Rethinking UN peace and security engagements in a changing world

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'Anniversaries are a time to look back and celebrate—but they are even more a time to cast our eyes to the future. It is only natural—especially in a period of turbulence and tumult—to look ahead and ask central questions'. These words were spoken in May 2025 by United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres as he briefed member states on the UN80 reform initiative.[1] Although the main impetus for the reforms is the financial crisis the UN is facing, the rapidly changing international context also makes them a necessity, as geopolitical competition and a contestation of the liberal global order are reshaping world politics. In this policy paper, we discuss this shifting environment and the impact it is having on the UN's role in peace and security.

The unipolar international system is being challenged as major and emerging powers are making their voices heard. Meanwhile, armed conflicts have become fragmented and internationalized, while we have also witnessed the return of direct conflicts between states.[2] New threats related to climate change, technology and cybersecurity, and public health emergencies intersect with armed conflict in various ways. These changes have challenged the so-called 'standard treatment' of conflicts, which for a long time has consisted of mediation followed by a peacekeeping operation to oversee the implementation of the resulting peace agreement.[3]

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[*] This article is part of *International Affairs'* policy paper series. These short papers bring new insights into policy debates on the most important problems of international relations, and offer clear and concise guidance and 'real-world' recommendations for policy-makers and practitioners. Views and analysis expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations.

[1] United Nations, 'Secretary-General, briefing on UN80 initiative, lays out system-wide reform plans to make United Nations more effective, nimble, fit for today's challenges', 12 May 2025, https://press.un.org/en/2025/sgsm22644.doc.htm. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 26 Sept. 2025.)

[2] Shawn Davies, Thérése Pettersson and Magnus Öberg, 'Organized violence 1989–2022, and the return of conflict between states', *Journal of Peace Research* 60: 4, 2023, pp. 691–708, https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433231185169.

[3] Richard Gowan and Stephen John Stedman, 'The international regime for treating civil war, 1988–2017', *Daedalus* 147: 1, 2018, pp. 171–84, https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00482; Richard Gowan, 'The treatment of civil wars in a fragmenting international order', *Global Governance* 30: 2, 2024, pp. 203–13, https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-03002009.

The shifting context within which the UN promotes international peace and security makes it imperative to analyse the organization's role. In spite of its current challenges, the UN remains an important actor as a venue for member states to discuss policy and common action.[4] The questions to be asked are thus: what role should the UN play in international peace and security? What kinds of values should guide its activities? And how, and by whom, should these initiatives be implemented? In his policy brief 'A New Agenda for Peace', published in July 2023, Secretary-General Guterres outlined his vision of how to strengthen multilateral action for peace in a changing world.[5] The 'Pact for the Future', adopted in September 2024, contains a commitment to 'adapt peace operations to better respond to existing challenges and new realities' and requests the Secretary-General to undertake a review of the future of all forms of UN peace operations, including peace-keeping operations and political missions.[6]

This policy paper is authored by a combination of International Relations and peace scholars, policy-makers and practitioners, including former and current UN officials. Providing cutting-edge thinking on UN peace and security engagements, the paper makes two contributions. First, it adds to the literature on the UN and its peace operations in a changing world by identifying four ways in which global power shifts affect UN peace missions and by highlighting four suggested roles for the UN in this new world.[7] Second, it contributes to the ongoing policy debate on the reform of the UN's peace and security engagements. In the following, we first sketch the changes in the current global context. We then analyse how they affect UN peace operations and what role the UN can still play to promote peace and security in a changing world. We conclude with reflections on the way forward.

A shifting world order

We live in a time of major global power shifts. Several states have emerged as influential powers in the current international system, while others have gained

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[4] At the 79th Session of the UN General Assembly in September 2024, numerous countries emphasized the vital role of the UN in addressing global challenges: they included Angola, Brazil, Ireland and the United Kingdom, among many others.

[5] United Nations, *Our Common Agenda policy brief 9: A New Agenda for Peace*, 2023, https://dppa.un.org/en/a-new-agenda-for-peace.

