substance may have suffered.

The broad context against which the PBA emerged could thus be characterised by two sets of opposite agendas within the UN system that reflected a battle between pro-reform *versus* turf protection attitudes of departments and specialised agencies. The other set of opposing agendas reflected a battle between member states that, on the one hand, wanted to assist the UN in becoming more efficient and, on the other hand, wanted to see the UN as an institution permanently handicapped – to the point of a political willingness to undermine the foundations of the organisation.

These opposing sets of interests and goals help explain why most of those involved in the reform process eventually emerged – if the interviews conducted a decade later are any guide – as, at best, with mixed feelings. That there had been reform was seen by some as a positive fact. The PBA was a step forward or 'better than nothing'; an incremental reform was all one could expect. To others, it appeared a completely inappropriate negotiation outcome that – as many then believed – would not be able to seriously address the issues that the PBA was supposed to address.

Why so far but no further?

The obvious question that follows is: why? Why did the PBA take the shape it ultimately took? Why was something 'more' – a new agency, a total overhaul of UN peace operations and the system by which they are funded – seemingly impossible to achieve? What exactly were the political pressures and institutional constraints at play?

One needs only to look at the lines of communication and composition of the PBC to grasp part of the answer to these questions. The creation of the PBC was a sum of many compromises. Some of these included:

- The PBC would have two masters: the General Assembly and the Security Council, both that passed identical resolutions in late 2005 to support the creation of this advisory body.
- The Organisational Committee (OC) of the PBC would have 31 members, representing the UNSC (7), UN General Assembly (7), ECOSOC (7), as well as 5 from the top contributors to UN budget and the top five contributors of military personnel to UN missions.
- Because of its nature as an advisory body, the PBC would have no actual authority over the many (up to 17, in some cases) bodies that contributed to peacebuilding.

This was piecemeal reform – a point all those interviewed tended to agree upon. On the one hand, the PBC structure was clearly inclusive and the PBA as such therefore had, at least in principle, broad political support. On the other hand, this also meant that the capacity to act rapidly – something reformers often yearned for – was not easily forthcoming from the newly developed structure.

While the watered-down outcome may have satisfied the interests of a number of already existing UN bodies with a stake in the creation of the PBA – such as UN Development Programme, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), the Department of Political

Affairs (DPA), and others – one can further speculate about the role of specific UN member states in the reform process. Denmark and Tanzania's interest in using (at least in some fashion) their active involvement as a means of building support for their bids to join the UNSC has been already mentioned as an example of how reform was instrumentalised to serve other purposes. Others, including the US under the George W. Bush Administration, were not particularly keen to empower the UN in the early 21st century.

Another factor explaining the nature of the PBA may well have been, simply, 'reform fatigue.' By 2005, UN reform had been on the agenda for a long time without much concrete to show for all the talk and fine plans. As the World Summit approached, expectations that significant reform was forthcoming gradually evaporated as nation states prioritised differently and UN institutions safeguarded their turf. What ultimately emerged at the World Summit and its immediate aftermath was a compromise solution at various levels.

Conclusion: delivering for some

If 'delivering as one' was the purpose behind the creation of the PBA, the negotiated outcome fell short of accomplishing that goal. Nor did it, however, translate into 'delivering for none'. Within a few years a number of programmes were under way, assisting several countries on their long road to post-conflict recovery.

That the new architecture was already treated with some skepticism at the time of its founding is also evident. The PBA was no miracle solution to the complex problems of post-conflict recovery. Nor did anyone view it as such at the time. The bargaining process that resulted in the creation of the PBA was itself evidence of an abundant presence of vested and often conflicting interests. The peacebuilding 'business' was already 'a crowded field' ten years ago, as one interviewee poignantly remarked. To try to install a new mechanism and structure into this crowded field of UN agencies, NGOs and UN member states was bound to be an uphill struggle. The decade that followed would provide ample evidence of the skepticism directed at the time towards what was, even in 2005, an exercise in piecemeal reform.

About the author: **Jussi M. Hanhimäki** is professor of international history at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland. He has published numerous books, including *United Nations: A Very Short Introduction* (2008, 2nd and revised edition forthcoming in 2015); *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (2004), *The Cold War: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts* (2003, 2004) and *An International History of the Twentieth Century and Beyond* (2003, 2008, 3rd edition forthcoming in 2015). He is at the beginning stages of a project on the history of UN peace operations.

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About the White Paper on Peacebuilding: The White Paper on Peacebuilding is a collaborative, multi-stakeholder process initiated by the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform and supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. It has the objective to situate UN peacebuilding within the broader peacebuilding universe and to articulate visions for the future for building peace in violent and fragile contexts. The White Paper places peacebuilding within the changing characteristics of armed violence and security, and within the practical evidence of engagements in peacebuilding contexts emanating from a diversity of fields. Ensuring a better relationship between UN peacebuilding and the broader peacebuilding field is a complementary effort to the existing work surrounding the 10-year review of the UN peacebuilding architecture and an effort to take stock of the nature and evolution of the broader peacebuilding universe.

