

Who Killed UN Peacekeeping?

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Brief Summary

This brief suggests provocatively that in a critical moment for global peace and security UN peacekeeping is either absent or in rapid and terminal decline. It challenges the assumption that peacekeeping has been especially wasteful or ineffective, or its demise a consequence of it collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions or conceptual weaknesses. Instead, this brief suggests that UN Member States and the UN Organization share responsibility for failing to create an environment, provide the resources or properly administer its missions in ways that would have made peacekeeping more consistently successful. Current alternatives look problematic. UN peacekeeping remains the best, among a bad range, of intervention options to support global peace and security. It is worth resurrecting.

This policy brief recommends:

- Policymakers reassert the principal that a robust UN peacekeeping operational capability remains a critical part of global peace and security.
- Policymakers, experts, and practitioners resolve to establish a best practice of UN peacekeeping that is doctrinally strong, more autonomous, and better integrated into local areas where it is operating.
- Policymakers discourage a rhetoric of a primacy of politics where that detracts from the contributions of ground missions to contribute to transformational peace.

Introduction

It generally takes seven years for a missing person to be declared dead. Yet the last time a military peacekeeping mission was established was almost a decade ago.¹ The closest thing to a new peacekeeping mission is the Multinational Security Support (MSS) for Haiti, authorized at the end of last year.² That is a non-military, police-led operation. Despite having been convened by the UN, operating under a chapter VII mandate, and sharing many of the attributes of a peacekeeping mission, care has been taken to avoid it being referred to as such. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres made clear in options outlined two years prior that peacekeeping ‘was not the preferred option’ to respond to deepening instability in the country (UN 2022), and the word is absent from the resolution authorizing it.

What then of the 11 remaining peacekeeping missions? Are the white shapes moving on the distant horizon just the ghostly remnants of a peacekeeping past that is rapidly disappearing? Last year the UN was forced out of its mission in Mali (MINUSMA), after failing to stem a dramatic rise in violence since its deployment in 2013 (Fig.1). The withdrawal helped fuel a collapse of a ceasefire and rise of violence in the north. By April this year, the UN will have also withdrawn forces from MONUSCO. It has been forced to leave the DRC against an accelerated timeline, even as the insurgent group M23 makes increasing territorial gains. That withdrawal creates the potential for similar, and possibly worse, chaos than occurred in Mali. MINUSMA and MONUSCO accounted for 40% of peacekeeping personnel at the start of 2023. By the end of 2024 deployed UN peacekeeping personnel will be at its lowest level in more than two decades (IPI 2024).

Some are likely to applaud the paring back of an institution that has been accused of being bloated and ineffective (Autesserre 2019; Jett 2023). However, global violence is currently at historic highs (ACLED 2024b). The level of international disorder is such that the first line of International Crisis Group’s appraisal of 2024 simply and bleakly read ‘Can we stop things falling apart?’ (ICG 2024). A greater sense of

insecurity has meant that global military spending has continued to rise to a gargantuan \$2.2 trillion (USD) (IISS 2024). With UN peacekeeping accounting for less than 0.3% of that global budget,³ it is difficult to argue that it is the most significant waste of security spending.

Whether peacekeeping has been an effective answer to decreasing international security is contested. However, when resources and political will were conducive, peacekeeping showed that it could support peace and stabilization with either partial or fully successful missions in Namibia, El Salvador, Cambodia, Mozambique, Burundi, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Cote d’Ivoire amongst others. Even in situations where success has been more marginal, peacekeeping generally contributes positively to peace including through reducing civilian deaths, preventing the spread of violence as well as helping reach and implement peace agreements (Salvatore and Ruggeri 2017; Walter, Howard, and Fortna 2021).

The Case Against UN Member States

Nonetheless, enthusiasm for peacekeeping has waned, not least because of perceived failures in places such as Mali and the DRC. The UN can plausibly argue that these failures were the consequence of being pushed into more intractable conflicts where there was *no peace to keep*. Missions have also had to contend with an ever-widening to-do list that includes enhanced responsibilities to protect civilians (Breau 2006), wide-ranging multi-dimensional mandates (Jasper and Moreland 2015), and increasingly counter-terrorist or stabilization roles (Karlsrud 2019). Resources have shrunk even as responsibilities have grown. In 2000, the UN mission to Sierra Leone was authorized with one peacekeeper per 413 people or one per 6 square kilometres.⁴ When the UN deployed to Mali in 2013 that ratio had shrunk to about one per 1,518 people or 111 square kilometres. Valiant efforts within the UN to reform its notoriously rigid structures to allow it to do more with less have had positive but limited impact (Lyon et al. 2023).

Problems resourcing peacekeeping missions have

¹ MINUSCA in 2014

² In 2017, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) authorized MINUJUSTH. However, it was not military mission but rather a transitional rollover from another peacekeeping mission, focussed on rule of law capacity building.

³ Based on a current peacekeeping budget of \$6.38 billion (USD)

⁴ Based on the expanded figures authorized by S/RES/1289 (2000) in February 2000, four months after the mission was initially authorized in October 1999.