[6] United Nations, *Pact for the Future, global digital compact and declaration on future generations* (New York: UN, 2024), https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sotf-pact_for_the_future_adopted.pdf. Political missions are often referred to as Special Political Missions (SPMs). SPM is a budgetary modality to support mostly political work assigned to the Secretariat by the UN Security Council, less often by the UN General Assembly, and occasionally the Charter, understood to include the good offices of the Secretary-General (UNSG). Some political initiatives are also funded outside the SPM modality (e.g. the Office of the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and ad hoc UNSG initiatives).

[7] Richard Caplan, 'The foundations of a research agenda' *International Peacekeeping* 27: 1, 2020, pp. 70–6, https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2019.1710376; Cedric de Coning and Mateja Peter, *UN peace operations in a changing global order* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Sara Hellmüller, 'Peacemaking in a shifting world order: a macro-level analysis of UN mediation in Syria', *Review of International Studies* 48: 3, 2022, pp. 543–59, https://doi.org/10.1017/S026021052200016X; Sara Hellmüller and Fanny Badache, 'Children of their time: the impact of world politics on United Nations peace operations', *Contemporary Security Policy* 46: 2, 2025, pp. 177–96, https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2025.2470590.

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significant influence in their respective regions.[8] With the rise of these actors, the world has shifted from a unipolar order towards an international environment that has been described by different scholars as multiplex,[9] multi-order[10] or multipolar.[11]

The main consequence of these global power shifts is twofold. First, world politics has entered a more competitive phase. In the words of Secretary-General Guterres, 'we have a level of division among superpowers that has no precedent since the Second World War'.[12] This geopolitical competition has made it more difficult for the UN Security Council (UNSC) to reach consensus.[13] Diverging interests have rendered the UNSC less able to address the most acute crises with a unified message and collective response, which has reputational consequences for 'the UN' as a whole. However, this situation has not prevented the UNSC from continuing to function in other areas, including in the renewal of peace operation mandates.[14]

Second, the global power shifts have broadened the value systems that inform world politics. Scholars point to an increasing contestation of the liberal international order. According to academic literature, the failures of western-led interventions or policies in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya have tarnished the liberal peace model and undermined its appeal.[15] Contestation of a liberal interpretation of human rights, of the Women, Peace and Security agenda and of other issues perceived as western priorities has also become more prevalent.[16] Processes such as the Summit of the Future have provided states with an opportunity to agree on new interpretations of the values that should underpin UN engagement in the coming decades. These may not differ much from the past—as the UN Charter itself is not being renegotiated—but there are

[8] Amitav Acharya, 'After liberal hegemony: the advent of a multiplex world order', *Ethics & International Affairs* 31: 3, 2017, pp. 271–85, https://doi.org/10.1017/S089267941700020X; G. John Ikenberry, 'Three worlds: the West, East and South and the competition to shape global order', *International Affairs* 100: 1, 2024, pp. 121–38, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiad284.

[9] Amitav Acharya, Antoni Estevadeordal and Louis W. Goodman, 'Multipolar or multiplex? Interaction capacity, global cooperation and world order', *International Affairs* 99: 6, 2023, pp. 2339–65, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiad242.

[10] Trine Flockhart, 'The coming multi-order world', *Contemporary Security Policy* 37: 1, 2016, pp. 3–30, https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2016.1150053.

[11] Barry R. Posen, 'From unipolarity to multipolarity: transition in sight?', in: G. John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno and William C. Wohlforth, eds, *International Relations theory and the consequences of unipolarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 317–41.

[12] '"The Secretary has no power": UN Secretary General António Guterres plays the cards he's dealt', CNN, 18 Sept. 2023, https://edition.cnn.com/videos/tv/2023/09/18/amanpour-guterres-unga.cnn.

[13] Tetsuro Iji, 'The UN as an international mediator: from the post–Cold War era to the twenty-first century', *Global Governance* 23: 1, 2017, pp. 83–100, https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-02301008.

[14] In 2024 the UNSC renewed the mandates of several missions. However, mandate renewals have more often become non-unanimous: in 2011, fewer than 5% of such renewals were not unanimous; in 2022, non-unanimous renewals made up 33.3% of the total. *Security Council working methods in hard times* (New York: Security Council Report, 2023).

