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Misplaced Faith in Military Integration after Civil War

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This policy brief is based on **"United They Fall: Why the International Community Should Not Promote Military Integration after Civil War,"** which appears in the winter 2015/16 issue of *International Security*.

Bottom Lines

Absence of Reliable Evidence. Settlements negotiated after civil wars commonly call for combining competing combatant forces into a single national army. Past research, however, has not shown whether military integration works.

Not a Major Cause of the Breakdown of Peace. Deep military integration often accompanies sustainable postwar peace, but it cannot take credit: the underlying political conditions that determine whether peace endures also determine the extent to which military integration succeeds. Eleven cases of postwar military integration over four decades reveal little evidence that it contributes to the durability of postwar peace.

A Dangerous Priority for the International Community. The international community's embrace of post–civil war military integration is not merely wasteful, but potentially dangerous: a strong security sector in a weak political system can lead to military domination and invite the recurrence of civil war.

Locally made shells are launched by Free Syrian Army fighters towards the Sheikh Maqsud neighbourhood of the northern Syrian city of Aleppo on December 2, 2015. (AP)

Military integration is a common practice after civil war: by one count, nearly 40 percent of peace settlements for the 128 civil wars that took place from 1945 through 2006 called for some form of integration of combatant military forces. The international peacebuilding community has embraced military integration as common sense, accepting the conventional wisdom that inclusive institutions are the key to preventing a society's relapse into war. To ascribe responsibility for sustainable postwar peace to military integration is to suggest that integration is largely an engineering problem: when it is competently designed and implemented, it bolsters peace; when it is not, peace is undermined. Military integration, however, is fundamentally a political problem, not a technical matter: the underlying political conditions that determine the extent of military integration are also responsible for whether postwar peace endures or conflict restarts. Our study of eleven cases of military integration over four decades reveals that the international peacebuilding community's emphasis on military integration is misplaced. Military integration can only rarely serve as a major independent cause of peace, and its failure can only rarely be a substantial independent cause of civil war's resumption.

Absence of Reliable Evidence

The intuition behind military integration seems reasonable. A professional, communally representative force could conceivably allay vulnerable groups' security fears by serving as a credible signal of the government's commitment to power sharing; by making the army less likely to employ violence against the society's constituent communal groups;

by protecting all populations against militias composed of irreconcilables and communal extremists; by providing employment to former fighters from all sides; and by facilitating, via its symbolic power, popular identification with an inclusive vision of the nation.

Evidence of military integration's effectiveness is sparse, however. Studies are divided in their assessment of whether postwar integration makes civil war's recurrence less likely. Further, these studies have generally explored only if war settlements mandated integration, not whether or how provisions in those settlements were implemented. There is no systematic cross-national evidence on implementation, though many national experts have affirmed that, even when local actors commit to military integration, they often do not fulfill that commitment.

Not a Major Cause of Peace's Breakdown

The same interests, institutions, ideas, and deep historical structures that drive a given peace settlement, warts and all, also shape the corresponding military integration. These forces, more than the particulars of integration, are key to the duration of peace. Local actors' embrace of military integration is a reflection of propitious underlying political conditions. Similarly, when local actors resist military integration, retaining the means of coercion and hedging their bets, that is a sign of their underlying distrust or incompatible interests. Failed or incomplete military integration is not, then, a fundamental cause of peace's breakdown.

We examined the implementation of military integration in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Lebanon, Mozambique, the Philippines, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sudan, and Zimbabwe. These cases are very different with respect to the magnitude or breadth of integration (whether overall numbers are heavily skewed toward combatants from one side or from certain populations), the horizontal integration of units (whether units are constituted on the basis of their members' communal, organizational, or ideological affiliation or on the basis of substantive qualifications and merits), and the vertical integration of the officer corps (whether certain populations dominate the highest levels of command). As expected, countries whose postwar integration has been deeper are also less likely to revert to civil war. In none of these eleven cases, however, can one persuasively ascribe either the absence or resumption of fighting to military integration.

