

OPINION

U.S. must lead to pace peacekeeping efforts

By PETER YEO

Special to Stars and Stripes

Gen. Martin Dempsey hit it on the head this summer when — for the sake of global security — he called for our allies to bolster United Nations peacekeeping. “The complex array of threats and, let’s call it geopolitical jockeying, requires all of us to contend with an unpredictable landscape, and our support to peacekeeping operations must keep pace with that unpredictability,” the Joint Chiefs chairman said.

But with growing strains on our allies’ resources, such as the refugee crisis that has recently deluged borders, how can the U.S. ensure such a call will not fall on deaf — or at least distracted — ears, no matter how urgent?

When President Barack Obama convenes nations and chairs a U.N. peacekeeping summit next week, other U.N. member states will be asked to enhance, or in some cases commence, support for the growing number of missions the world has asked the U.N. to deploy. The 16 operations are acting manifestly in U.S. interests and bringing needed stability to hot spots in North Africa, the Middle East and elsewhere. If we expect allied nations to make and fulfill meaningful commitments on all our behalves, the U.S. should show significant leadership as well.

Certainly it is a fair, if not complicated, request. Over the past 20 years, many Western nations have retreated from providing troops for U.N. combat operations. Currently, EU governments, for example, provide some 6,000 troops to peacekeeping missions — less than 1 percent of the more than 110,000 troops total — compared to 25,000 troops, or 40 percent, two decades ago. The United States provides 28 troops and 78 total personnel, its contributions measuring more visibly in other ways, especially monetarily and through its diplomatic muscle. Meanwhile, developing nations have markedly increased their troop contributions.

This dynamic of developed nations providing the bulk of financing and developing nations the bulk of forces has allowed the greatest growth of operations in the institution’s 70-year history. However,



PASQUAL GONZALEZ/Courtesy of the United Nations

Indonesian peacekeepers with the U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) patrol in the countryside near Taybe, Lebanon, in 2009.

with that growth, today’s “complex array of threats” has exposed some shortfalls of the current system, namely the lack of specialized training for troops and critical enabling assets and capabilities.

To deepen and diversify the pool of countries deploying troops, police and military, the U.S. will have to set the pace. As it stands, the U.S. is the world’s largest financial contributor to peacekeeping — because of bipartisan support on Capitol Hill and leadership from the executive branch — and full payment of our dues is absolutely critical to the enterprise. However by expanding our contributions in other ways — such as through training and expertise — we would make it more difficult for other countries to stand on the sidelines and thus ensure operations are more effective and safer for civilians. All of this can be done without putting U.S. troops direct-

ly on the line.

For one, the U.S. can assist the U.N. in enhancing specialized training standards for today’s peacekeepers, for whom peacekeeping operations no longer mean simply observing a cease-fire between two consenting nations. In South Sudan, for example, the mission is sheltering over 200,000 civilians within its camps — an unprecedented task. Elsewhere, like the Democratic Republic of the Congo, peacekeepers are countering violent armed militias; in Mali they are confronting the proliferation of improvised explosive devices.

Given these unique challenges and the longstanding role the U.S. has played in training through two State Department programs (Global Peace Operations Initiative and Africa Contingency Operations Training & Assistance), the United States should fine-tune its training standards to

be more mission-specific and insist U.N. member states enhance their own standards before deploying troops. In fact, with respect to the U.N. peacekeeping mission in Mali, the U.S. Army’s Asymmetric Warfare Group recently found that tailored, pre-deployment training for peacekeepers headed to Mali is the most important and the largest gap for the mission. It’s quite likely this holds true for the other U.N. operations as well.

Two, the U.S. can show leadership to other nations by deploying U.S. specialist military contingents to U.N. peacekeeping operations in combat service and support roles. This does not mean providing our troops to fight, but instead issuing limited medical, engineering, logistics or aviation units. To illustrate the need, a lack of air assets and specialized training is preventing some missions from carrying out casualty and medical evacuation. It would be inconceivable for U.S. troops to conduct patrols without medical or casualty evacuation capability, or inability to ensure that wounded personnel would be quickly evacuated is quite understandably leading some peacekeepers to be risk-averse in their projection of force, inhibiting longer-range patrols and undermining the mission’s ability to protect civilians.