[15] Courtney J. Fung, *China and intervention at the UN Security Council: reconciling status* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Mateja Peter, 'Global fragmentation and collective security instruments: weakening the liberal international order from within', *Politics and Governance*, vol. 12, 2024, pp. 1–15, https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.7357.

[16] Courtney J. Fung, 'Separating intervention from regime change? China's diplomatic innovations at the UN Security Council regarding the Syria crisis', *The China Quarterly*, vol. 235, 2018, pp. 693–712, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741018000851.

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subtle differences that reflect a shift away from the UN's role of upholding liberal values, whose interpretation and application are increasingly contested, to supporting the peaceful coexistence of multiple value systems.[17]

UN peace operations in a changing world

How have these major global power shifts influenced UN peace operations? We see the impact in four respects: a diversification of the peace and security actors with which the UN interacts; a challenge to the authority of peace operations from domestic interlocutors; a weakening of the norm of political settlements at the core of peace operations and a move in terms of core objectives from conflict resolution to conflict management.

Diversification of peace and security actors

First, we notice a multiplication of peace and security providers besides the UN in the form of regional organizations, states, civil society organizations, private security companies and ad hoc coalitions.[18] While this proliferation has sometimes led to a fragmentation of approaches, it also offers opportunities for more effective interventions when properly coordinated.

Multiparty mediation has become a standard feature of processes in the realm of peace. Research shows that the involvement of multiple actors can enhance a peace process by bringing together a diverse set of strengths and resources.[19] However, it can be challenging when a plethora of peace initiatives compete with formal UN-facilitated processes. These endeavours are often led by states that are themselves involved in the conflict, or that at least seek to manage it in terms that protect their interests rather than prioritizing peace.[20] Meanwhile, as they recognize the interconnections between national political processes and local conflicts, UN peace operations have also dedicated more attention and resources to supporting local mediation processes.[21]

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[17] Cedric de Coning, 'Adaptive peacebuilding', *International Affairs* 94: 2, 2018, pp. 301–17, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix251; Roland Paris, 'The future of UN peace operations: pragmatism, pluralism or statism?', *International Affairs* 100: 5, 2024, pp. 2153–72, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiae182.

[18] Yf Reykers et al., 'Ad hoc coalitions in global governance: short-notice, task- and time-specific cooperation', *International Affairs* 99: 2, 2023, pp. 727–45, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiac319; Iji, 'The UN as an international mediator'.

[19] Allard Duursma, 'Partnering to make peace: the effectiveness of joint African and non-African mediation efforts', *International Peacekeeping*, 24: 4, 2017, pp. 590–615, https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2017.1345312; Tetsuro Iji, *Multiparty mediation in violent conflict: peacemaking diplomacy in the Tajikistan civil war* (London: Routledge, 2019).

[20] Sara Hellmüller and Bilal Salaymeh, 'Multiparty mediation in a changing world: the emergence and impact of parallel processes to UN peacemaking in Syria and Libya', *International Journal of Conflict Management* 35: 1, 2024, pp. 129–49, https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCMA-01-2023-0004; Sara Hellmüller and Bilal Salaymeh, 'Transactional peacemaking: warmakers as peacemakers in the political marketplace of peace processes', *Contemporary Security Policy* 46: 2, 2025, pp. 312–42, https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2024.2448908.

[21] Arthur Boutellis, Delphine Mechoulan and Marie-Joëlle Zahar, *Parallel tracks or connected pieces? UN peace operations, local mediation, and peace processes* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2020), https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2012-UN-Peace-Operations-Local-Mediation-and-Peace-Processes.pdf.