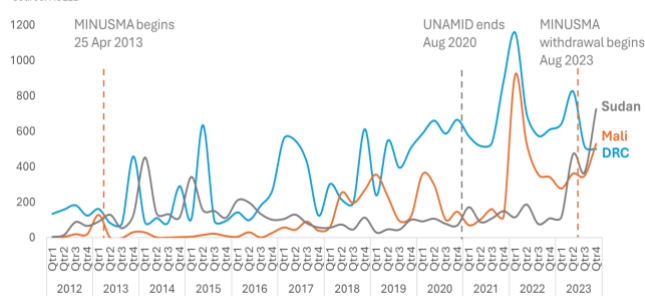
existed since their inception. In 2000, the Brahimi report gently suggested the existence of ‘commitment gaps’ in which UN Member States had grown accustomed to making significant peacekeeping promises on the organization’s behalf without providing the requisite resources to complete the task. By the start of the tenure of the current Secretary-General in 2017, the situation had become so debilitating that Guterres was open in his frustration about a peacekeeping capability that was, ‘under-equipped, under-prepared and unready’ (UN 2018).

The ennui around peacekeeping has been most evident in negotiations around the recently authorized mission to Haiti. Even while avoiding the term peacekeeping, Member States balked at the idea of participating in anything that even looked like a peacekeeping mission. Haggling over its composition lasted more than two years even as the situation in the country has worsened. Canada, once considered one of peacekeeping’s staunchest defenders, complicated negotiations in its attempts to avoid participating while also avoiding being seen as avoiding participation (Dyer 2023). In the final vote on the MSS, Russia and China’s abstention was indicative of longstanding differences between permanent members of the Security Council on peacekeeping, especially about the invocation of Chapter VII and its impacts on sovereignty, which have also been part of the story of peacekeeping’s demise.

As well as ideological differences, UN Member States have sought to project competing visions of security in ways that avoided the perceived inefficiencies of reaching multilateral consensus and having to work through a cumbersome global bureaucracy. Military interventions by permanent members of the security council in Iraq, the Sahel, and Ukraine over the past quarter century have proven disastrous. They have driven new conflicts that have added to the UN’s ever-increasing *to-do list* while also alienating vast populations that are now more likely to view any foreign interference negatively (Moe 2021). Fatigue has also grown more generally among global populations that are increasingly sceptical of the benefits of costly foreign military interventions and globalized agendas. The UN is likely to have been tarnished by that trend with global opinion polls suggesting support for the institution is ‘tepid’ at best (Trithart and Case 2023).

Fatalities resulting from attacks on civilians in Mali, DRC and Sudan 2012 to 2023

Source: ACLED



Additional information: UNAMID (Sudan) began its mission on 31 July 2007. MONUSCO (DRC) began 1 July 2010 and is scheduled to complete its mission by the end of April 2024.

Figure 1

The Case Against the UN Organisation

Member States have thrust unreasonable demands on UN peacekeeping while depriving it of the requisite resources and fouling the environment for its operations. However, even with the known constraints of peacekeeping the UN has performed badly. Strategic mistakes have been made by peacekeeping leadership in New York and the field (Berdal 2018; Lundgren, Oksamytna, and Bove 2021; Millar 2022; Pinget 2018).

Despite reforms, peacekeeping remains structurally inadequate to achieve aims that are multidimensional, complex, and subject to locally specific conditions. Rigid peacekeeping models to fulfil broad tasks in complex and wildly different contexts exacerbates, ‘the delegation and coordination problems that are endemic to PKOs [peacekeeping operations]’ (Blair, Di Salvatore, and Smidt 2022). A lack of responsiveness to contextually specific needs also undermines locally integrated approaches that undermine peacebuilding efforts (Autesserre 2019). That becomes even more apparent in dynamic conflicts when poorly resourced risk averse missions resort to *bunkerization* and conflict avoidance to protect its staff and troops. The subsequent distance between local communities and the UN missions that are supposed to support them increases, and is part of the reason behind the collapse of local acceptance in places like Mali and DRC (Curran and Hunt 2020; Trithart 2023).

Haiti has been an unfortunate platform for many of the problems of peacekeeping. In 2010 a UN peacekeeping contingent reintroduced cholera to the country, leading to an epidemic that killed 10,000. While the incident was specific, the subsequent failure to hold itself accountable and commit to change was characteristic. The UN denied, and likely covered up,

responsibility for six years before being forced to apologize (Pilkington and Quinn 2016). As that scandal peaked, allegations emerged of mass incidents of sexual exploitation, another problem that has plagued UN missions around the world (AP 2017). The UN also failed in its primary peacekeeping objective to stabilize violence in the country. Its focus on confronting gangs ultimately, 'did more to protect state institutions of dubious legitimacy than to protect civilians' (Pingeot 2018) and helped laid the foundations for today's chaos.

