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A New Approach to United Nations Peace Operations: Pathways for Demand-Driven Interventions

Co-authored by the NYU Center on International Cooperation and the Institute for Security Studies, this policy brief examines the path forward for United Nations peace operations in light of the current challenges, lessons learned from the past decade, and available opportunities. As member states look ahead to the Summit of the Future, authors outline key recommendations for a new approach to peace operations, which include managing ambitious mandates, fostering comprehensive and flexible peace operation approaches, tapping the potential of partnerships, taking mission transitions into consideration, and having adequate resourcing.

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Introduction

In recent years, the United Nations (UN) peace operations have struggled with the implementation of their mandates and are currently in a period of retrenchment. **Despite growing global insecurity, the UN Security Council has not mandated an entirely new peacekeeping operation since 2014.** Although a diverse range of field-based special political missions have been established in the past decade, these missions have not been immune to the broader crisis of confidence affecting UN peace operations.

The Summit of the Future provides an opportunity for member states to reflect on the limitations of current approaches to UN peace operations and call for a new approach to peace operations. Such an effort is necessary to restore the effectiveness of peace operations as tools to assist countries in the prevention and resolution of violent conflict. Member states must be in the driving seat of such a push, as existing approaches are ingrained in the structures and processes within the UN Secretariat, and hinder attempts at objective self-reflection. A shift away from the prevailing templated and bureaucratic approaches to planning and deployment towards more tailored, adaptive, and people-centered mission models is necessary to more effectively respond to complex crises. A new approach to peace operations must also better take into account and leverage the capabilities and comparative advantages of other

partners, including UN country teams and regional organizations, as part of coherent strategies. It should also reflect lessons from recent transition contexts to ensure that the hard-won efforts of peace operations are not lost when missions depart.

This background paper is intended to provide member states with concrete and practical ideas for promoting a new approach to UN peace operations through the Pact for the Future, to be adopted during the Summit for the Future in September 2024.

Challenges and opportunities for peace operations

UN peace operations have been successful in supporting the prevention, management, and resolution of conflicts. Several peer-reviewed quantitative studies indicate that the deployment of a peacekeeping operation may reduce conflict casualties, reduce the recurrence of civil war, and strengthen institutions. However, a continuously evolving conflict landscape has strained the ability of peace operations to contribute to sustainable peace through existing approaches. Systemic and structural challenges within the UN system are also apparent, reflected in the rigid compartmentalization between peacekeeping and peacebuilding institutions. Domestic politics is also at play, as some missions have been embroiled in the politics of host nations.[1] As such, confidence in UN peace operations on the part of key stakeholders has declined in recent decades. For example, Security Council members have been frustrated by slow progress in the implementation of many mission mandates, while host governments and/or significant segments of host populations view many peace operations with distrust and even hostility. As a result, there have been several mission drawdowns and terminations precipitated by declining interest in maintaining missions on the part of either Security Council members or host governments—despite ongoing or even worsening conflict and fragility in those contexts.

Efforts such as the Action for Peacekeeping initiative, launched in 2018, have attempted to shore up peacekeeping support on the part of member states through a renewal of past commitments. However, addressing the crisis of confidence faced by peace operations cannot be achieved by doubling down on existing approaches. A future-oriented approach is needed, taking into account lessons learned from missions past and present, changes in the nature of conflict, and shifts in the overall geopolitical environment. **To reposition peace operations that better support the maintenance of international peace and security, member states should undertake a serious reflection on the limits and future of UN peace operations,**

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[1] Meressa K. Dessu and Dawit Yohannes, "What do protests say about UN peacekeeping in Africa?" *ISS Today*, October 28, 2022, https://issafrica.org/iss-today/what-do-protests-say-about-un-peacekeeping-in-africa.

with particular attention on how missions are planned and mandated, how they work with partners, and how they are resourced.