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In the security realm, UN peace operations have a complex array of relationships, sometimes competitive and sometimes collaborative, with regional security arrangements and bilateral security providers. In the ten years since the UN last authorized a multidimensional peacekeeping operation, regional organizations such as the African Union (AU) and the European Union, ad hoc coalitions of states and even single states have deployed more than 20 new peace operations between them.[22] Research shows that cooperation between UN and non-UN peacekeeping operations can yield positive results.[23] However, in contrast to earlier practice which saw the UN either taking over from a regional operation or deploying simultaneously with one, non-UN operations now regularly deploy without a UN partner mission.[24] The latest acknowledgement of this trend is UNSC Resolution 2719, adopted in December 2023, which foresees UN funding for AU-led peacekeeping operations.[25] At the same time, while not needing UNSC authorization, ad hoc security initiatives such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force and the Multinational Joint Task Force—which operates in the Lake Chad Basin—are often endorsed by the Council, which risks conflating peacekeeping with counterterrorism.[26] Particularly challenging for the UN has been the involvement of armed non-state actors and private military contractors, such as the Wagner Group (now rebranded as the Africa Corps) in Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR), or the Global Security Services Group, which recruits Colombian mercenaries for operations in Sudan.[27]

Challenges to UN peace operations' authority

Second, domestic actors have questioned the authority of several UN peace operations. On the one hand, the emergence of UN stabilization operations in CAR, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Mali, where consent only came from the host state (as opposed to all the conflict parties), has made the UN vulnerable to these governments' decisions. This proves to be especially challenging when national governments are more interested in the UN using its military force to counter insurgencies and less in other activities such as human rights promotion or support for political processes.[28] Indeed, host governments often criticize peace

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[22] Maurice P. Schumann and Corinne Bara, 'A new era: power in partnership peacekeeping', *International Studies Quarterly* 67: 3, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqad037.

[23] Schumann and Bara, 'A new era'.

[24] Corinne Bara and Lisa Hultman, 'Just different hats? Comparing UN and non-UN peacekeeping', *International Peacekeeping* 27: 3, 2020, pp. 341–68, https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2020.1737023.

[25] Another example is the UN-authorized mission in Haiti where a Kenyan police force was deployed.

[26] Daniel Forti and Priyal Singh, 'Can the UN and AU navigate the shifting landscape of multilateral peace operations?', International Peace Institute, 1 July 2021, https://theglobalobservatory.org/2021/07/can-the-un-and-au-navigate-the-shifting-landscape-of-multilateral-peace-operations; Cedric de Coning, Andrew E. Yaw Tchie and Anab Ovidie Grand, 'Ad-hoc security initiatives, an African response to insecurity', *African Security Review* 31: 4, 2022, pp. 383–98, https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2022.2134810.

[27] Benoit Faucon, Gabriele Steinhauser, Kejal Vyas and Summer Said, 'The global war machine supplying Colombian mercenaries to fight in Sudan', *The Wall Street Journal*, 11 Dec. 2024, https://www.wsj.com/world/africa/sudan-colombian-mercenaries-global-security-services-9ff2a201.

[28] Allard Duursma, 'Pinioning the peacekeepers: sovereignty, host-state resistance against peacekeeping missions, and violence against civilians', *International Studies Review* 23: 3, 2021, pp. 670–95, https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viaa063; Cedric de Coning, 'How not to do UN peacekeeping: avoid the stabiliza-

operations for interfering in domestic affairs. For instance, the Malian government argued that the findings of the UN's Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in relation to the human rights situation were being instrumentalized.[29] With security now increasingly outsourced to other actors, the political leverage that missions can exercise on host governments has declined.[30] On the other hand, challenges to the UN's authority and legitimacy also arise when the effectiveness and impartiality of UN peace operations are called into question. Failure of operations to achieve their mandated tasks, as well as a perceived disregard of local capacities and priorities, have led to unmet expectations among the local population, eroding trust in missions.[31] Cases of sexual exploitation and abuse have substantially harmed peacekeepers' reputation.[32] Moreover, despite the almost universal nature of the UN's membership, peace operations are at times viewed as insufficiently reflective of the organization's different geographic groups.[33] The spread of disinformation has further fuelled this loss of confidence in several contexts.[34]

Such challenges to the UN's authority are critical, given that peace operations depend on the consent of the host state, or the parties to a ceasefire agreement, to implement their mandates effectively. Resistance can manifest in restricting the movement of UN personnel, limiting access to critical areas, engaging in political or legal impediments, or conducting propaganda campaigns against the mission.[35] For instance, the South Sudanese government obstructed the operations of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) by setting up checkpoints to deny the mission access to key locations, refusing patrols and intimidating personnel involved in human rights monitoring.[36] Such impediments hamper the mission's overall goal to promote peace and

tion dilemma with principled and adaptive mandating and leadership', *Global Governance* 29: 2, 2023, pp. 152–67, https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-02902008.

