



Blue Helmets for Culture

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'Cultural peacekeeping' has emerged as a new task for international peace operations. The inclusion of a cultural component in the mandates of peacekeeping interventions is a desirable move. But it is an extremely complex political-military exercise.

We are currently witnessing the most dramatic attack on cultural properties since the large-scale destruction and misappropriation of cultural heritage seen in World War II. Since summer 2014, Daesh has deliberately and systematically damaged, destroyed and looted significant portions of the exceptional cultural heritage of Mesopotamia, the 'cradle of civilization', from Mosul to Niniveh, from Nimrud to Khorsabad, from Hatra to Palmyra.

Reacting to Daesh's iconoclastic fury, the UNESCO 38th General Conference of Paris, 3–18 November 2015, passed a resolution to establish – adopting an effective slogan often used by both media and diplomats – the 'Blue Helmets for Culture'. Building on the positive experience of the 'United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali' (MINUSMA), which was mandated to ensure the safeguarding of cultural heritage sites in collaboration with UNESCO, the resolution adopts a new strategy founded on two key elements: the inclusion of a cultural component in the mandates of peacekeeping interventions where cultural heritage is at risk; the creation of a task force of experts in the protection of cultural heritage.

As a direct contribution to the actualization of the resolution, UNESCO and the Italian Government signed an agreement on 16 February 2016 in Rome for the establishment of the first task force. Named 'Unite4Heritage', the task force is largely based on the Italian Carabinieri 'Command for the Protection of Cultural

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Heritage' (*Comando Carabinieri Tutela Patrimonio Culturale*), which is internationally renowned as of the most competent and effective military policing force for protecting works of art and archaeological property. The Director-General of UNESCO, Irina Bokova, urged other countries to establish and make available similarly specialized units to strengthen and enforce the existing cultural heritage protection regime, [expressing her confidence](#) that 'this Task Force, and the agreement signed in Rome with the Italian Government, will become a model for other countries'. The urgency of the issue was also recently taken up by the UN Security Council, which approved [Resolution 2437](#) on 24 March 2017, providing for the engagement of a cultural component in UN peace-keeping missions.

While the process of implementing and defining the operational aspects of the Blue Helmets for Culture's initiative is underway, this article provides an initial assessment of the politico-military significance of 'cultural peacekeeping' (CPK) as a new task for international peace operations, considering both its strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and challenges. Still lacking actual case studies, this exercise is highly theoretical, but it is solidly grounded in the literature on heritage studies, peacekeeping, terrorism and armed violence.

Opportunities and prospects

CPK can serve multiple and interrelated cultural, political and military objectives. First of all, it is hoped that CPK will contribute to protecting cultural heritage from damage and destruction by helping the enforcement of the international protection regime and, in particular, giving teeth to the implementation of [the 1954](#)'Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict', which has shown many inadequacies and proven to be minimally effective and difficult to enforce as political and legal instrument.

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Secondly, the integration of cultural heritage protection in the mandate of a peacekeeping mission can have a significant impact on the mission's broader immediate and long-term objectives. On the ground, the mission's efforts to save cultural heritage can help to 'win the hearts and minds' of local populations and increase their acceptance and support for the peacekeepers. CPK can also contribute to cutting off the funding generated by looting and selling artefacts, which fuels and prolongs conflicts by providing revenues for armed groups and terrorists. At the end of hostilities, it can help to ensure quicker recovery and stabilization by promoting societal and economic regeneration for a long-lasting peace.

From a broader political perspective, CPK can gather and sustain international support and mobilization for the mission. Cultural heritage is widely appreciated, respected and prized for its universal value, and its protection and preservation are deemed the collective responsibility of the entire international community. It follows that engagement in CPK has the potential to win support more easily and with less political controversy than other types of international interventions. It can be presented (and 'marketed') to an internal and/or external audience as an intervention for a very noble, principled and apolitical goal that unites the international community in a 'war for civilization' against extremism.

Finally, CPK has the merit of simplifying very complex realities and issues, which is again key in building political and public support for an international intervention and for clearly defining its objectives. While sorting out and taking sides in the complex geopolitical, religious, and ethnic Middle Eastern dynamics is a very difficult undertaking, understanding what an ancient cultural item or

site is, and siding against those who want to destroy it, is rather straightforward and politically less controversial.

Challenges and risks

In theory, the proposed integration of the protection of cultural heritage and cultural diversity in peacekeeping mandates can be considered an important and welcomed novelty with multiple strengths. In practice CPK is, however, bound to incur serious challenges and risks that should not be underestimated.

At the military and operational level, it should be emphasized that cultural heritage sites often have important military and strategic value, which is one of the reasons they become deliberate targets during armed conflicts. Many cultural heritage sites are not 'soft targets' but represent highly valued and militarily sensitive objectives for the warring parties. If CPK is deployed as a preventative mission in precarious pre-conflict situations or in post-conflict situations even before complete stability has been achieved, those sites will require heavily armed and mandated international forces for their protection. When intervening in such a context, an international operation might find it difficult to strike a balance between military necessity and its mandate of cultural protection.

Moreover, if a mandate for cultural heritage protection can help mobilize support for international intervention, it is equally true that the moment things go wrong and the mission starts suffering casualties, public support could evaporate very rapidly, which could promptly rescind its initial backing with the argument that the protection of cultural heritage is not worth the lives of the intervening country's 'boys' and that those 'boys' should immediately be brought back home.

Most importantly, CPK can entail the grave risk of transforming from a ‘civilisation war’ to save the world’s cultural heritage into a ‘clash of civilisations’. If CPK is not well planned or wrong decisions are made, a group such as Daesh could exploit the situation to its own advantage by presenting the well-intentioned protection of cultural heritage in terms of a war against Islam. Through a well-orchestrated propaganda campaign, ‘cultural peacekeepers’ could be depicted as ‘invaders’ if not ‘crusaders’ who occupy and violate the sacred soil of the Prophet. At the very least, CPK can risk the accusation of ‘mission civilisatrice’ or ‘civilizing mission’, especially if it involves Western contingents whose past history of colonial rule, imperial domination, and ‘colonial archaeology’ which will be promptly highlighted by adversaries.

Again, deployment of ‘boots on the ground’, and especially ‘Western boots’, may serve Daesh’s military strategy. It is not a coincidence that Western countries and especially the United States have to date strongly resisted sending ground troops to Syria, fearing being bogged down in another costly and extended Middle Eastern military fiasco, which is what Daesh hopes to achieve. The dilemma is that ground forces are indispensable to protecting cultural heritage ‘in situ’, be it in Syria, Iraq or Libya.

Another non-trivial problem is the inherent difficulty of maintaining civil/military relations. CPK will necessarily involve extended cooperation between military and civilian personnel, such as archaeologists, historians, and anthropologists. However, cooperation can be particularly challenging between diverse working communities with very different educational backgrounds, mindsets, training, sensibilities, work habits and customs. On the ground, cooperation between *warriors*, *peacekeepers*, *archaeologists* and *humanitarians* may turn

into a very complex exercise, and their respective primary concerns may become hard to reconcile.

A risky but necessary business

In conclusion, CPK should not be mistaken as a minor, light and inexpensive international intervention (in all senses, in economic terms and in terms of possible human losses). Although badly needed, CPK is an extremely complex and hazardous major politico-military exercise that can face serious challenges and risks of unintended consequences. Before becoming involved in any CPK mission, a sound, realistic and legally accurate assessment is needed along with planning of the mission's objectives and the capabilities required to meet those objectives. This would avoid gaps between the mandates and the reality on the ground, which could very negatively impact the mission's execution.

Image credit: [US Army](#).

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