AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE

REFORMING PEACEKEEPING IN A TIME OF CONFLICT: A CONVERSATION WITH US AMBASSADOR TO THE UNITED NATIONS SAMANTHA POWER

INTRODUCTION:

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SPEAKER:

AMBASSADOR SAMANTHA POWER, US AMBASSADOR TO THE UNITED NATIONS

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DANIELLE PLETKA: I’m Danielle Pletka. I’m the senior vice president for foreign and defense policy studies here at AEI. And it’s really a pleasure to welcome Ambassador Power, the permanent representative of the United States to the United Nations and a member of the president’s cabinet, as we all now know as well, to AEI. I think this is your first time here, Ambassador Power, so all the more welcome.

Today, Ambassador Power is going to be talking about peacekeeping, United Nations peacekeeping, and ideas for peacekeeping reform. There are 120,000 men and women who are serving in UN peacekeeping roles around the world. Increasingly, they are under threat from kidnapping and worse. Increasingly, in a lot of the world, there is no peace to keep. The United States also spends more than any other nation to support peacekeeping operations by the United Nations. And the American people may well ask whether they’re getting value for their money.

Ambassador Power is going to give a short talk, and then we’ll sit down and continue a short conversation and open things up to the audience. We welcome her to the podium. (Applause.)

AMBASSADOR SAMANTHA POWER: Thank you. Hello, everybody. I have come here today to talk about UN peacekeeping. There is a lot going on in the world right now. Elie Wiesel once – quite recently – shared with me the following thought: the winds of madness are blowing. And I know that’s how it feels. But the urgent critical issues on our plate should not divert us from an important fact, which is that the United States has a vital interest and a critical role to play in strengthening peacekeeping to meet demands that peacekeepers are currently struggling to meet around the world.

I start from a basic premise: conflicts in faraway places matter in various ways to the United States. These conflicts matter because we recognize that violence within any particular country can quickly cause national and regional instability, displacing millions of people, upending markets, and spilling over into neighboring countries. Conflicts undo the hard-earned progress countries have made towards building democracy; they weaken both governments and civil society; and they allow criminals and repressors to thrive.

They also matter because the instability created by these conflicts increasingly attracts extremist groups, who can use the vacuum of authority to terrorize civilian populations and plan and launch attacks. The suffering caused by these conflicts can be a powerful recruitment tool. Even conflicts that are not fueled at the outset by extremist elements can attract and foster them. Or, because state authority breaks down, places of conflict can be comfortable places for extremists to hang out unmolested. Whether it be Darfur, Mali or the Central African Republic, we ignore these crises at our peril.
Not only does curbing violent conflicts make us safer, it is also consistent with what our hearts tell us is right. A number of public opinion polls have shown that large majorities of Americans support action to prevent mass atrocities from occurring in other parts of the world.

We do not want to live in a world where more than 9,000 kids are recruited in less than a year to become child soldiers, as has happened recently in South Sudan. We do not want to live in a world where religious or ethnic communities who’ve lived together for decades in harmony, such as the Muslims and Christians in the Central African Republic, learn to hate and fear and demonize one another. Neither do America’s foreign policy leaders: the possible next chairs of the Senate Foreign Relations and Armed Services Committees, Senators Corker and McCain, have long been strong advocates on preventing such atrocities. So have the committees’ current chairs: Senators Menendez and Levin.

Recognizing that our security and our values prevent us from ignoring these conflicts, the question is, what should America do to stop them?

The United States has a lot that we must do right now. We have a lot on our plate. Our troops are fighting ISIL in the Middle East; they are deployed to West Africa to beat back Ebola; and they continue to serve valiantly in Afghanistan – all this even as we face substantial budget cuts. Crises from eastern Ukraine to Gaza continue to cascade on the broader foreign policy horizon. As President Obama said at West Point, America must always lead on the world stage, but we should not go it alone.

Even if the United States has an interest in seeing conflict abate or civilians protected, that does not mean that US forces should be doing all of the abating or the protecting. We shouldn’t. It should go without saying that we cannot, and we should not, send the US military into all of the places where conflict is burning, civilians are hurting, or extremists are lurking. Just because we have far and away the most capable military in the world does not mean we should assume risks and burdens that should be shared by the broader international community.

This is where peacekeeping comes in. When conflicts in Congo, Mali, or South Sudan require boots on the ground to defuse conflict, peacekeeping is often the best instrument we have. Peacekeeping operations ensure that other countries help shoulder the burden, both by contributing troops and sharing the financial costs of operations. Provided that peacekeepers actually deliver on their mandates, multilateral peacekeeping also brings a degree of legitimacy in the eyes of the local population: because missions are made up of troops from multiple countries, with strong representation from the Global South, spoilers and militants have a harder time cynically brandishing them as having imperialist designs.

Even in places where the United States has decided to deploy troops, we’ve benefitted from being able to hand off to the United Nations – as we did in Haiti –
allowing the peacekeeping operation, then, to provide longer-term support for security, rule of law, and political transition.