[29] El-Ghassim Wane, 'MINUSMA's withdrawal from Mali: brief overview of the mission's performance and challenges, and lessons for peacekeeping in Africa', Accord, 28 May 2024, https://www.accord.org.za/analysis/minusmas-withdrawal-from-mali-brief-overview-of-the-missions-performance-and-challenges-and-lessons-for-peacekeeping-in-africa.

[30] Richard Caplan, 'Political leverage and UN peacekeeping: the case of UNOCI's withdrawal from Côte d'Ivoire', *Conflict, Security & Development* 24: 2, 2024, pp. 111–25, https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2024.2335733.

[31] Séverine Autesserre, *Peaceland: conflict resolution and the everyday politics of international intervention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Susanna P. Campbell, David Chandler and Meera Sabaratnam, eds, *A liberal peace? The problems and practices of peacebuilding* (London: Zed Books, 2011).

[32] Sabrina Karim and Kyle Beardsley, 'Explaining sexual exploitation and abuse in peacekeeping missions: the role of female peacekeepers and gender equality in contributing countries', *Journal of Peace Research* 53: 1, 2016, pp. 100–15, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343315615506.

[33] Courtney J. Fung and Shing-hon Lam, 'Staffing the UN: China's motivations and prospects', *International Affairs* 97: 4, 2021, pp. 1143–63, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiab071.

[34] Albert Trithart, *Disinformation against UN peacekeeping operations* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2022), https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/2212_Disinformation-against-UN-Peacekeeping-Ops.pdf.

[35] Allard Duursma, 'Obstruction and intimidation of peacekeepers: how armed actors undermine civilian protection efforts', *Journal of Peace Research* 56: 2, 2018, pp. 234–48, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343318800522; Allard Duursma, Sara Lindberg Bromley and Aditi Gorur, 'The impact of host-state consent on the protection of civilians in UN peacekeeping', *Civil Wars* 26: 1, 2024, pp. 16-40, https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2023.2196185.

[36] Duursma, 'Obstruction and intimidation of peacekeepers'.

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create a dilemma: should peace operations occupy the moral high ground and call out a lack of political engagement on the part of host governments, or should they tacitly accept the limitation in the hope of maintaining at least a minimal level of consent? Both choices may lead to a further loss of authority.

Weakening of the norm of political settlements

Third, the norm of political settlements that is at the core of peace operations and that derives from Chapter VI of the UN Charter is under strain. While the Secretary-General has continued to advocate for the primacy of politics, this norm is questioned if conflict parties pursue military solutions exclusively, frequently with the backing of powerful member states. Too often, such situations result in the lack of a common direction in the pursuit of a negotiated settlement to end a given conflict. Even when UN peace operations have been able to facilitate the conclusion of political agreements, conflict parties and their supporters have shown their reluctance to implement the proposed roadmaps—as demonstrated, for instance, in Iraq, Libya and Yemen.[37]

The establishment of enforcement and stabilization missions, such as in CAR, the DRC and Mali, has accelerated the shift away from political settlements.[38] This trend is likely to grow with the increased outsourcing of such missions, as non-UN operations often have a more militarized approach. Peace enforcement by regional actors can be effective in partnership with UN missions, when it allows for a division of labour in which non-UN peacekeepers focus on stabilization while UN missions contribute their broad toolbox of military and non-military measures and a political strategy to support peace.[39] One example is the French military intervention Operation Sangaris, which ran in CAR from 2013–2016. Under Sangaris, troops actively fought rebels in the country, while 'blue helmet' UN peacekeepers patrolled buffer zones and the leadership of the UN Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) supported the peace process. However, a predominantly militarized approach that focuses solely on the reduction of violence is problematic and further erodes the contribution that the norm of political settlements can make to ending conflicts peacefully. More broadly, resources for peace are diminishing in a context of rising defence budgets, further affecting the (political) capabilities of UN peace operations.[40]

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[37] Tetsuro Iji, 'The limits and potentials of UN mediation: views from ripeness theory', *International Negotiation* 27: 3, 2022, pp. 354–85, https://doi.org/10.1163/15718069-bja10077.