As global conflicts indeed become increasingly complex and unpredictable, “keeping pace” as Dempsey noted — will mean additional and varied investments. We cannot cut corners on peacekeeping or go it alone when it comes to tempering extremists in places like Mali, DR Congo or South Sudan. We also cannot expect our allies to solely shoulder additional burdens. A robust showing of U.S. leadership at the president’s upcoming summit will go a long way toward achieving a sustainable and more effective partnership on peacekeeping.

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Kurds poised to strike the Islamic State in Syria

By DAVID IGNATIUS

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WASHINGTON While the Obama administration haggles over its Syria strategy, a Kurdish militia that claims more than 100,000 fighters is poised several dozen miles north of the Islamic State’s capital of Raqqa — ready to roll toward the extremists’ sanctuary.

U.S. special operations forces have been providing air support, training and supplies for the Syrian Kurdish group, the People’s Protection Units, known as the “YPG” from its Kurdish initials. A resupply shipment of about 100 pallets of arms and other aid has been positioned at a U.S. air base in the Persian Gulf, awaiting Washington authorization for an airdrop to the Kurdish fighters.

“We have no objection to more cooperation with the U.S. and going ahead to Raqqa,” said Saleh Muslim, co-chairman of the Democratic Union Party, which oversees the militia. But he said that any final assault on Raqqa should come from an estimated 5,000 Arab tribal forces in the region that are working with the YPG.

Muslim spoke to me Tuesday by Skype from the northeast Syria.

Several U.S. officials say that a White House decision to approve expanded aid has been expected for more than a week. Deliberations were complicated by debate over Russia’s recent military moves in Syria, which Moscow describes as an effort to join the fight against the extremists.

“Analysis-paralysis” is how one frustrated U.S. official describes the slow process of approval. Advocates argue that after recent setbacks for a U.S. “train and equip” mission for Syrian moderate forces, the Kurds are the best option against the extremists. Air support wouldn’t risk significant U.S. casualties, nor would it violate existing American understandings with Turkey, nor would it threaten the Russians.

Muslim said the YPG force is larger than a U.S. official’s estimate of 25,000 but he wouldn’t provide a number. U.S. and Kurdish officials said the YPG’s power on the ground and its readiness to attack are already well-known to the Islamic State militants, who are getting pounded in the Raqqa region by coalition airstrikes and firefights with YPG forces.

The YPG fighters get high marks from

U.S. commanders. Backed by U.S. air support, they’ve swept west from their bases in Iraqi Kurdistan and captured a huge swath of northeast Syria, estimated by one official at about 6,500 square miles. In January, they won a fierce battle to drive the Islamic State from the border town of Kobani.

U.S. commanders have discussed with their YPG counterparts a move south that would squeeze the Raqqa region, while U.S. and coalition planes and drones attack the city from the air. Once Kurdish fighters had cordoned the areas near Raqqa, the final assault to clear the city and hold it would be left to Sunni Arab forces. Muslim said that about 3,000 members of the Shammar tribe are fighting alongside the YPG in Hasaka province, northeast of Raqqa, and over 1,000 more Sunnis are fighting closer to the city. But any such assault on Raqqa is probably months away.

The YPG has been the most reliable ally for the U.S.-led coalition in Syria, but the alliance carries several regional complications. First, the militia has close links with the Iraqi Kurdish group known as the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, or PUK, which has fragmented badly in recent years and has growing ties with Iran. Second,

the YPG has even tighter bonds with the radical Turkey militia known as the PKK, which the Turkish government regards as a terrorist organization.

Syria has been a nightmare for U.S. policymakers partly because the order of battle there is so tangled. The rampaging YPG is backed by our adversary, Iran, but recruited by our ally, Turkey. The U.S. says it wants to work for a diplomatic settlement with help from Russia, which is now sending a significant new military force into northern Syria. Meanwhile, progress on the so-called “southern front,” has been hamstrung by Jordan’s reluctance to topple President Bashar Assad until it’s clearer who will succeed him.

In this fog of policy, the only goal shared by all major players — the U.S., Russia, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the Syrian regime itself — is to defeat the Islamic State. The best U.S.-backed fighters against the extremists have been the Syrian Kurds, who say they’re ready to do much more, with U.S. support.

“The trust is there between the YPG and American forces,” says Muslim. In Syria, where there often seem to be only bad options, helping the Syrian Kurds fight the Islamic State should be a no-brainer.