



Towards a reform in UN's peacekeeping operations?

The instability and growing international tensions have placed peacekeeping operations under scrutiny. The failures of past missions have cast a shadow on the legitimacy of the UN, which is still trying to recover from them. But is it possible to reform this system?

Peacekeeping Operations

After the end of the Cold War, there was a proliferation of peacekeeping operations and a shift in their functions. Previously grounded in the principle of Westphalian peace, which recognized the territorial sovereignty of states, peacekeeping evolved toward a post-Westphalian conception. This allowed the international community to intervene in domestic affairs when there were cases of human rights abuses.

Over time, these missions have evolved with a focus on stabilization. Rather than building liberal democratic institutions for peacebuilding, they aim to stabilize conflict zones and maintain non-violence, protecting vulnerable populations affected by conflict. United Nations peacekeeping operations (PKOs) are authorized by the Security Council (UNSC). However, despite increasing global instability and the resurgence of armed conflicts, the Security Council has not authorized any new peace operations since 2014, when it established

the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA).

The absence of new peace operations amidst rising global conflicts has reignited the debate on the Security Council's composition: Does it fairly represent the voices of the Global South, or is it merely a mechanism for the great powers to maintain their influence? Moreover, are these operations adequate for a system that has expanded toward globalization and multilateralism?

The Root of the Problem: Power Politics in the Security Council

To begin, it is important to examine the United Nations Security Council, the body responsible for designating Peacekeeping Operations. Since its last (and only) reform in 1965, the Security Council consists of five Permanent Members—United States, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, and China, the victors of World War II—and 10 non-



permanent members based on geographical distribution, rotating every two years. The

permanent members are the only ones with veto power over proposed resolutions. This geographical imbalance, amplified by the power of the veto, is evident.

In the context of an armed conflict that has triggered a humanitarian crisis in the Middle East, the UNSC has shown a significant failure to reach an agreement on adopting a binding resolution. This highlights the problem regards the veto power, which allows permanent members to paralyze the process of adopting UNSC resolutions.

The world and international system have changed since the creation of the UN and its Security Council, leading to calls for reform to align with the new realities of globalization and multilateralism. Various leaders from the Global South have demanded for the UNSC to be adapted to reflect international realities, including representation from South America, Africa, and the Caribbean—regions without permanent representation. How can international peace and security be pursued when the final decision rests in the hands of the great powers and their allies? Can we consider it a truly international goal if it does not encompass all contemporary geographical realities?

Recently, during the General Assembly on September 26, several African leaders reiterated their call for reform to make the UNSC more

inclusive and representative of international realities, while denouncing its configuration as an inheritance of colonialism, which excludes an entire continent from permanent and legitimate representation. In this regard, Africa is isolated from discussions on today's critical political issues.

African leaders argue that, representing 18% of the world's population and making up 50% of the UNSC's agenda, their voice should be formalized with two permanent and five non-permanent members, instead of just the two non-permanent seats they have held since 1965. This plan, known as the Ezulwini Consensus, has not been implemented due to complications arising from the veto power of current permanent members, who oppose ceding any of their power to another continent that could challenge their international influence. William Ruto, the President of Kenya, stated at the 79th session of the General Assembly, "The Council is dysfunctional, undemocratic, non-inclusive, irresponsible, autocratic, and opaque" (United Nations, 2024).

Additionally, proposals to eliminate the veto power of permanent members face a bleak future due to the complex legal process required, which involves amending the UN Charter and approval by two-thirds of the General Assembly, including all five permanent members. This again underscores how these members hold significant control over the UN, using it in line with their geopolitical objectives. The power politics within the UNSC are a major

factor limiting the UN's role in safeguarding peace in conflict areas. However, it is also important to consider the objectives of PKOs.