The multilateral nature of peacekeeping helps address the free-rider problem we see today in so many matters of international security – from the spread of Ebola, to the rise of ISIL, to the recruitment of foreign terrorist fighters – whereby countries with vested interests in addressing threats rely on the United States to do the lion’s share of the work. Peacekeeping gets other countries to stand up rather than stand by.

So, we start from the premise that in a world where we have a vested interest in seeing violent conflicts curbed and seeing suffering prevented, America needs peacekeeping to work. But precisely at this moment, when we recognize this crucial role that peacekeeping can play in shoring up US interests, our demands on peacekeeping are outstripping what it can deliver.

Today, we are asking peacekeepers to do more, in more places, and in more complex conflicts than at any time in history.

There are currently sixteen UN peacekeeping missions worldwide, made up of nearly 130,000 personnel, at least 100,000 of them are uniformed military and police, compared to just 75,000 total personnel a decade ago. That’s not to mention the more than 20,000 peacekeepers fighting in the African Union’s mission in Somalia. To stress, this is by far the most peacekeepers that have ever been active in history. And yet the numbers only tell a small part of the story.

The strain on the system would be challenging enough if we were asking peacekeepers simply to do what they used to do – to monitor ceasefires between two consenting states. But we’re giving peacekeepers broad and increasingly demanding responsibilities in increasingly inhospitable domains. We are asking them to contain and, at times, even disarm violent groups like the countless rebel groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo. We’re asking them to ensure safe delivery of life-saving humanitarian assistance, such as by escorting emergency shipments of food and medicine to civilians, as peacekeepers have done in South Sudan. We are asking them to protect civilians from atrocities, such as those being carried out in the Central African Republic. And we are asking them to help provide stability in countries emerging from brutal civil wars, as in Liberia. And in virtually all of these missions, we are asking them to carry out these duties in countries where governments are extremely weak and often unable to meet the basic needs of their citizens.

Today, two-thirds of UN peacekeepers are operating in active conflict areas – the highest percentage ever. Peacekeepers often deploy to areas where myriad rebel groups and militias have made clear that they intend to keep fighting. And the warring parties in modern conflicts increasingly include violent extremist groups, who terrorize civilians and view peacekeepers – openly treat peacekeepers – as legitimate targets.
But precisely at this moment, when we’re asking more of peacekeeping than ever before, and as we recognize the crucial role that it can play, we see both the promise and the pitfalls of contemporary peacekeeping. We see life-saving impact when peacekeepers are willing and able to fulfill their mandates, and we see the devastating consequences when they are not.

A few examples. In South Sudan, where a new civil war has displaced over a million people and killed more than 10,000 just since last December, the UN peacekeeping mission has arguably played a critical role in preventing even more bloodshed. On December 15th, the day that infighting between President Kiir and former Vice President Machar sent the country spiraling into horrific violence, government soldiers went house-to-house searching for ethnic Nuer men and executing them in the streets. In one incident, soldiers crammed between two and three hundred Nuer men into a small building and then opened fire on them through the windows, killing nearly all of them. In the city of Bor, rebel forces repeatedly targeted the homes of ethnic Dinka, executing the unarmed inhabitants and looting their cattle and other possessions.

In response to the onset of violence, the UN opened the gates of its bases to civilians fleeing the violence, eventually taking in more than 100,000 displaced persons. On a Security Council trip to South Sudan I took in August, I visited the UN base in Malakal, where more than 17,000 people were taking shelter. Rough as the conditions were for the people on the base – and they were rough; many of them were living in foot-deep, filthy water – they told me that at least they had access to food and clean drinking water and protection from deadly attacks, which was more than could be said for the South Sudanese outside of the gates.

Two decades earlier, recall, when civilians sought refuge under the UN flag, peacekeepers made a different choice. In April 1994, some 2,000 Rwandan Tutsi had sought refuge in the Don Bosco School in Kigali, which UN peacekeepers were using as a base. Hutu militia had surrounded the school, chanting “Hutu power! Hutu power!” drinking banana beer, and brandishing machetes. Yet when orders came for the peacekeepers to evacuate, they followed orders. They had to shoot over the heads of Tutsi in order to get out – so resistant were the people to letting them go. And not long after the peacekeepers walked out of the school, militia members walked in, butchering virtually everyone inside.

