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# The Oxymoron of Peacekeeping

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**Abstract.** This article describes some conceptual difficulties with the notion of military personnel and weapons as peacekeeping assets.

Oxymoron denotes a combination of antithetical or incongruous terms or concepts, e.g., "deafening silence" or--to some wags--"military intelligence." Is "peacekeeping" an oxymoron?

In the United States (US), some intercontinental ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads have been termed "peacekeepers." It's Strategic Air Command (SAC) professed itself to be a peacekeeping organization and that "Peace is our profession." In the sense of deterring nuclear war or conventional wars of attrition, US military and political authorities might employ the missile moniker and SAC motto with a straight face. But if the missiles were employed and moniker and motto remained, the authorities could justifiably be labeled Orwellian or Strangelovian for using peacekeeping assets in warfighting.

United Nations (UN) peacekeepers, too, may or may not exemplify an oxymoron. When they are deployed by the agreement of all pertinent adversaries and when their mere presence preserves the peace and deters military conflict, they are indeed peacekeepers. But when the adversaries continue or reinstate military conflict around or through the UN personnel, "peacekeeping" no longer applies. In the case of the continuation of military conflict, "warkeeping" might better apply.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) peacekeepers in Bosnia have been just that as long as their presence deterred military conflict among adversarial Bosnian Croats, Muslims, and Serbs. However, the term, "peacekeeping" no longer applies once they begin to (1) seek out alleged war criminals to arrest, (2) aid in seizing police stations or mass media assets in support of one politician over another, (3) seize weapons from former combatants, or (4) employ weapons against those who seek to prevent displaced populations from returning to their homes or citizenries from engaging in elections,. In these examples, the peacekeepers are no longer keeping the peace. Instead the peace has been broken. Peace again has to be made. Thus, the peacekeepers have become peacemakers. And even "peacemaker" becomes an oxymoron, if the employment of military force proves to be unsuccessful in securing the peace.

Those who argue that peacekeepers who take preemptive action because of putative threats to the peace are still peacekeepers ignore that the peacekeepers have become peacebreakers. It is here that a very puzzling statement of New York Times reporter Chris Hedges becomes germane. In an article entitled "2 U.S. soldiers hurt confronting pro-Karadzic Bosnian Serbs," Hedges's account of NATO peacekeeping troops seeking to take control of a police station from pro-Karadzic forces includes the observation that "Thursday's clashes were the sharpest confrontation between NATO forces and the Bosnian Serb people (IBPP emphasis) since the signing of the Dayton accord in 1995." This statement may easily be taken to imply that the peacekeepers not only are no longer peacekeepers but are fighting against an entire people--a conclusion that belies many observations that there are significant segments of Bosnian Serbs that desire peace, are tired of war, and will tolerate compromise for peace.

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Ironically, the peacekeeping notion is not an oxymoron only if the military assets deployed as peacekeeping are not employed--actually that these assets are being employed totally through being deployed--and peace holds. Once the military assets are employed in the former sense, peacekeeping becomes peacemaking or peacebreaking. And at this point, failure to immediately change terminology is more than a semantic slip-up. It also is an invitation to misguided analysis, planning, and implementation in the politico-military sphere. (Hedges, C. (August 29, 1997.) 2 U.S. soldiers hurt confronting pro-Karadzic Bosnian Serbs. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Litz, B.T., Orsillo, S.M., Friedman, M., & Ehlich, P. (1997.) Posttraumatic stress disorder associated with peacekeeping duty in Somalia for U.S. military personnel. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 154, 178-184; Montiel, C.J. (1997.) Citizen-based peacemaking in a protracted war: Two Philippine cases. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 3, 155-134; Twemlow, S.W., & Sacco, F. (1996.) Peacekeeping and peacemaking: The conceptual foundations of a plan to reduce violence and improve the quality of life in a midsized community in Jamaica. *Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological Processes*, 59, 156-174.) (Keywords: Peacekeeping, Peacemaking.)