Managing ambitious mandates

Despite progress in recent years, peace operations are still authorized with wide-ranging mandates, though the problem is more acute in the case of peacekeeping missions. The tendency to confer so-called "Christmas Tree mandates" is perhaps understandable given the nature of contemporary conflicts, with numerous drivers and multiple actors underpinned by a system of root causes. However, these complex and multi-dimensional mandates can hardly be achieved, particularly with the chronic challenge of insufficient resources. While some Security Council members appear to use this argument for attempting to cut mandated tasks they are less in favor of (e.g., human rights), the proliferation of mandated tasks can distract a mission from focusing on any particular aspect and tempt to curtail a clear strategy/political process.[2]

Diverging institutional and political interests are a driver of the proliferation of mission mandates, with different UN Secretariat organizational units and individual member states championing different mandated tasks for various reasons. Although the Security Council has taken steps to streamline mandates in response to the 2015 recommendation of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) to prioritize and sequence these mandated tasks, efforts to construct a succession of tasks are hindered by the non-linear nature of conflict transformation.[3] As such, a series of studies conducted by the Security Council Report and the Stimson Center in 2020 concluded that **the Security Council should focus more on defining strategic objectives instead of mandating individual tasks or, at the very least, avoid specifying too many priority tasks.**[4]

Beyond the proliferation of mandated tasks, the basic character and practice of peace operations have changed in recent decades, particularly in peacekeeping operations where the mandate of missions has taken a more robust turn, particularly in the implementation of protection of civilians' mandate. In some cases, the Security Council has conferred tasks verging on peace enforcement and counterinsurgency on missions as in the cases of the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO)

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[2] At the same time, the combination of certain mandated tasks can also lead to perverse outcomes, as recent academic research has suggested that the split focus of many contemporary peace operations on stabilization and capacity building can serve to enable authoritarianism and undermine democratization in conflict affected contexts. See Sarah von Billerbeck and Oisín Tansey, "Enabling autocracy? Peacebuilding and post-conflict authoritarianism in the Democratic Republic of Congo," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 25, 3 (January 7, 2019): 698-722, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066118819724.

[3] Aditi Gorur and Madeline Vellturo. "Prioritization and Sequencing by Peacekeepers: Leading From the Field," *Stimson Center*, November 2020, https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Prioritization-Sequencing-Peacekeeping-Stimson-2020.pdf.

[4] Security Council Report, "Prioritisation and Sequencing of Council Mandates: Walking the Walk?" Security Council Report, January 2020, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/research-reports/prioritisation-and-sequencing-of-council-mandates-walking-the-walk.php.

and UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), respectively. Such transformations have strained the core principles of UN peacekeeping—consent, impartiality, and non-use of force except in self-defense—and have set unrealistic expectations for missions ill-equipped to handle these tasks, accelerating the crisis of confidence in peacekeeping. These principles were first articulated in the 1995 *Supplement to An Agenda for Peace*, which noted that all three were respected in successful missions but not in those less successful ones.[5]

The call by the secretary-general for a new generation of peace enforcement and counterterrorism operations undertaken by regional organizations can be interpreted as an attempt to clarify the limits of what UN peace operations can realistically be expected to achieve**. At the same time, it has become evident most violent conflicts cannot be resolved through military means. The design of these non-UN peace enforcement and counterterrorism operations must avoid the pitfalls of overly securitized interventions of the past in which the prioritization of securitized responses at the expense of pursuing political solutions has only served to exacerbate grievances and prolong violence.**[6]

Fostering comprehensive and flexible approaches

In 2015, HIPPO highlighted the need for the UN to avoid the pitfalls of templated approaches and be able to flexibly draw upon the full spectrum of tools at its disposal. Indeed, numerous studies have demonstrated the greater effectiveness of adaptive approaches compared to templated approaches in sustaining peace.[7] However, little tangible progress on this front has been evident in the past decade.

The current institutional setup of the UN drives a path dependency where the selection of a lead department largely dictates the form a peace operation will take. **Over the past 25 years, the UN has settled upon a particular model of multidimensional peacekeeping operations with a sizable uniformed component and large mission footprint. Throughout successive reform processes, structures, policies, and procedures have been developed to plan, deploy, and support this specific type of peacekeeping operation. Such a templated approach, however, is not optimized for all situations;** it is also inflexible and struggles to adapt to changing circumstances and requirements on the ground.

5 United Nations, *Supplement to An Agenda for Peace: Position paper of the Secretary-General on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations*, A/50/60—S/1995/1 (January 25, 1995).

6 Larry Attree and Jordan Street, "Redefining a UN peace doctrine to avoid regime protection operations," *Saferworld*, November 2020, https://www.saferworld-global.org/resources/publications/1290-redefining-a-un-peace-doctrine-to-avoid-regime-protection-operations.

7 Cedric de Coning, Rui Saraiva, Ako Muto, eds., *Adaptive Peacebuilding* (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-18219-8.