That was then, now we have the UN mission in South Sudan opening its gates and staying with the people at a time of great need. At the same time, South Sudan today demonstrates the continuing challenge of rapidly deploying peacekeepers and the equipment that they need. At the outset of this December conflict, which continues to this day, the Security Council swiftly authorized an emergency surge of 5,500 troops, nearly doubling the number of troops there on the ground in South Sudan. Yet almost one year later, the mission today is still more than 2,000 troops short, severely restricting the mission’s ability to project force and provide security for civilians outside the camps. It has also suffered from a chronic shortage of helicopters. And in fact, as some of you may
know, there is a shortfall of more than 30 helicopters across UN missions, consistently restricting mobility and effectiveness, often in life-or-death situations.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, there is similar good news-bad news. After years of stagnancy, the UN mission there has played a really important role in the last year, year-and-a-half, in disarming and defeating powerful rebel groups. Alongside Congolese forces, this effort has been led by a special unit of the mission known as the Force Intervention Brigade. The Brazilian UN force commander, Lieutenant General Carlos Alberto dos Santos Cruz – who has been absolutely critical to a heightened emphasis on preventing atrocities – he told fellow peacekeeping commanders at a recent Security Council meeting to change their mindset and to stop reporting just what happened yesterday and instead start reporting what we did yesterday, so the accountability is for what we did in the face of what is happening.

And the brigade under dos Santos Cruz has put these convictions into action, neutralizing a number of powerful rebel groups, including the M23, which had committed unspeakable atrocities against Congolese civilians. General Santos Cruz has set an example by putting himself on the front lines of this aggressive effort, participating in patrols with his troops, and even traveling personally to the headquarters of one rebel group to tell its leaders to lay down their arms or face a frontal assault. This is not your mother or your grandmother’s peacekeeping.

And yet even with this singular leadership we still see UN peacekeepers in Congo fairly routinely failing to protect civilians. On the evening of June 6th, armed assailants attacked civilians at an outdoor church service in the Congolese town of Mutarule. Many people called the nearby UN base – which was only five miles away – they were begging for help, in some instances they were using the free phones that peacekeepers had provided them for just such an emergency. Yet the peacekeepers sat at their base, later claiming that they thought that local Congolese military commanders would intervene. More than 30 people were massacred, eight of them kids. One victim was a four-year-old boy with mental and physical disabilities who was burned to death.

These are the stakes of what gets done right and what gets done wrong – or not done, in this case. This incident in Congo is unfortunately not an isolated case – even though the protection of civilians has moved to the heart of contemporary mission mandates. A report by the UN’s internal oversight office in March found that in 507 attacks against civilians from 2010 to 2013, peacekeepers virtually never used force to protect civilians under attack. Thousands of civilians may have lost their lives as a result. And this is unacceptable.

In Mali, during the nine months in 2012 and 2013 that extremist groups controlled towns in the North, a teenage girl was whipped 60 times in the streets of Timbuktu for daring to talk to young boys. Music was banned, major mausoleums demolished, and libraries burned. Today, peacekeepers are playing a critical role, alongside the French, to help root out extremists. UN peacekeepers have helped to provide Malians with the security and assurance they needed to return to their communities, reducing the number
of internally displaced persons in Mali by more the 60 percent in the past year. And the peacekeepers’ presence has prevented extremists from retaking key cities and towns, such as Timbuktu, where the community is reconstituting its long tradition of religious tolerance and rebuilding its ravaged holy sites.

At the same time though, the peacekeeping mission in Mali faces serious challenges in projecting force over the vast territory north of the Niger River. The mission has struggled to move troops to establish base camps and sustain them in an austere environment with unusable roads. The mission has had to spend millions of dollars just to transport water to its troops in that environment. Worst of all, UN troops are also facing unprecedented attacks by extremists.

Just to give a few examples: on August 16th, a suicide bomber drove a pick-up truck laden with explosives into the heart of a UN camp in the town of Ber and detonated its load. Two Burkinabe peacekeepers were killed, and seven others were wounded. On September 18th, five Chadian peacekeepers were killed when their truck drove over an IED. And on October 3rd, men armed with RPGs on motorbikes ambushed a UN logistics convoy traveling to resupply troops in the field, killing nine peacekeepers from Niger. Suffice it to say, when the UN created peacekeeping six decades ago, it did not have suicide bombers or IEDs in mind.

Now when we deploy peacekeepers into some of the most complex conflicts of our time, and deploy a rather low number of troops proportional to the tasks that they are being assigned, some of these problems would likely be evident even if the world’s most advanced militaries were the ones wearing blue helmets.

Regardless, the problems I’ve described—slow troop deployment, limited mobility, the challenge of keeping units fed and hydrated in remote areas, and the failure to confront aggressors and protect civilians—are problems that are in the US interest to see addressed. I would like to share four ways that the United States and our partners can strengthen peacekeeping so it can better meet the demands of 21st-century conflicts.

First, the pool of countries that deploy troops, police, and military enablers has to expand. UN peacekeeping is increasingly funded by developed countries and manned by developing countries. This is unsustainable and unfair. It will not produce the peacekeeping forces that today’s conflicts and our national security demand. And it perpetuates divisions between the two camps, when in reality we have a shared interest in seeing peacekeeping succeed.