In four cases—the Philippines, Rwanda, Sudan, and Zimbabwe—military integration was shallow, and substantial violence resumed after the end of each country's civil war. Integration typically remained limited for the same reasons that peace ultimately failed, however. Sudan, for instance, descended back into civil war not because the parties had refused to implement plans for postwar military integration, but, ironically, when President Gaafar Mohamed el-Nimeiri boldly attempted to deepen military integration and strengthen the Sudanese central state. In the Philippines, the Moro National Liberation Front sued for peace because its battlefield fortunes had taken a marked turn for the worse, and its decline was also the reason that military integration proved shallow, that the Moro Islamic Liberation Front replaced it as the lead rebel force, and that the civil war endured.

In four cases—Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sierra Leone, South Africa, and the DRC—mixed levels of military integration coincided with something approximating durable peace. Military integration could take little credit for this outcome, however, as it was typically shallow, reflecting the terms of the wars' conclusions. Bosnia's military, for instance, is a small, politically irrelevant force whose units are still organized by nationality; the superficiality of integration in Bosnia is a reflection of enduring communal divides. In the DRC, similarly, weak military integration was a prerequisite for the negotiated settlement.

In the remaining three cases—Burundi, Lebanon, and Mozambique—substantial military integration took place and peace proved fairly durable, but other factors have played a much larger role than has military integration in maintaining postwar peace. Experts typically cite battlefield stalemate and war exhaustion as crucial in creating and sustaining peace in Burundi and Mozambique. In Lebanon, the military is so hamstrung by the country's fragile sectarian politics that, although its integration has been impressive, it is not in practice available to keep the peace within the country or to limit spillover from the turmoil in Lebanon's neighbors, and thus cannot serve as a bulwark against the renewal of Lebanon's civil war.

There is little evidence that military integration, whether deep or shallow, profoundly alters local actors' strategic preferences or their ultimate goals. Even when the resulting militaries are the most successful national institutions in the postwar polity, they do not appear to provide adequate security guarantees, project a sufficient symbol of national unity, or enmesh local actors in processes and institutions of governance from which they cannot extricate themselves. History demonstrates that they have done so too often.

A Dangerous Priority for the International Community

Despite the conventional wisdom that successful peacebuilding requires local knowledge and buy-in, the international community still often pursues policies that displace national authorities and pay little regard to the preferences of local stakeholders—as Séverine Autesserre has powerfully shown. This is true as well of military integration: the international community has often played a prominent role in integration and has even at times pressed it on reluctant local forces. Civil war settlements that provide for integration are far more likely to have substantial international involvement than settlements without such a provision. Of our eleven cases, international actors played a decisive role in five military integration processes, were major players in another three, and were irrelevant in just three.

The international community's promotion of military integration, however, is neither wise nor responsible, especially when local forces see it as having been imposed by outsiders. Military integration is not only ineffective in sustaining peace in post–civil war states, but it can have deleterious consequences. First, resources devoted to military integration might more profitably be put to other purposes. Second, military integration has the potential to undermine the stability of civilian politics and to invite the recurrence of civil war: when the security apparatus is strong, and the central state otherwise weak and ineffective, generals may be tempted to engage in foreign adventurism or interfere in domestic politics.

In short, military integration's benefits are unclear, the costs can be high, and the outsiders pressing for it do not suffer the consequences. The first rule of international intervention is "do no harm." Military integration fails that test.

Additional Resources

Séverine Autesserre, *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Ban Ki-moon, "Peacebuilding in the Aftermath of Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General," A/69/399–S/2014/694 (New York: United Nations Peacebuilding Commission, September 23, 2014).

Roy Licklider, ed. *New Armies from Old: Merging Competing Military Forces after Civil Wars* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2014).

United Nations, *Security Sector Reform* website, http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/issues/security.shtml.

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