A Pragmatic Alternative to Peacekeeping Operations

UN peacekeeping operations have been a mechanism used by the organization to pursue international peace and security. Through these operations, attempts have been made to intervene in conflicts—sometimes more or less intrusively—to bring them to an end. Contemporary history shows a shift in the political motivations driving these decisions since their inception, but they are now at a critical juncture. The failures of several PKOs (such as interventions in Angola, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Somalia) have contributed to this legitimacy crisis, along with the absence of new operations since 2014. Nonetheless, there are still 11 active operations today. In this context, it is important to learn from past mistakes and build a new generation of PKOs based on these lessons.

Considering that the imposition of democratic peace—under liberal premises—risks the legitimacy of the Organization and the survival of those involved in the conflict, it is necessary to formulate PKOs that aim to protect the fundamental rights of people in active armed conflict, while also reinforcing the image of the UN as an international actor pursuing peace and security. The growing dissatisfaction among civil society could lead to dissatisfaction among states with the UN and a loss of trust in the system, which would endanger its survival. A change is needed to ensure the future of the Organization and its original goal: international peace.

Currently, PKOs face a legitimacy crisis due to the unsatisfactory outcomes of recent missions. While they have achieved considerable results in reducing violence and increasing respect for fundamental rights in several territories, public opinion remains critical because they do not meet expectations for achieving peace, understood as the absence of violence. Achieving peace depends entirely on how the concept is defined, which can range from non-violence to full individual freedom with guaranteed human rights. However, it is important to remember that UN PKOs focus on stabilizing conflict situations to protect civilians and ensure their fundamental rights. Therefore, it cannot be expected that these missions will resolve conflicts, as this requires political and legal interventions beyond the scope of PKOs.

La construcción de la paz por la ONU

Misiones de Paz y Misiones Políticas (2020)

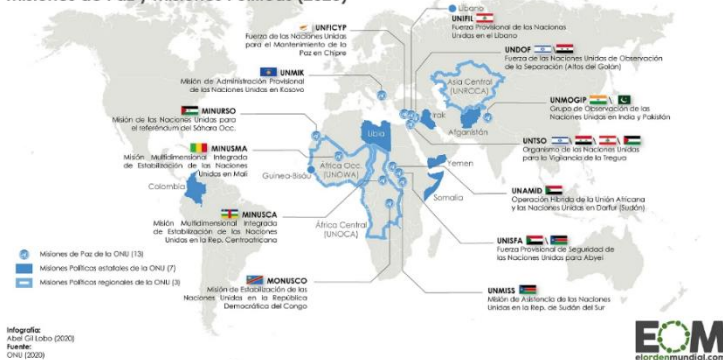


Image 1. Map of UN's PKOs. Source: El Orden Mundial

Learning from Mistakes

Throughout the history of peace operations, there have been several scandals that have gradually tarnished the name of the United Nations, leading to a legitimacy and trust crisis for the Organization.

In several instances, cases of sexual abuse and exploitation by peacekeeping personnel have been reported—such as in 2005 during the MONUSCO operation in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Given that these operations are supposed to protect civilians, such conduct is not only unacceptable and legally condemnable, but it is also contrary to the mission of PKOs: to protect civilian populations. Since the issue came to light, then-Secretary-General Kofi Annan emphasized the need for reform to end sexual exploitation by UN peacekeepers. As this problem persisted, Secretary-General António Guterres declared in

2020 that the UN was committed to a "zero tolerance" policy on sexual abuse in PKOs. Along with direct aid to victims and at-risk individuals, a special coordinator was appointed to address sexual exploitation and abuse by UN personnel, and efforts were coordinated with 87 states to resolve the issue and hold perpetrators accountable. Learning from mistakes, therefore, means conducting an introspective analysis of the failures that have stained the Organization's name.

Another issue affecting peacekeepers is their safety in the field. The lack of protection for these forces puts both their survival and the mission itself at risk, as their presence is what sustains PKOs. Recently, Israel requested the immediate withdrawal of UNIFIL personnel—the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon—which has occupied the border since 2006 following a Security



Image 2. UN Blue Helmets. Source: UN vía El Universal



Council resolution. This threat against PKO personnel underscores the need to enhance protection against external threats. The international community and civil society around the world are paying attention to the developments involving UNIFIL. The EU States have not stayed behind and have already condemned both the threats and the initial actions. The actions of this peacekeeping operation remain necessary to have an impartial force that reports to the Security Council on violations of international humanitarian law, not only against civilians but also against peacekeepers, who are protected under Security Council Resolution 1701. Therefore, an attack on them is a direct violation of international humanitarian law.

