The Southeastern Europe Multinational Peace Force: Problems of and Prospects for a Regional Security Agency

Dimitris Bourantonis

Athens University of Economics and Business

Panayotis Tsakonas

University of the Aegean, Greece

This article deals with the first regional security institution ever established in the southeastern part of Europe. The purpose of this article is threefold: first, to discuss the origins, structure and mission of the Multinational Peace Force Southeastern Europe (MPFSEE); second, to investigate the reasons for MPFSEE inactivity, i.e., why the MPFSEE has so far not been involved in peace operations in the region; and third, to examine whether the MPFSEE is still capable of contributing to the furtherance of peace in southeastern Europe.

As a consequence of the resurgence of regionalism in world politics that marked the decade of the 1990s, regional agencies and arrangements have become more prominent as vehicles for solving international problems and managing regional disputes. This development has led to a steady output of writings focusing on the revival of old regional arrangements as well as on new ones that have been formed over the past decade.

This literature, however, has touched only superficially upon the formation of the first multinational peace force ever established in southeastern Europe – Europe’s ‘powder keg’ – namely, the Multinational Peace Force Southeastern Europe, or, MPFSEE. All the states that helped give birth to the organisation, namely, the countries of southeastern Europe as well as the United States, hailed the formation of the MPFSEE, declaring it to be an important and positive step towards creating a useful agency for dealing with potential regional security problems. However, almost four years after its establishment, the MPFSEE remains inactive.

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Origins, structure and mission of the MPFSEE

The ending of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet empire have had a repercussive effect on southeastern Europe and drawn the attention of the international
community once again to developments taking place in this volatile region. Most importantly, the ‘security vacuum’ created in the region and the release of nationalism aspirations, accompanied by territorial disputes, have dramatically affected relations between the states of the region and hindered initiatives for inter-Balkan co-operation on a multilateral level.2

The establishment of the MPFSEE was prompted by developments in the region over the past decade, especially by concerns over fighting in the Serbian province of Kosovo. The MPFSEE formally came into being through an agreement signed at the Southeastern Europe Defence Ministerial (SEDM) meeting held in Skopje on 26 September 1998. The signatories were Greece, Italy and Turkey (three NATO members); Albania, Bulgaria, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) and Romania (four prospective NATO members); and the United States.

The Skopje treaty also included a protocol signed by the ministers of defence of the member states at a meeting in Athens on 13 January 1999. The protocol stipulated that, with regard to the MPFSEE, Croatia, Slovenia and the United States would participate as ‘observers’. The signatories also expressed their determination to support fully any subsequent steps taken within the framework of the initiative. It was further agreed that the MPFSEE regional security arrangement would be open to any NATO/PFP country in the region able and willing to make a constructive contribution. Finally, it was declared that no initiative or action taken by the MPFSEE would be directed against any third country nor would affect in any way rights or obligations of the participating states stemming from a previous treaty or agreement.

The establishment of a brigade-size force, the South-Eastern Europe Brigade (SEEBRIG), was one of the most important decisions taken by the signatories. The brigade is an ‘on-call’ land force; the units assigned to SEEBRIG are permanently based in the respective home country and hook up for exercise/training activities and operations subject to the collective decision-making of the member states. The brigade is made up of battalions, each of which is composed of three companies, combat support and combat service support units. Each country designates separate units and other types of support, including equipment, from its armed forces, which are then incorporated into the brigade. These units remain under the authority of the individual country until they are declared mission-ready, at which time they become subject to SEEBRIG command. An Engineer Task Force (ETF) and a Crisis Information Network (CIN) were established at an SEDM meeting in Bucharest on 30 November 1999 with the aim of supporting the brigade’s role in cases of humanitarian emergencies and natural disasters in the region, facilitating communication and improving interoperability between the member states and NATO forces.