[38] *Uniting our strengths for peace—politics, partnership and people: report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations* (New York: UN, 2015), https://www.refworld.org/reference/themreport/un/2015/en/105627; *Action for Peacekeeping: declaration of shared commitments on UN peacekeeping operations* (New York: UN, 2018), https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/a4p-declaration-en.pdf.

[39] Schumann and Bara, 'A new era'; Lise Morjé Howard, *Power in peacekeeping* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Lise Howard, 'Peacekeeping is not counterinsurgency', *International Peacekeeping* 26: 5, 2019, pp. 545–8, https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2019.1677288.

[40] Katharina P. Coleman, 'Downsizing in UN peacekeeping: the impact on civilian peacekeepers and the missions employing them', *International Peacekeeping* 27: 5, 2020, pp. 703–31, https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2020.1793328.

From conflict resolution to conflict management

Fourth, we observe a shift in the overall goal of UN peace operations from *conflict resolution*, aiming at resolving armed conflict, towards *conflict management*, focusing on containing the violence.[41] This shift is linked to the increasing fragmentation of armed conflicts and the consequent weakening of the conditions that allow for comprehensive peace agreements. It is now more common to have partial and localized agreements addressing different parts of a conflict rather than its entirety.[42]

   Related to this change is a noticeable move away from ambitious peace-building agendas guiding peace operation mandates that until recently had a strong emphasis on human rights, democratic governance and inclusive political processes. Since 2011 missions with extensive mandates aimed at establishing sustainable peace have progressively been replaced by more minimalist missions with the main objective of stopping the violence.[43] This is partly due to the complexity of implementing multidimensional mandates. It is also linked to a mounting division among the permanent five UNSC member states—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States—as human rights and political mandates in peace missions are increasingly challenged at the UNSC, reflecting a broader discomfort by individual UNSC members with the definition of peacebuilding as liberal statebuilding.[44]

Future roles for the UN in promoting international peace and security

Given the changing international context in which UN peace operations exist, what role can the organization still play in promoting international peace and security? The UN's legitimacy is deeply questioned for reasons related to actions at the UNSC level, but also because of attitudes and behaviour within its administration.[45] At the same time, the UN remains the most representative global actor and thus offers a unique arena for the prevention and management of conflicts, even when their resolution is elusive. It is the only entity with the

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[41] Fanny Badache, Sara Hellmüller and Bilal Salaymeh, 'Conflict management or conflict resolution: how do major powers conceive the role of the UN in peacebuilding?', *Contemporary Security Policy* 44: 4, 2022, pp. 547–71, https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2022.2147334.

[42] Jan Pospisil, 'Dissolving conflict. Local peace agreements and armed conflict transitions', *Peacebuilding* 10: 2, 2022, pp. 122–37, https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2022.2032945.

[43] Sara Hellmüller, Marie Lobjoy and Xiang-Yun Rosalind Tan, 'Beyond generations: an alternative approach to categorizing peace missions', *Global Governance* 28: 4, 2022, pp. 509–33, https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-02804003.

[44] Rosemary Foot, *China, the UN, and human protection: beliefs, power, image* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Richard Caplan, 'Peacekeeping in turbulent times', *International Peacekeeping* 26: 5, 2019, pp. 527–30, https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2019.1677284; Courtney J. Fung, 'China's small steps into UN peacekeeping are adding up', International Peace Institute, 24 May 2023, https://theglobalobservatory.org/2023/05/chinas-small-steps-into-un-peacekeeping-are-adding-up.

