

INTRODUCTION

Efforts to enhance the United Nations' capacity for rapid deployment were intended to ensure that both the Organisation and the members could respond reliably and effectively to armed conflict. Empowering the UN - providing it with the capacity to fulfil assigned tasks in the prevention and management of violent conflict - remains a daunting challenge. If the process is to succeed, it will require a new approach, expanded partnerships and forward-thinking options, as well as adaptation at a far faster rate. Despite the prevailing cynicism, it is noteworthy that there have been occasions when much of the support, if not the consensus, required was close at hand.

In the early years of the past decade there were promising high-level indications of assistance for some form of UN rapid reaction force.¹ Four leaders of the permanent five members of the Security Council actually declared support for related efforts. Regrettably, when confronted by the combination of costs, institutional intransigence and mixed results from an unprecedented number of new missions, the major powers quickly lost the will to back their rhetoric with meaningful reforms. Prior commitments tended to be followed by carefully nuanced retractions.²

In 1992, *An Agenda for Peace* prompted a wide-ranging discussion of the UN's options for responding to violent conflict.³ Among the various catalysts for the debate were the Secretary-General's call for peace enforcement units and Article 43-type arrangements, as well as Sir Brian Urquhart's efforts to revive Trygve Lie's proposal for a UN Legion.⁴ As these ideas began to attract a constituency, they also generated apprehension and a search for less ambitious options in many national capitals.

Opinion on the subject of any UN capability is always mixed. The initial debate here tended to follow two perspectives: the "practitioners" who favoured strengthening current arrangements, and the "visionaries" who desired a dedicated UN standing force or standing emergency capability.⁵ With notable exceptions, the official preference focused on pragmatic, incremental reform within the structure of the UN Secretariat and available resources.⁶ Such an approach was also assumed to entail fewer risks, fewer obligations and more control. As the rapid deployment initiatives of 1994-97 demonstrated, even supportive governments were worried about moving ahead of public opinion, fellow member states, the international defence community and their own capacity to secure more ambitious reforms. By 1996, a third opposing perspective arose among several