That is why Vice President Biden convened world leaders at the UN General Assembly in September for a Peacekeeping Summit, to press for more commitments from capable militaries and to demonstrate our common cause with those who are performing this dangerous task. We are encouraging European militaries, many of which are drawing down from Afghanistan, to return to UN peacekeeping where they played a very active role in the 1990s. We’re urging Latin American militaries to deploy outside the Western Hemisphere and we’re asking East Asian militaries to contribute more
substantially to peacekeeping, some for the first time. These countries will not only bring more troops to UN peacekeeping operations, but also potentially niche capabilities – such as the surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities that the Dutch and Nordic troops are now bringing to the UN mission in Mali, which should help prevent deadly attacks on peacekeepers and civilians, like the ones that have taken the lives of more than 30 peacekeepers in Mali in the last year.

At the September summit, many of our partners answered the US and the UN call. Colombia announced its intent to deploy its highly capable troops, which have benefitted over the years from US training, to UN peacekeeping. Japan announced that it will change its domestic legislation to permit greater participation in peacekeeping. Indonesia announced that it will more than double its deployment of troops to UN peacekeeping operations and create a standby force to permit rapid deployment. More than two dozen other countries, from Sweden to Chile to China, made new commitments. We will continue to urge new contributions over the coming year, and world leaders will reconvene in September 2015 to make new pledges to peacekeeping.

As for our own military, in addition to our high-profile military efforts in Afghanistan, against ISIL, and against Ebola, the United States also contributes about 1,400 troops to the multinational peacekeeping force in Sinai and the NATO mission in Bosnia. But as Vice President Biden announced at the summit, we are reviewing whether there are gaps that the United States is uniquely positioned to fill. That includes providing critical airlift for UN or AU peacekeepers and building base camps, as we currently are doing for the mission in the Central African Republic. We are also doing more to share our unique knowledge of confronting asymmetric threats, like the ones that peacekeepers are confronting in Mali and Somalia – lessons we learned through more than a decade of war in Afghanistan. And we are doing more to help peacekeeping missions make better use of advanced technology, such as counter-IED equipment, which can improve peacekeepers’ ability to project force and to save lives.

Our second goal in this effort is to ensure that countries with the will to perform 21st-century peacekeeping have the capacity they need to do so. Because African leaders see first-hand the consequences of unchecked conflicts, several have been at the forefront of embracing a new approach to peacekeeping: seeking to aggressively execute the tasks assigned to peacekeepers and, in particular, the responsibility to protect civilians. The African Union has demonstrated a commitment to building rapid response capability on the continent and the United States is leading a coalition of international partners in support.

To this end, in August, President Obama announced a new initiative at the US-Africa Leaders’ Summit: the African Peacekeeping Rapid Response Partnership, A-PRReP. The United States will invest $110 million each year for the next three to five years to build the capacity of a core group of six countries – Ethiopia, Ghana, Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania, and Uganda. And we are hopeful that our allies in NATO and elsewhere will join this partnership to increase and deepen these capabilities.
The idea is to deepen our investment in those militaries that have a track record of deploying troops to peacekeeping operations and that make a commitment to protecting civilians from violence. To give just one example, Rwanda’s troops were among the first boots on the ground when conflict erupted in the Central African Republic. Rwandans understand the importance of getting peacekeeping right, having experienced the catastrophic consequences of it going terribly wrong twenty years ago. And because Rwandans robustly enforce their mission mandates, the people in countries where they serve trust them; troops from other countries who serve alongside them in UN peacekeeping see what robust peacekeeping looks like; and aggressors who would attack civilians fear them.

The United States has trained hundreds of thousands of peacekeepers in the past decade through the Global Peace Operations Initiative, launched under President Bush. A-PRReP is an important supplement to that effort. Our military experts will work alongside partners like Rwanda to strengthen their institutions and capabilities so they can rapidly deploy troops when crises emerge, and so that they can supply and sustain their forces in hostile and inhospitable environments. In exchange for this support, these countries have committed to maintain the forces and the equipment necessary to undertake rapid deployment.

Third, we need to build a global consensus in support of the mandates peacekeepers are being asked to undertake. The Security Council first tasked a peacekeeping mission with the responsibility to protect civilians in Sierra Leone in 1999 – in the face of that brutal civil war in their country. Today, ten missions – constituting almost 98 percent of UN troops across the world – are charged with protecting civilians.

However, a number of large troop-contributors openly express skepticism at the scope of responsibilities that the Security Council has assigned their troops. These countries cite the traditional principles of peacekeeping – operating with the consent of the parties, remaining impartial between the parties, and using limited force. This approach is understandable. Many of the countries that subscribe to this view served in some of the earliest peacekeeping missions in which blue helmets were deployed at the invitation of warring parties to observe a ceasefire along a demarcated line, such as one between Israel and Syria, or India and Pakistan. In that context, it was absolutely vital that peacekeepers had the state parties’ consent, that they behaved impartially, and that they observed and reported infractions.

But for more than twenty years, peacekeeping has steadily evolved and we must question how relevant these principles remain to places like Mali and South Sudan, where peacekeepers are called on to defend peace and protect civilians. As Ethiopia’s Prime Minister recently argued, we cannot ask extremist groups for their consent, remain impartial between legitimate governments and brutal militias, or restrict peacekeepers to using force in self-defense while mass atrocities are taking place around them.