In contrast, the absence of a common mission doctrine and the lack of dedicated planning capacities for special political missions have contributed to their relative diversity in form and function. In fact, special political missions have even subsumed mission types—such as observer missions—formerly deployed as peacekeeping missions before the dominance of the multidimensional mission model. **Yet special political missions are not immune to templated approaches. The planning for such missions is also constrained by rigid approaches to mission budgeting and an organizational culture that places undue emphasis on arbitrary structural distinctions between mission types unrelated to the requirements of the mandate or the specific country context.**

The inability of the UN to adapt more tailored, flexible approaches based on the needs of particular contexts cannot only be blamed on the bureaucratic inertia of the Secretariat. Member states have also undermined attempts at reform. Indeed, the 2017–19 restructuring of the peace and security architecture sought to overcome some of the obstacles to a more flexible approach by assigning lead departments of peace operations based on their operational and support requirements. The UN Department of Peace Operations, as originally proposed by the secretary-general, would have been responsible both for large peacekeeping and field-based special political missions such as the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI). The General Assembly, however, decided in its resolution 72/252C to assign these missions to the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), therefore further entrenching the counterproductive bifurcation between peacekeeping and special political missions. **The Pact for the Future can help reverse this counterproductive trend by reaffirming the importance of tailored, flexible approaches that draw upon the full spectrum of peace operations.**

Tapping the potential of partnerships
Collective action is key to ensuring global peace and security. Particularly, the vitality of global-regional partnership has been affirmed in various UN reports, including the 2015 HIPPO report. The importance of such partnerships has become more evident as the complexity of today's security concerns has exposed the limitations of any one organization to address these issues. However, the full potential of such partnership remains untapped.

Efforts to strengthen partnerships can begin within the UN system. Peace operations are invariably deployed in contexts where the agencies, funds, and programs are already present in the form of a UN country team. In most cases, the contexts in which missions and country teams co-exist are structurally integrated in that the head or deputy head of mission is simultaneously the

resident coordinator charged with leading the activities of the UN country team. Despite such structural integration, differences in mandates and institutional cultures impede coordination between peace operations and entities within the UN country team. In several cases, missions have relied on their sheer size to simply disregard the UN country team where there have been divergences in opinion or approach. Beyond undermining the coordination of programmatic activities, such mindsets can generate considerable resentment on the part of UN funds and programs against peace operations. **One way that friction between peace operations and country teams can be prevented is for the planning and design of peace operations to be informed by a better understanding of the existing expertise of the UN country team and having missions draw upon the civilian capacities already available within the UN system instead of duplicating tasks.** This would not only allow each part of the UN system to play to its strengths but also allow for more programmatic coherence and optimize the use of limited financial resources.[8]

Peace operations should also work more effectively with partners outside of the UN system. The adoption of Security Council resolution 2719 (2023) on the financing of African Union (AU)-led peace support operations authorized by the Security Council is significant not only as a sign of the strengthened partnership between the UN and AU but also provides a framework for a more systematic approach to drawing upon capabilities and tasks beyond those available to or appropriate for UN peace operations. The concept of a standalone support office has emerged as a popular mechanism through which the UN can help fill capability gaps in peace support operations in areas such as planning, logistical and operational support, and financing. However, **to ensure alignment of activities in support of a common political strategy, consideration should also be given to the possibility of support packages delivered by a UN peace operation instead of a standalone support office or even the establishment of a joint mission**, building on the experiences and lessons learned from previous joint endeavors such as the UN-AU Hybrid Operation in Darfur, Sudan and the UN-Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Joint Mission in Syria.

Mission transitions

The 2022 report of the secretary-general on transitions in UN peace operations highlighted a range of key policy issues in the areas of planning, resourcing, and post-mandate considerations that need to be taken into account when missions draw down.[9] Just as a differentiation of mandated tasks between missions and

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8 Eugene Chen and Katharina Coleman, "Reinvigorating United Nations peacekeeping," in Markus Kornprobst and Slawomir Redo, eds. *Reinvigorating the United Nations*. (Routledge: 2024, forthcoming).
9 United Nations, "Transitions in United Nations peace operations: Report of the Secretary-General," S/2022/522 (June 29, 2022).

UN country teams can help programmatic coherence across the UN system, a differentiation of tasks can also help lay the groundwork for effective transitions by ensuring that peacebuilding tasks with a longer time horizon remain with country teams, therefore reducing the likelihood of programmatic interruption or the loss of institutional memory upon the departures of missions.