[45] Autesserre, *Peaceland*; Susanna P. Campbell, *Global governance and local peace: accountability and performance in international peacebuilding* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Kseniya Oksamytna and Sarah von Billerbeck, 'Race and international organizations', *International Studies Quarterly* 68: 2, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqae010; Sara Hellmüller, *The interaction between local and international peacebuilding actors: partners for peace* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

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ability to link the global legitimacy that comes from a UNSC or UN General Assembly mandate with concrete actions in a conflict context. The UN Secretariat, as the primary body supporting mandates related to international peace and security, can draw on a broad range of capabilities to address conflicts and sustain peace. Building on these strengths, we envisage four broad roles for the UN that can be bolstered: providing good offices, maintaining and promoting norms, offering expertise for capacity-building and acting as the 'conductor of the orchestra' of different peace and security actors. Given the high degree of uncertainty that surrounds the organization at the moment, we conceive these roles as the common denominator on which member states can agree and as feasible in the current financial and geopolitical context.

First, the UN's role in providing 'good offices', both at headquarters and in conflict contexts, remains valued even though it is deeply challenged. It is important because the UN—and particularly the Secretary-General—remains the most influential channel for reminding all actors of the importance of prioritizing diplomacy over military solutions to conflict. The UN's mediation efforts can capitalize on its unique repertoire of intangible resources for facilitative (if not directive) influence, such as legitimacy, universality and expertise. UN mediators—either the Secretary-General, his/her Special Representatives and Envoys, or UN officials acting on their behalf—can deploy such resources in ways that other mediation actors cannot quite match. Appointment of the Special Representatives and Special Envoys—an inherently political process—could be improved by placing a greater focus on the development of talent pipelines, including from within the UN system. These pipelines would prioritize the cultivation of the skills and qualities needed to engage in mediation while leading UN missions, and would increase accountability.[46] Outside mission contexts, greater attention could be paid to low-key, preventive engagements, which could be undertaken on an exploratory basis by UN officials able to engage in an appropriate manner. In this context, the UN Secretariat will need to take further steps to professionalize its mediation services in a way that helps conflict parties resolve the entire gamut of conflicts they face.

Second, the UN has a unique mandate to maintain and promote the norms that are legitimized through their universal endorsement, such as human rights, the inclusion of women and international humanitarian law (IHL).[47] Few issues have been more damaging to the UN than accusations of double standards. For this reason, the organization must now more than ever serve as a staunch defender of the universality of values and norms, and it must clearly denounce the double standards that have tainted global politics. Even if some states currently contest these norms, they resonate strongly with civilian populations

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[46] See Jeffrey Feltman, 'Restoring (some) impartiality to UN senior appointments', Brookings, 29 Oct. 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/restoring-some-impartiality-to-un-senior-appointments.

[47] Charles T. Hunt et al., *UN peace operations and human rights: a thematic study* (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2024), https://www.nupi.no/content/pdf_preview/28402/file/EPON%20-%20 UN%20Peace%20Operations%20and%20Human%20Rights%20EXECUTIVE%20SUMMARY.pdf.

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in conflict settings.[48] This resonation can increase the perceived legitimacy of UN peace operations as well as the confidence of conflict parties that any additional agreements they reach may be broadly supported—and consequently may also be more sustainable. Given the current questioning of certain values, it seems to be most important that the UN ensures that whatever norms its membership endorses are carried over into implementation in an unbiased manner, including those mentioned in the 'Pact for the Future'. The source of this impartiality could be a better level of geographical representation among UN staff who work in peace operations,[49] and an increased consideration of local capacities and knowledge.[50]

Third, the UN has a unique expertise which positions it well to engage in capacity-building. It could, for instance, do more to build the expertise of (sub)regional organizations in police and civilian peacekeeping, including ensuring that they adhere to human rights standards and IHL. For example, UN Police is working in a range of non-mission settings to advise, mentor and support regional organizations and national police services in developing their capacities. Considering the mounting internal security challenges experienced by many states, UN policing expertise may become even more relevant in the future as a strategic and nimble conflict-prevention capacity.[51] Further, given the rise of geopolitical competition, the need for capacities to impartially observe, monitor and report not only intrastate but also interstate demarcation lines and ceasefires is likely to increase. Thus, the UN is well positioned not only to provide strategic advice and training for UN military observers deployed in a greater range of mission types, but also to strengthen the military observer capabilities of other organizations such as the AU.[52] Moreover, the UN should continue the long-established practice of making its mediation support capacities available to its partners.[53]