The harried diplomats of New York could be forgiven for wanting to pull the plug on an activity in which they felt unsupported and have struggled to be any good at. Recent organizational sentiment has been towards wilful disengagement (Fig. 2). When I worked in the UN Secretariat between 2018 and 2019 *peacekeeping transition* was a mantra repeatedly pushed out of the executive office. As most did, I interpreted this to mean that we should leave as many mission areas as possible as quickly as possible even as some of those contexts were worsening. In Sudan for example, rising violence suggested UNAMID had failed to create a sustainable transformative peace (Henry 2018). The political crisis emerging in Khartoum was also creating new potential drivers to that conflict. Still, plans for transition moved ahead and the mission fully departed at the end of 2020. Following the outbreak of civil war in 2023, much of the ethnic cleansing that took place was in areas that UNAMID had been stationed to protect civilians.

The UN's vision for how it intends to address issues of peace and security can be found in its New Agenda for Peace (NA4P), published last year. Anyone looking for a robust defence of the principles of operational peacekeeping will be disappointed (Karlsrud 2023). Instead, the document is a plea from diplomats to be allowed to use the political tools and normative structures of the UN to prevent and mediate conflict. This is despite key concepts such as conflict prevention never being satisfactorily defined. Peacekeeping operations that have proven and direct methods to reduce and prevent conflict are reduced to, 'an essential part of the diplomatic toolbox' rather than an end in themselves. The section dedicated to address peace enforcement operations is one of the briefest parts of the report and says little other than to suggest weakly, 'Member States should urgently consider how to improve such operations.'

The language used in the NA4P pre-dates Guterres

and is reflective of an international civil service that has long fretted about implementing a capability that fills it with uncertainty. A significant component has been the idea of the *primacy of politics* that allows a diplomatic civil service to focus on those aspects of peace and security that they are most comfortable. The prevalence of such attitudes also creates decision errors that have contributed to peacekeeping failures in the past. Previously, I have argued that in South Sudan there was an irrational tendency of peacekeeping leadership to overvalue their political influence while ignoring the tactical capabilities of the mission. That led to persistently suboptimal decision-making that cost lives and allowed conflict to escalate (Millar 2022). Other research suggests that across different missions, stronger and more confident tactical postures lead to mission credibility and better peacekeeping outcomes (Williams 2023). Those field capacities are becoming more relevant as conflicts increasingly evolve in ways that are complex, involving a range of non-traditional actors that require multi-level interventions that may be social, political, or physical in order to achieve transformative outcomes (Day and Hunt 2023).

Another issue with the NA4P is it signposts a desire to handover peacekeeping responsibilities to 'robust regional frameworks and organizations.' While regional ownership of crises management is laudable, it may also be fraught if it is driven by the less noble desire to distance the UN from difficult protracted social conflicts. That may regionalize not only the response but also the problem, with violence in the global south becoming a lower priority for global elites. Regional organizations may also be less likely to take a robust position in local crises in which their members have significant interests. Involvement risks fragmenting otherwise functional political and economic forum, such as recently occurred with ECOWAS. It will also test regional organizations that continue to lack the capability to carry out peacekeeping roles. The East African Community Force in eastern DRC, that it had been hoped might provide an alternative to MONUSCO, has already begun to withdraw after a dismal year (Russo 2023). A Southern African Development Community (SADC) currently being deployed there will struggle to do better. The lack of a defined doctrine of peacekeeping to handover, means that the deployment of new regional variants of peacekeeping may have consequences that are unintended and chaotic.

In a worst-case scenario, this could draw armed competitors onto the battlefield in ways that may ultimately exacerbate violence.

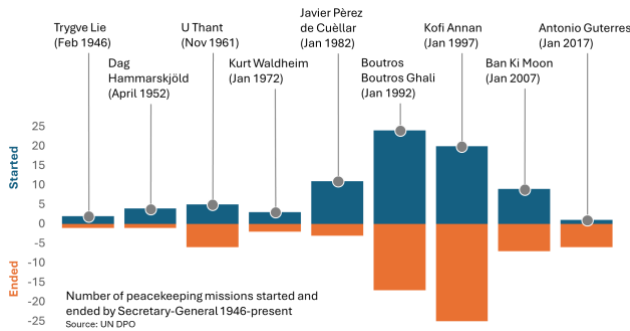


Figure 2

Conclusion

The provocative title of this brief is intended to highlight the fact that peacekeeping did not disappear under the weight of its own complexity and contradictions. Peacekeeping has worked where it has been well-resourced, was unburdened by tasks that detracted it from its core purpose, was tactically confident in the field, and had won local acceptance to its goals. Efforts should be made to build new capabilities that allow peacekeepers to act with greater autonomy that are better integrated with diverse local communities. That is essential to create more effective responses to complex challenges. This requires developing a more robust doctrine to define peacekeeping strategy and tactics. It may turn out that reports of the death of UN peacekeeping have been greatly exaggerated. But that will only be the case if urgent attention is given to improving, rather than ignoring, its valuable potential.



Figure 1 United Nations - African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID). Photo Unit at Communications and Public Information Section. A storm gathering

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