If peacekeeping is to be effective in the 21st century, we have to close the gap between the mandates the international community asks peacekeepers to undertake and
their willingness to successfully execute those mandates. If we don’t, it not only puts the
lives of civilians and peacekeepers at risk, but undermines the credibility and legitimacy
of peacekeeping everywhere.

Recently, some of the largest and longest-serving troop contributors have
demonstrated a willingness to tackle this issue head-on. Over the last year, Bangladesh
has conducted a comprehensive internal review to craft a new peacekeeping strategy
aimed at adapting to the demands of contemporary peacekeeping. It has recognized the
evolution of peacekeeping and pledged to make the protection of civilians an essential
component of its troops’ training. Meanwhile, earlier this year, Pakistan swiftly removed
a sector commander who failed to deploy his troops to protect civilians under attack, and
that sent a message to Pakistan’s some 8,000 peacekeepers worldwide that such inaction
was not condoned. Just last week, Pakistan declared at the UN that it was committed to
robust peacekeeping to protect civilians.

Translating these shifts in posture into unity of purpose will take time, but these
are promising steps and we will work with our partners and the UN to encourage more
like them. In turn, we must take seriously and seek to remedy the troop-contributing
countries’ understandable frustration that they lack sufficient opportunity to share with
the Security Council the practical experience of their troops on the ground to taking on
complex and robust mandates which put in harm’s way their men and women in uniform.

Fourth, we need to press the UN to make bold institutional reforms. It is easy to
criticize the UN for all the problems we see on the ground. But at the same time we
create much needed accountability for failures and for abuses, we should take note of
some profound changes that the UN Secretariat has made to peacekeeping since the
catastrophic failures of Rwanda and Srebrenica. From doctrinal changes that recognize
the new responsibilities of peacekeepers; to better systems for the recruitment and
deployment of a vast number of military, police, and civilian personnel; to improved
logistics and procurement – the United Nations has made some advances. Last year, we
spearheaded the effort to enact further reforms, including longer troop rotations to
preserve institutional memory, financial penalties for troops who show up without the
necessary equipment to perform their duties, and financial premiums for troops who are
willing to accept higher risks. Incentives and disincentives have to be better leveraged in
the service of our shared aims.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has just launched a new strategic review of
peacekeeping, the first in nearly fifteen years. While we don’t expect a mere review to
remedy deficiencies in capabilities and shortages in political will, the review should
address those shortcomings in peacekeeping that the UN itself, the UN Secretariat as
distinct from the UN member states, has the ability itself to fix: inadequate planning,
slow troop deployment, uneven mission leadership, unclear and unenforced standards for
troop performance, inadequate measures to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse,
insufficient accountability for failures to protect civilians, and an inefficient division of
labor between peacekeeping operations and other UN agencies.
Most of the issues that I’ve just described, the UN Secretariat can take a strong leadership role. Member states then in turn have to step up, you have to have both for the reforms that are needed to kick in and make a difference. These four lines of effort are all critical to ensuring peacekeeping better addresses 21st-century challenges. They demonstrate the need for US leadership, and to exercise that leadership, the United States must pay our UN dues in full.

I understand the frustration that many Americans feel with the United States paying a substantial share of the peacekeeping budget, and with the US share rising over the past decade due to the formula that the United States negotiated back in the year 2000, which allowed our regular budget contribution share to be capped. We agree that the formula should be changed to reflect the realities of today’s world. Until that happens, we also insist on paying our full dues at this critical moment. If we do not, we will dramatically undercut our power to achieve the reforms needed, we will undermine our leadership, and we will potentially underfund important African-led missions, such as the ones in Mali and the Central African Republic.

This does not mean we simply sign over a large check and look the other way. On the contrary, as stewards of taxpayer funds, over the last six years we have pressed hard to improve the cost-efficiency of peacekeeping and to prevent significant new costs. Through US-led reform efforts, the UN has cut the per-peacekeeper costs by roughly sixteen percent. That’s one sixth of the cost reduced through efficiencies and streamlining. We’ve also aggressively fought cost increases, saving hundreds of millions of dollars per year by prevailing on other countries for a more modest increase in the long-frozen reimbursement rates for UN peacekeepers. And we’ve pressed to streamline and right-size missions, where warranted, by changing conditions on the ground. In the Ivory Coast, we’ve cut the number of mandated troops in half, from 10,000 to around 5,000. In Haiti, we have reduced the number of mandated troops from nearly 9,000 after the 2010 earthquake to just over 2,000 today. And we were on course to do the same in Liberia prior to the outbreak of Ebola. These efforts ensure that governments do not use peacekeepers as an excuse not to take responsibility for their own citizens’ security. And streamlining missions in this manner frees up troops and resources that are needed elsewhere.