In meetings of MPFSEE members in Istanbul, Turkey (November 1998), in Bucharest, Romania (November 1999), and in Plovdiv, Bulgaria (April 1999), military experts of participating states sought to clarify a number of issues: where the MPFSEE’s headquarters should be located; which nation should SEEBRIG’s commander come from; and where should the MPFSEE’s Politico-Military Steering Committee reside. It was resolved that SEEBRIG’s headquarters would rotate every four years, beginning with Bulgaria (Plovdiv) and followed by Romania.
(Costantza), Turkey (Edirne) and Greece (Kilkis). The headquarters would have a permanent staff of 36 (a general as commander, 21 officers and 14 NCOs) and would increase to 105 during exercises and operations. There would also be a support staff of 64 officers. Command of the brigade would be on a two-year rotational basis, with commanders coming from, successively, Turkey, Greece, Italy and Bulgaria. The commander would assume authority over subordinate units upon approval of the MPFSEE. Finally, a Politico-Military Steering Committee (PMSC), the executive body of the MPFSEE, would assume responsibility for supervising, co-ordinating and directing the MPFSEE’s activities. The PMSC would be composed of representatives from the member states and would meet in plenary session at least twice a year. The president of the PMSC would hold office for two years, coming first from Greece, then from Romania, Turkey and Bulgaria.

The MPFSEE would be available – on a case-by-case basis – for deployment in UN- or OSCE-mandated and NATO- or EU-led conflict prevention and other peace support operations, including peacekeeping, peacemaking, peacebuilding and humanitarian operations. The multinational force could also participate in ‘coalition of the willing’-type international initiatives. The brigade, mandated to function ‘within the spirit of [NATO’s] Partnership for Peace’, would have to declare to the UN and the OSCE that it was being employed in the aforementioned peace support operations within as well as beyond southeastern Europe.

Why the PMFSEE remains inactive

As previously stated, almost four years after its birth, the MPFSEE remains dormant. Indeed, the security agency did not participate in the two peace operations that were conducted in southeast Europe after the war in Kosovo. Both operations were conducted solely by NATO. In the first operation, NATO deployed its forces in a mission called ‘Operation Essential Harvest’ in August 2001 (Financial Times, 20 August 2001). The objective of this British-led mission was to collect and destroy weapons and ammunition of the armed ethnic Albanian rebels who had risen up against the Slav-dominated government. When the weapons collection ended on 26 September 2001, NATO decided, with the blessing of the UN, to deploy a new force in the FYROM. The second peace operation, known as ‘Amber Fox’, was a German-led mission – the smallest of all NATO missions in the Balkans – designed to protect international observers assigned to oversee the implementation of the fragile peace accord that had been concluded in August, thus suspending six months of fighting in the FYROM (International Herald Tribune, 2001).

The inactivity of the MPFSEE in peace operations is due to the agency’s failure to satisfy a number of conditions which are crucial if it is to carry out conflict-management assignments (Alagappa, 1997, pp. 434–439). The following interrelated conditions are primarily responsible for the failure of the MPFSEE to become involved in peace operations in southeastern Europe: (a) accountability and lack of autonomy; (b) insufficient member-states commitment; (c) absence of shared interests of the member states with regard to specific conflicts; and (d) failure to develop institutional capacity. Let’s briefly examine each of these deficiencies.
Accountability and lack of autonomy

The MPFSEE’s relationship to the larger international security organisations is one of accountability and dependency and the chief reason for its inactivity. The MPFSEE is not permitted to undertake initiatives on its own and may be deployed only on orders of the UN, the OSCE, the EU or NATO. This means that the MPFSEE is not an autonomous body. As a former Greek minister of defence put it: ‘[MPFSEE] is a tool, which will be made available to international organisations, mainly NATO, for missions within the framework of international law’ (Thesis, 1999). The MPFSEE’s accountability to these international organisations is designed ‘to ensure that a mission subcontracted by international organisations to regional institutions reflect[s] collective interests and norms and not merely the national imperatives and preferences of the subcontractor’ (Alagappa, 1997, p. 438). Thus, the general contractors – in this case, the UN, the OSCE, the EU and NATO – are alone responsible for clearly defining the principles and objectives of any mission and for ensuring that the MPFSEE understands that continued support for its operations is conditional upon strict adherence to a given mandate.

Most importantly, accountability also means that future assignments will depend on how well the MPFSEE carries out the ‘task-sharing’ operations given to it by these international organisations. But MPFSEE performance is in turn dependent upon decisive leadership provided by the general contractors. Thus, it is incumbent upon the leadership to search for task-sharing opportunities in areas where the MPFSEE can achieve a minimum acceptable level of performance. However, when it is a question of task-sharing in southeastern Europe, a difficulty arises owing to the complexity and intensity of the conflicts and to the reluctance of some states in the region to accept the deployment of the MPFSEE for peace operations.