Mission personnel report feeling insecure in the face of threats from the Israeli army, as well as lacking the resources and opportunities to protect all civilians at risk and in vulnerable situations. This is why, at this moment, it is essential to address the demands of peacekeeping personnel, recognizing that their work is critical for the protection of civilians, and it is unfeasible to do so without their safety and a budget adjusted to the needs of the operation."

Reflecting on the MINUSMA operation and the blow it dealt to the UN's credibility with both local populations and UN personnel, it is crucial to avoid creating a widespread sense of abandonment in conflict situations. The solution lies in increasing

funding for operations to safeguard both local populations and peacekeepers. It is essential not to repeat the mistake of leaving inexperienced and under-resourced personnel at the mercy of a mission.

Although such structural reform may seem unattainable to many, the United Nations has recognized the need for change, given the evolving nature of conflicts, political instability, and shifts in international geopolitics.

Towards change?

The Summit of the Future, held on September 22-23, aimed to shape a pact for guiding the organization's future, including its objectives and practices. The outcome was the Pact for the Future, with its second section dedicated to international peace and security. This section emphasizes the need to move away from current bureaucratic approaches and focus on tailored models that prioritize local populations, taking into account the local conditions in conflict zones.

Conflicts are becoming increasingly complex, and the changing nature of their origins—such as in Syria, where civil war reflects sectarian divisions—requires reform to provide an effective response. Proposals include adapting PKOs to address both existing crises and new realities while fostering collaboration with regional and sub-regional organizations. Involving local entities in the process of stabilization and civilian protection will lead to



more realistic actions, considering the local motivations behind the war.

These new PKOs must be predictable, appropriate, and well-funded. To ensure greater oversight of these directives, the Secretary-General has committed to supervising operations and applying lessons learned from past failed PKOs.

The Pact for the Future addresses many of the criticisms that have arisen in recent years. Shifting to a more pragmatic and pluralistic approach is likely to restore the trust of both global civil society and states from the Global South, which have long called for change due to their growing relevance within the system. However, the final outcome remains to be seen, especially considering it has been more than a decade since the Security Council last approved a PKO.

Conclusion

It is clear that the UN is continuing its path to reforming its structure to ensure that its peacekeeping operations are as effective as possible, both in adapting to conflict and in restoring its image as the leading actor in the international system regarding the protection of peace. Beyond a PKO reform, a change in the functioning dynamics of the Security Council would offer an opportunity to manage better peace issues, reflecting the diversity of realities represented in the international system. This would also open the door to more peace

operations, while allowing the voices of the Global South—where most operations are conducted—to bring a new approach focused on the realities of local efforts towards peace.

A more pragmatic vision for peacekeeping operations, with increased funding and greater attention to local realities, would reflect a paradigmatic shift in PKOs: towards regaining lost trust amid a legitimacy crisis due to past mission failures. The ultimate goal remains the same—pursuing maximum effectiveness in protecting populations—but there is a noticeable shift in how operations are being implemented.

Therefore, referring back to the initial question, reform is indeed necessary, and the UN is aware of this. Moving forward with the (re)constitution of its legitimacy, gaining local population consent is essential for effective missions, showing a commitment to their safety, dignity, and protection. Only then will it be possible to achieve the stability necessary for sustainable and effective peace.

The most important thing now is to ensure these promises become reality. Only then will the paradigmatic shift the UN has embarked on become clear. However, with the Security Council's deadlock, there is no guarantee that these ambitions will be fulfilled. It is time then to abandon power politics and transform the UN into the organization its founders envisioned, leaving



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OCTOBER 2024

national interests behind and prioritizing international ones—for peace and security built through multilateralism and including all global realities.

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