We will continue to work relentlessly to make peacekeeping as efficient as possible without undermining its effectiveness, in close coordination with Congress. As Congress reconvenes next week to consider a spending bill, I plan to continue working with a bipartisan group of lawmakers to find a path forward on this critically important issue.

Before closing, let me just touch briefly on a trip President Obama asked me to take last week to take stock of the international response to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa. Long before Ebola hit Sierra Leone and Liberia, brutal civil wars did. And both nations subsequently hosted UN peacekeeping missions. The UN’s mission in Liberia, UNMIL, is ongoing.
When UN peacekeepers arrived in Sierra Leone in 1999, the ceasefire between warring parties was shaky. More than 50,000 people had been killed, and rebel groups had amputated the limbs of 20,000 people. Over the next six years, the UN Sierra Leone Mission was performing a lot like the contemporary missions I described earlier. It suffered some very serious failures and setbacks, including credible allegations of an outrageous pattern of sexual abuse by troops. And less than a year after the mission deployed, rebels kidnapped hundreds of peacekeepers, killed four of them, and renounced their ceasefire with the government.

But talk to Sierra Leoneans, as I did last week, and they recall as well a mission that had an outsized impact in helping Sierra Leone rebuild after an utterly devastating conflict. Peacekeepers helped to disarm at least 75,000 ex-fighters, including hundreds of child soldiers, who then they helped reintegrate into families and communities once again; the blue helmets decommissioned more than 42,000 weapons; they helped half a million displaced people return to their communities. And after providing security for the country’s first-ever democratic presidential election in 2005, the UN peacekeeping mission was drawn down.

One of the questions that kept running through my mind as I toured Freetown last week was: what if UN peacekeepers had never come to Sierra Leone? What if the country had still been at war when the Ebola outbreak struck? How much faster would the virus have spread? How would doctors and nurses have been able to flood the country to support the country’s weak health system right now? How would Sierra Leone’s military have been able to help build Ebola treatment units or run safe burial operations, as they are now doing, if they were tied down fighting rebels? We rarely ask these questions of peacekeeping.

We see the many, many ways that peacekeepers come up short: the slowness to deploy, the failures to protect civilians, the abuses – the list goes on. But what we cannot see – what is impossible to see – is the counterfactual. What would any of the more than a dozen countries where UN peacekeepers are deployed today look like without a peacekeeping presence?

And when the missions do their jobs, as the Sierra Leone peacekeeping mission did in many ways, they make themselves obsolete. They draw down. Troops come home, not to parades – in spite of having risked their lives for people from nations that are not their own – they come home to anonymity.

Yet this “what if” question is one we must ask ourselves with every mission. What would have happened in South Sudan if no UN peacekeepers had been present when Dinka and Nuer began going door-to-door and killing people on the basis of their ethnicity; or if the UN had not opened its gates to those 100,000 people fleeing this violence? What would the Central African Republic look like today if no African Union or European Union peacekeepers, now UN peacekeepers, had come to try to prevent attacks by the anti-Balaka and Seleka militias, who were massacring civilians with abandon?
In all of these instances, the answer is simple: without peacekeeping, the violence and the suffering would likely have been much, much worse.

The “what if” question doesn’t let anybody off the hook, not peacekeepers; not the countries that fund and lift and support peacekeeping and authorize these missions as we have the privilege of doing within the Security Council; not the peacekeeping contributors themselves; not the UN Secretariat – nobody gets off the hook. But it does remind us why this effort is so worthwhile and why American leadership is so critical.

Just because places like Sierra Leone, South Sudan, and the Central African Republic are better off than they would have been without peacekeeping, does not mean the institution is where it needs to be. It is not. Nor does it mean that we are satisfied with peacekeepers fulfilling parts, but not all, of their mandates; or with peacekeepers standing up to protect civilians some of the time, rather than all of the time. We are not.

When the stakes are as high as they are though in these conflicts – when shortfalls can result in atrocities committed, in communities uprooted, and in entire societies being split along ethnic and religious lines – getting it right some of the time is certainly not good enough. Peacekeeping must be consistently performing and meeting our expectations. And we will keep working with our partners to bring about the kinds of reforms upon which the security of millions of people around the world may well depend. Thank you. (Applause.)

MS. PLETKA: Good to go?

AMB. POWER: Yeah, good to go.

MS. PLETKA: You can hear us? Marvelous.

Ambassador, thank you very much. That was a very substantive talk. And I know we don’t have a lot of time, and I want to make sure that we get at least a little bit of time for questions. So I’m going to ask – not have any of the throat-clearing questions that we would normally have.

AMB. POWER: OK.

MS. PLETKA: About how good you look today and how difficult your job is. You said something that was very interesting to me as a former congressional staffer who was there when we legislated the cuts on peacekeeping. So you want –

AMB. POWER: Thanks for that.

MS. PLETKA: You’re welcome. Still think it was a good thing to do. Did you want that – you want Congress to re-up that money. At the same time, the Chinese have
surpassed the United States as the world’s largest economy. How much are the Chinese contributing to peacekeeping?