Thus far, the predominant role of NATO and, to a lesser degree, the activity of the UN and the OSCE in southeastern Europe have left no role for the MFPSEE. The apparent unwillingness of international organisations to entrust the MPFSEE with tasks and missions in the region has undoubtedly undermined its credibility and legitimacy. Thus, in the two peace operations recently conducted by NATO in the territory of the FYROM, NATO disregarded the MPFSEE’s stand-by force and acted unilaterally, obviously reluctant to delegate to the MPFSEE even a low-level micro-managing operation.

Insufficient member-states commitment

The member states of the MPFSEE are not strongly committed to the organisation. This can be attributed to the fact that the MPFSEE did not emerge from any notion of regional awareness or shared perception in which the member states agreed to submerge their national interests in the interest of a common goal, namely, conflict prevention in the region. On the contrary, the MPFSEE is the product of the disparate and self-serving motives of the countries that formed the organisation.

In fact, the MPFSEE owes its origin to an initiative taken by the United States to establish a regional security agency that would prepare the ground for several southeastern European countries to be integrated into the Euro-Atlantic security structures. Thus, Romania, the FYROM, Albania and Bulgaria saw their member-
ship as an important stepping stone on the way to full integration into the Euro-Atlantic security structures, especially NATO. It is noteworthy that NATO’s ‘know-how’ regarding structures, procedures and rules of engagement for multinational forces has served as the basis for the functioning of the MPFSEE. As a result, the training and exercise programme of the brigade is carried out in accordance with the standardised Programme of Enhanced Training and Education for NATO-led PFP operations. This means that, as members of the MPFSEE, the military units of these four countries receive training that is up to NATO standards, which might well accelerate their membership into the organisation.

The MPFSEE came into being with the active involvement of Greece and Turkey, both members of NATO. Each country saw an opportunity to promote itself as a major peace-broker, on a primus inter pares basis, in southeast Europe. Italy’s decision to join can be seen as a desire also to acquire major power status in the region.

### Absence of shared interests in specific conflicts

As M. Alagappa, an expert on regionalism, has pointed out, ‘shared interests in a specific conflict and common purposes with regard to strategy and outcome’ are crucial in determining the ability of a regional institution to play a significant role. In the absence of such shared interests, he stresses, ‘even a strong regional organisation like the EU will be inhibited from playing an effective role, as was the case in Bosnia’ (Alagappa, 1997, p. 435).

In the case of the MPFSEE, where all decisions regarding its activities are reached by a consensus of the member states, there has been an obvious reluctance by some of them to accept deployment of the MPFSEE for peace operations. There is, indeed, an unwillingness on the part of certain southeast European states to trust the MPFSEE with peace missions in the region because of a fear that the MPFSEE could be used as a vehicle for intruding into their internal affairs. Because the MPFSEE is composed of member states who have differing vested interests and opposing views on how conflicts should be resolved, the MPFSEE is unlikely to be a neutral forum. Related to this, because some of the member states do not trust the MPFSEE, they look to more impartial organisations, such as NATO and the OSCE, to help resolve conflicts between member states. In such circumstances, it is difficult for the countries of southeast Europe to develop a consensus in the deployment of the MPFSEE in conflict situations. The absence of shared interests has led to a further weakening of member-states commitment to the MPFSEE and is all the more reason for the larger international organisations not to delegate peace missions to it.

### Failure to develop institutional capacity

Institutional capacity refers to the ability of an organisation to develop the necessary apparatus, rules and procedures that would enable it to define its roles and carry out its tasks. Of particular concern is the capacity to collect, collate and analyse data; to develop command, control and communications capabilities; and to provide adequate administrative and logistical support.
The MPFSEE has thus far not developed the institutional capacity for dealing with tasks such as preventive diplomacy, peaceful settlement of disputes or aspects of peacebuilding. The SEEBRIG, for example, has been used only for exercise and training activities. The previously analysed lack of strong commitment and the concomitant reluctance of the UN, NATO, the OSCE and the EU to find task-sharing opportunities have inhibited the MPFSEE from developing the institutional capacity required to deal adequately with the numerous tasks it is allowed to perform.