Although transitions have traditionally been understood as a process premised upon progress made towards the achievement of mission mandates, **peace operations have increasingly been forced into transition as a result of deteriorating political support for the mission either on the part of the Security Council or the host government, with implications for all three policy areas**. The Secretariat tends to avoid proactive transition planning because of fear of how this could be interpreted either by member states or host governments and has often waited until after the Security Council has given a clear indication of its intention to draw down a mission before planning begins in earnest. This approach, however, fails to account for situations—as in Mali and Sudan—in which the host government has withdrawn consent. The Security Council should, therefore, allow the Secretariat to proactively undertake contingency and transition planning instead of discouraging such planning. This also requires that the planning function in missions be adequately resourced and not be overburdened with routine reporting requirements to be able to undertake more strategic planning throughout the mission lifecycle. Planning for the eventual mission exit should be part of planning from the very start of the mission to help normalize such processes and reduce the likelihood of a negative reaction from either the Security Council, the parties to the conflict, or local populations.

The departure of peace operations from a country is often accompanied by a drop-off of attention on that particular context. The post-mandate phase of transition is a critical juncture in which the hard-won gains of a country, supported by the efforts of a peace operation, are most at risk. The secretary-general has repeatedly warned of the peacebuilding financing "cliff" that countries face upon the departure of a peace operation. This has only been exacerbated in recent years, given the shifting politics of traditional donor countries.[10] The recent adoption of General Assembly resolution 78/257 approving an annual infusion of USD 50 million through assessed contributions to the Peacebuilding Fund is an important symbolic gesture. Still, more financing is necessary to ensure that host countries remain on a path towards durable peace following the exit of peace operations. **One step that member states can take is to request that the budget for peace operations be presented in the context of overall UN system financing for the**

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[10] Pauline Veron and Andrew Sherriff, "International Peacebuilding Financing and Changing Politics in Europe," *NYU Center on International Cooperation and European Centre for Development Policy Management*, October 2022, https://cic.nyu.edu/resources/international-peacebuilding-financing-and-changing-politics-in-europe.

countries in question. This would allow donors to better understand the overall funding situation for sustaining peace in each country and therefore be able to adjust contributions to the funds and programs to avoid gaps in peacebuilding activities as missions draw down.

Enabling adequate and accountable resourcing

Financing challenges are, however, key considerations through a mission lifecycle and not only an issue limited to transitions. Most contemporary peace operations are simultaneously endowed with ambitious mandates while deprived of the required resources. This resource challenge stems in large part from a vicious cycle in which pressure from major financial contributors to limit mission budgets leads to self-censorship on the part of the Secretariat to limit resource requests. And yet, despite these pre-emptive reductions, few budgets survive General Assembly review without further—and often arbitrary—cuts driven both by the culture and current working methods of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions and the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly. Although member states have a legitimate desire to ensure the accountable use of assessed contributions, the inflexibility of budgets and the rigidity of staffing tables present major challenges to missions attempting to square their expansive mandates with their constrained resources. In particular, given the fluidity of conflict dynamics and the volatility of mission settings, **peace operations should be held accountable for how they use their resources to achieve mission mandates rather than being hamstrung in advance through micromanagement in their budgets**.

The resource constraints peace operations face are further exacerbated by the perennial cash shortfalls the Secretariat faces due to the late payment of contributions by many member states, including some of the largest financial contributors. **The recent steps taken by the General Assembly to improve the liquidity available to peacekeeping operations through cross-borrowing and access to the Peacekeeping Reserve Fund are welcome, but these do not address challenges faced by missions financed through the regular budget and are not substitutes for ensuring that assessments for all peace operations are paid in full and on time.**

Conclusion

UN peace operations are a concrete representation of the willingness of member states to collectively address challenges to international peace and security. However, efforts to adapt peace operations have not kept pace with the changing nature of conflict and the shifting geopolitical landscape, leading to the current crisis of confidence that confronts contemporary peace operations.

The Summit of the Future provides a valuable opportunity for member states and the Secretariat to step back from responding to urgent crises through their normal intergovernmental and bureaucratic processes to reflect on the experience from recent peace operations. Member states can do much more than reaffirm their political commitment, through the Pact for the Future, to using the full spectrum of tools available across peace operations. Member states can help ensure that peace operations remain effective tools to help countries prevent, mitigate, and resolve violent conflict by also encouraging tailored approaches to mission planning, adopting more strategic approaches to mission mandating, leveraging the capacities and expertise of other partners inside and outside the UN system as part of comprehensive political strategies, encourage proactive and strategic planning, focusing on sustaining peace beyond the mission time horizon, and ensuring that missions are adequately and predictably resourced.

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