AMB. POWER: The Chinese rate – the share of peacekeeping has doubled, and the fact that there –

MS. PLETKA: So from one point something to –

AMB. POWER: It’s up around five percent now.

MS. PLETKA: And where – and you want us to go to 27, right?

AMB. POWER: Pardon me?

MS. PLETKA: You want us to go to 27.

AMB. POWER: No, no. You have old, old numbers.

MS. PLETKA: I am old. It’s so sad.

AMB. POWER: We’re at 27 – the share now that we are – billed for us is 28.4 percent which means that 72.6 – 71.6 percent is paid by others.

MS. PLETKA: Others. But we’re paying much more –

AMB. POWER: We’re paying a large share, and we’re getting a lot out of it.

MS. PLETKA: Good. So you should have stuck with what I said before. That sounded better. That’s going to be a hard case to make to Congress, don’t you think?

AMB. POWER: There’s a lot of bipartisan support for, again, the very particular missions that are being performed, I mean, whether it’s the Syria-Israel line now, which is active for the first time. It used to be just sheep that were crossing that line and had to be reported on. Now, it’s al-Nusra. Or Mali, where we’ve seen al Qaeda establish a foothold get pushed out and now, again, beginning to return where we have to strengthen. South Sudan, of course – the United States has everything to do with the birth of that country.

So I think it’s true that when you raise the issue of peacekeeping in the abstract, people blanche a little bit, but if you can disaggregate it and boil it down to the missions and to the causes, to the protection of civilians, the protection of Christians in the Central African Republic and Muslims as well on the other side of the lines there, you know, I think we have a lot of support actually up on the Hill.

MS. PLETKA: Well, you make some very specific and persuasive cases. Let’s talk about a couple of the ones you just mentioned, which are really tough. We’re
watching the peacekeepers are being put in positions that I think you rightly outlined – they have always assumed that basically they would be standing there and occupying a place – keeping the peace, not delivering it. It’s not keeping peace – (inaudible) – other places, but UNIFIL, which is between Israel and Lebanon, obviously the peacekeepers that were on the Golan Heights and who are now really, you know, under siege –

AMB. POWER: Yeah.

MS. PLETKA: And not a peacekeeping operation, but you mentioned the multinational force and observers in Sinai. We’ve got al Qaeda there. How do we manage these sorts of situations where peacekeepers are basically in war zones? Should they be taken out?

AMB. POWER: Well, the challenges – I’m sure many of them would like not to be present in those roles. And that’s, again, where I think refreshing the conversation with the American people, with Congress is so important because the truth is, again, we do spend a lot of time rightly drawing attention to the ways in which they’re failing in this environment as distinct from imagining what it would be like to operate in that environment with no IED – anti-IED equipment, with no UAVs providing with you intel or anything ahead of the arrival of extremists in your neighborhood.

So there isn’t any obvious candidate to take their place if we cannot actually reinforce the efforts that they’re making. So because we don’t have as, you know, on the list of options allowing vacuums to persist or allowing civilians to be just slaughtered wholesale, we are in a situation now where we are trying to change the training, change the capabilities, change the mindset, but there’s a lag between the missions of the kind that you’ve described and I’ve described and the traditional mindset that many of these peacekeepers brought to bear.

Now, we’ve been in this evolution though, as you know well, from the 1990s. You know, it was back then – it was the first time people said, but wait, there’s no peace to keep. Now, as I said, the huge percentage of conflicts – the huge percentage of UN peacekeeping that is being performed now in conflict areas, the exception is when there’s actually a peace to keep.

But, again, if there were a door number two, I think we’d all walk through it. But, instead, I think what we have are these imperfect, brave coalitions of people who are still willing to put themselves on the line in service of, again, the principles of international peace and security and the protection of civilians. And we just can’t afford to sort of wish them well and hope that these tensions resolve themselves.

MS. PLETKA: And I think the Indians, the Pakistanis, the Bangladeshis, the Nepalese, who are by far the largest contributors to UN peacekeeping –

AMB. POWER: Correct.
MS. PLETKA: – are all going to be game for the notion that if we train them to fight, you know, with counter-IEDs, they can be in these sorts of conflict zones, particularly some of the Muslim countries that are contributing?

AMB. POWER: Well, let me give an example. I mean, I think, again, with each country it is a specific dialogue. And the question you’re asking is one of those that I addressed in part by also saying we need almost a new compact, both on the rules of engagement that they need to embrace, if for no other reason because of the nature of the environments they’re operating in, and a way of the Security Council engaging with them also as mandates and missions are structured.

But just to give one example, Mali, where, as I mentioned, 30 peacekeepers have been killed now this year in Mali – 30. And what do you have? You have African countries, you know, wanting to walk away from Mali? No. They want more robust rules of engagement. They’re coming to us with a list of the kinds of capabilities they need. So they do recognize that if you don’t deal with a crisis in the neighborhood, it’s coming, again, to a community near you.