Prospects for the MPFSEE

The MPFSEE is still far from fulfilling the mission envisioned by its founders. It has yet to make a substantive contribution to security and stability in the southeast European region. Its establishment in the midst of intense hostilities in the region has proven to be a mistake. The complexity and intensity of the conflicts in the region have left the MPFSEE unable to satisfy those conditions upon which its active involvement in the regional conflicts is contingent.

The failure of the MPFSEE has demonstrated the need to employ more flexible approaches to regional co-operation, like one-off coalitions of interests with limited scope and duration and relatively loose mandates. One such approach, the Multinational Peace Force (MPF), was successfully employed in 1997 in ‘Operation Alba’. The MPF, an ad hoc coalition of mainly southeast European states led by Italy and accompanied by Greece, received the explicit or implicit endorsement of the UN, the OSCE and NATO (Kostakos and Bourantonis, 1998). During its tour of duty in Albania, it carried out a series of patrols, escorted humanitarian convoys around the country, transported aid items and provided security for the OSCE personnel who came to observe the 1997 elections. In addition, the MPF’s impartiality was not called into question because the Albanian problem was a strictly internal affair, with no international implications, such as a border or cease-fire line dispute. Also, the operation was of short duration (91 days) and carried out at such a low cost that the member states were willing to make the commitment.

However, the obvious failure of the MPFSEE to play a more significant role should not obscure the useful contribution it makes to the cause of peace in southeast Europe by its mere existence and functioning. In sending their military units to the SEEBRIG, where they work together, get to know each other better, and collectively promote common aims, the MPFSEE has succeeded in creating a sense of community among the member states. Rather than as a vehicle for achieving specific goals, the MPFSEE should essentially be seen as the embodiment of certain principles of co-operation and, in a vague but still fruitful way, as a means of fostering a feeling of family togetherness and shared interests among a group of states that had very little in common to begin with. Viewed in this manner, a debate is currently taking place among the member states on how to assign the MPFSEE with roles that would be both useful and realistic. To this end, they have agreed, in principle, to use the MPFSEE as a forum for collaboration in combating terrorism and crime in the region. If the MPFSEE remains incapable of fulfilling its original mandate, it can at least create a new sense of direction in handling other important regional issues.
Notes


2 The Cold War imposed an ‘artificial stability’ on the region, which was a result of the bipolar system of ‘balanced confrontation’, and also managed to enrol the Balkan states into a context of a limited but still important co-operative interaction by largely freezing the various nationalist aspirations and territorial disputes. For these remarks see Larrabee (1990/1991) and Brown (1992).

3 For the structure and mission of the MPFSEE, see The Skopje Agreement on the Multinational Peace Force Southeastern Europe, Skopje, 26 September 1998.

4 See the address by the US secretary of defence William C. Cohen to the Southeastern Defence Ministerial (SEDM) meeting in Thessaloniki, Greece, 9 October 2000.

5 Echoing the interests of his fellow former communist Southeast European states, the Bulgarian minister of defence Gueorgui Ananiev stressed that ‘the MPFSEE is also a functioning mechanism for the practical implementation of the [NATO’s] Operational Capabilities Concept. Bulgaria is ready to take part in the pools of forces by providing its units allocated within the framework of PFP as well as the Bulgarian components of the MPFSEE’. See his speech delivered at the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Meeting of Ministers of Defence, Brussels, 3 December 1999.

6 From interviews with Greek military officers at the Ministers of National Defence Staff (EPYETHA) in November 2001, and Turkish diplomats at NATO’s headquarters, Brussels in December 2001. See also the ‘Official Summary Record’ submitted by the Turkish delegation to the Experts Meeting in Ankara in April 1998.

7 The FYROM has questioned the right of the MPFSEE to act in a crisis situation in any country in the southeast European region. In the words of the minister of defence Lazar Kitanofski, ‘FYROM believes that the MPFSEE should not intervene to keep the peace in countries that take part in the group’. See M. Vichou, ‘Tsohatzopoulos Holds Talks with FYROM Counterpart’, Athens News Agency, 27 April 1998. It is no coincidence that during the signing of the supplementary protocol of the Skopje Treaty in Athens in January 1999, the ministers of defence of the seven participating states agreed to decouple the MPFSEE’s possible involvement from future developments in Kosovo. See K. Faloutsis, ‘The Balkan Brigade Under NATO’s Wing’, Kathimerini (Greek daily), 13 January 1999.

References


Financial Times (2001), 20 August, p. 4.