Finally, the UN may no longer be a 'soloist' in peace and security efforts, as it sometimes used to be, but more the 'conductor of an orchestra' of different peace and security actors.[54] In many situations, the UN is well positioned

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[48] Geoff Dancy and Christopher J. Fariss, 'The global resonance of human rights: what Google trends can tell us', *American Political Science Review* 118: 1, 2024, pp. 252–73, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423000199.

[49] Fanny Badache, 'Unpacking the bureaucratic representation–legitimacy relationship in international organizations: the role of elite beliefs and self-legitimation practices', *Global Studies Quarterly* 2: 4, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksac063.

[50] Autesserre, *Peaceland*.

[51] Annika Hilding Norberg, et al., ed., *Ideas notes 2030: strategic reflections on the future of UN policing* (Geneva: Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 2024), https://www.gcsp.ch/publications/ideas-notes-2030-strategic-reflections-future-un-policing.

[52] Annika Hilding Norberg, Robert Mood and Apurba Kumar Bardalai, *UN Truce Supervision Organization: role, relevance, function and utility—lessons for future peace operations* (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2024), https://www.nupi.no/en/publications/cristin-pub/united-nations-truce-supervision-organization-role-relevance-function-and-utility-lessons-for-future-peace-operations.

[53] For instance, by developing guidance on various topics (e.g. ceasefire mediation), see *Guidance on the mediation of ceasefires* (New York: UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, 2022), https://peacemaker.un.org/en/documents/guidance-mediation-ceasefires.

[54] Jeffrey Feltman, *UN envoys as conductors, not soloists* (Geneva: Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2019), https://hdcentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/UN-Envoys-as-conductors.not-soloists.pdf; David Lanz, 'Envoy envy? Competition in African mediation processes and ways to overcome it', *International Negotiation* 26: 3, 2021, pp. 499–526, https://doi.org/10.1163/15718069-bja10039.

to coordinate multi-actor responses: in fact, since 1948 the coordination of donors, partners and UN agencies has been among the most frequently mandated tasks in peace missions.[55] This approach would involve assessing, on a case-by-case basis, which actor is best positioned to lead peace efforts, as well as recognizing that in some contexts other actors may be better positioned than the UN. While many examples of effective collaboration already exist, the UN could continue to work collaboratively with current and new partners, including (sub)regional entities or international financial institutions, as well as NGOs, the private sector, academics and other civil society actors. Indeed, a purposeful division of labour can yield positive outcomes—even when the UN is not in the lead—if the UN Secretariat ensures that the work of all partners is conducted in an unbiased manner and supports the common objectives of peace efforts.

Conclusion

As the UN system has continued to evolve and adapt through different time periods, so have the organization's peace and security engagements, as exemplified in its peace operations. The UN is now bracing for another transformation to fit the emerging realities of a new international system. Challenges to UN peace operations remain during the most recent historical phase of the post-Cold War period, in terms of inadequate funding, a lack of standardized training approaches for peacekeepers and overly ambitious mandates. At the same time, new issues and challenges abound, including designing mandates that address the drivers of violent conflict while also accommodating competing normative perspectives among member states and between the UN and host states. While the UN may be impeded by geopolitical divisions, this policy paper shows that opportunities can still be found for rethinking the organization's role in maintaining international peace and security. The impetus for a more radical reimagining of the UN's role requires not only the endorsement of a majority of the UN member states but also a greater sense of humility and willingness to adapt. Overall, the focus must be on establishing dialogue step by step, starting with issues that allow for trust to be built and that ultimately benefit the people the UN is mandated to serve.

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[55] Sara Hellmüller, Xiang-Yun Rosalind Tan and Corinne Bara, 'What is in a mandate? Introducing the UN Peace Mission Mandates dataset', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 68: 1, 2023, pp. 166–92, https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027231159830.

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