So you have a lot of political will, but you either have a shortage of will and, you know, some pretty capable forces and pretty experienced forces, or you have a huge amount of will and some issues with lifting quickly, having equipment, being able to sustain themselves in hostile environments and having intel and anti-IED, and so forth. So we’ve got to close those gaps.

MS. PLETKA: Let’s open it up. This gentleman here. If you’d be kind enough to identify yourself, just wait for the microphone, which is coming. Just one second. She’s right here. And identify yourself, sir.

Q: Hello. Yes. First of all, thank you for the discussion. My name is Eremichi Bangul (ph). I saw my first peacekeeping mission in 1960 in the Congo that also took the life of Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld. What I wanted to ask is how much a country like the Congo, they have (benefited from?) so many peacekeeping missions, how much of that do they pay themselves, the cost?

AMB. POWER: Yes. Well, a country like the Congo, I think the answer would not only be nothing, but it would be also that they look to the international community to support their security forces who are operating now side by side with the peacekeepers in taking on some of these armed groups. So there are exceptions, though, within UN peacekeeping like in Cyprus – it’s a very different situation where you have a developed country and economies on both sides of the lines, where they do contribute a very substantial share of the UN peacekeeping mission cost.

To your larger point, though, on Congo, about – I use the phrase I think – or the words stagnant or stagnating about years of UN peacekeeping missions in Congo that produced no dividends, at least in terms of an overall change. Maybe civilians were safer
here or there because there might be a peacekeeper in the neighborhood, but when you looked at the kind of net crisis, they just look like it was more of the same year to year.

This new effort – and this is an example – they’re both use this force intervention brigade with this offensive mandate where they have three African armies that are willing to be part of that – Malawi, South African and Tanzania, who are raring to go against armed groups, which, again, it’s not something we’ve seen. They’re also UAVs to monitor the border and to try to see, you know, whether arms are coming across or whether actors in the region are getting involved in problematic ways. I think there is actually something different that has brought about meaningful changes over the last year and a half. I think it’s unfortunate that when one looks at the life of UN missions in Congo, it’s harder to say that regularly.

MS. PLETKA: Take one last question. This young lady back here.

Q: Hi. I’m Caroline Brazill. I study peace and conflict resolution in the Great Lakes region of Africa.

In recent years, we’ve increasingly noticed this kind of tendency for African countries to really want to consolidate peacekeeping efforts and to kind of want to find larger units to deal with issues that are increasingly domestic in nature. One of the more recent pieces of evidence is the ICGLR, who kind of have these overarching protocols within security, governance, kind of – etc., these larger themes, but we’ve also seen them kind of come into a conflict resolution role with their role in the Kampala talks and the recent flare-up in Congo.

So I’m just wondering what your idea is – where you see the future of the ICGLR and the strengths and weaknesses within that piece of public resolution within the region.

AMB. POWER: Well, I would distinguish that group and that effort a little bit from what I’ve been talking about, which is the security elements and the security sector reform piece. So just putting security to one side, what I perhaps should have said right at the beginning is I hope it goes without saying that the political processes and the mediations and the national reconciliation, that that is the first order priority, of course, of international efforts.

The best you’re going to do with these security forces is, you know, hold the militias at bay and, you know, potentially defang them and protect civilians. But unless you have that parallel piece at work where you’re actually trying to deal with what gives rise to conflict in the first place, you’re going to be just playing whack-a-mole. And that’s certainly what we’ve seen in Congo over many, many years.

So, again, without getting into the kind of technical aspects of what the regional effort is seeking to achieve, I think what we have seen in parallel to these improvements and this more aggressive attitude on the part of the peacekeepers is way more regional ownership of what’s actually happening inside the DRC than we’ve seen before. And
Angola’s involvement in particular I think is an interesting and noteworthy development. They’ve really stepped up not only in that region but also in the Central African Republic. They’ve also now come forward – they’re one of the countries that is stepping up to provide peacekeepers that hasn’t done that before under a UN umbrella so hopefully we’ll expand the pool of forces and make sure they have the training and capabilities they need.

So, again, it’s probably not worth going sort of deep into the specifics of where the mediation and the regional effort is right now beyond saying there will be no solution to Congo that comes on the peacekeeping side. It’s going to come through a political process when there’s enough will on the part of all the stakeholders in the region, but also where there’s both a deterrent to the armed groups where they feel they have to surrender their weapons or face something on the security side and some political track where they can – their constituents can find a home. And so you basically have to walk and chew gum at the same time.

MS. PLETKA: I was sworn by the ambassador’s staff to a hard stop. She has a plane to catch.

AMB. POWER: I have a 3:00 flight.

MS. PLETKA: Plane to catch in – I don’t know how she’s going to get it in 25 minutes. I apologize to our audience. We’ll have to have you back.

AMB. POWER: I would love to come back. Thank you so much.

MS. PLETKA: Thank you very much.

AMB. POWER: Thank you for coming.

MS. PLETKA: Thank you all. (Applause.)

(END)