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Prospects for United Nations Peacekeeping in the Multipolar World

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Introduction

United Nations peacekeeping, originally a modest, consent-based mechanism for monitoring ceasefires between sovereign states in the Cold War period, has evolved into vast, multidimensional missions in the years after Cold War. These operations are tasked with stabilizing internal conflicts, protecting vulnerable populations, and rebuilding failed states and institutions. This evolution is a product of a series of reflexive adaptations to operational failures, changing geopolitical alignments, and conflict landscapes. As the global order transitions from the unipolar order of the 1990s into a fragmented, multipolar arrangement in the third decade of 21st century, United Nations faces a fundamental crisis regarding its role as an impartial watcher of peace in the face of growing global competition and the erosion of international norms.

This paper first traces the development path of UN peace operations since 1990s when the mandates started embrace massive responsibilities until the contemporary era. It then discusses the current and long-term problems including disability of UNSC's to pass resolutions, insufficient funding and modern threats to security that the peacekeeping faces. This is followed by a short evaluation of the mission's performance in reducing violence and achieving success.

Geopolitical paralysis within the Security Council together with the financial crisis has rendered the former peacekeeping model inefficient. Given that the current international setting is structurally moving away from unipolar and stable world, a paradigm change within peacekeeping frameworks becomes necessity. In response to these systemic threats, this article argues for a shift toward a modular subsidiarity model in the design of mission. Rather than maintaining massive, unsustainable multidimensional missions, the UN must transition to deploying specialized modules integrated into regional or national frameworks. UN peacekeeping has most prospects in limiting its scope to operational realities by prioritizing political solutions and stepping down to give space for regional actors. Only then can it continue to survive and work in the interest of global norms in the increasingly polarizing world.

Continuity and Change in United Nations Policies Since the 1990s

The trajectory of United Nations policy since the early 1990s indicates a tension between the peacekeeping principles of consent, impartiality, the limited use of force, and the growing demands for intervention to prevent mass atrocities and stabilize complex civil wars. During the Cold War, the primary actors were the United States and the Soviet Union and their bipolar rivalry frequently paralyzed decision making in the Security Council. The major problem of this era was the potential for local conflicts to escalate into superpower confrontations. That's why UN's response was limited to monitoring ceasefires and providing neutral buffers with the consent of the parties. The post-Cold War era saw a sudden expansion in the UN's mandate. The initial optimism is seen in Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's 1992 report, *An Agenda for Peace*, which envisioned an activist United Nations capable of preventive diplomacy, peacemaking, and an expansive version of post-conflict peacebuilding (Boutros-Ghali, 1992). This era was defined by the belief that a united Security Council could resolve second-order conflicts through comprehensive liberal state-building. However, the unforeseen, or partly foreseen, difficulties described in the 1995 *Supplement to An Agenda for Peace* (Secretary-General, 1995), specifically the rise of internal wars with ethnic and religious characters, quickly tempered this enthusiasm.

The systemic failures in Rwanda and Srebrenica necessitated a comprehensive revision of the organization's operational culture, *Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations* or commonly known as the Brahimi Report reflected this necessity. The Brahimi Report (2000) marked adoption of invasive peacekeeping approach, arguing that United Nations forces must be professionally equipped and authorized to use force against spoilers who sought to undermine peace agreements. Later on, the Capstone Doctrine distinguished between tactical robust peacekeeping and strategic peace enforcement and solidified the expectation that United Nations missions would engage in a wide range of civilian tasks (United Nations, 2008).

By 2015, the organization recognized that the Christmas tree mandates of the 2000s were reaching their breaking point since they were burdens on missions with an unrealistic array of tasks without a coherent political strategy. The High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations introduced the primacy of politics as a corrective measure. It asserted that peace operations are not ends in themselves but rather tools to support political solutions, urging the Security Council to move away from militarized responses and toward the restoration of

political leverage. (Duursma et al., 2023) This shift emphasized that politics should be the true force multiplier and that the use of force must be strictly connected to the politics of a peaceful settlement.

Secretary-General António Guterres's policy brief, *A New Agenda for Peace* (2023) defines the contemporary era as a different period from post-Cold War. It describes a world in the process of transitioning to a new global order where the unity of purpose seen in the early 1990s has been lost and replaced by strategic competition with a disregard for international law. The policy brief advocates for leaving behind logic of competition and adopts a networked multilateralism that prioritizes national ownership, regional frameworks.

Actors and Partners in Peacekeeping

Although permanent members of the Security Council have the ultimate control over mission mandates, their influence is increasingly challenged as the troop-contributing countries from the Global South and regional organizations expand their role in global politics. Besides, geopolitical friction between Russia and the US, UK, and France has ruled out the use of peacekeeping in geopolitically sensitive conflicts like Syria, leading authorization of missions only in conflicts where interests are less likely to clash. This paralysis has resulted in the creation of partnership peacekeeping, most notably between the United Nations and the African Union. In December 2023, a resolution establishing the framework for the financing of AU-led peace support operations is adopted (Secretary-General, 2025). This framework acknowledges that the AU can deploy more effective forces in environments where traditional UN peacekeeping might be inappropriate (Stoddard, 2025). Yet, the operationalization of Resolution 2719 faces significant hurdles. With regard to the UN's greater funding problem, the US stood in objection to the African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia in December 2024 due to financial concerns (Matamis, 2025).

The Funding Crisis

The organization has been facing financial insufficiency since 2010s. As of early 2026, unpaid assessments to the regular budget have reached to $1.57 billion, with the United States being responsible for approximately 95% of the total debt (Massoud, 2026). The budgetary limitations have consequently forced deep cuts to field missions, including a 15% reduction in annual

budgets and a mandatory 25% reduction in uniformed and civilian personnel (Mishra, 2025). These downscaling imply a fundamental shift from proactive conflict prevention to narrow-scope missions as the organization is forced to act on liquidity calculation rather than humanitarian need. As a result, the ability of missions to protect civilians, monitor ceasefires, and support humanitarian relief shrinks as well as UN's global footprint.

Modern Difficulties for UN Peacekeeping

The problems confronting modern peacekeeping also include modern threats like fragmented insurgencies, transnational organized crime, and the weaponization of new technologies. Potential weaponization of artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and drones in the hands of non-state actors might create new domains of conflict that push UN's structural capabilities. While global threats like climate change exacerbate resource competition and displacement, mission mandates remain short of resource allocation to tackle these risk factors. Decrease in respect to global norms has also made civilians more vulnerable, with a 28% rise in state-based conflicts over the past decade, the highest levels of battle-related deaths since 1989 recorded in 2023 (Hansen, 2025).

Performance of UN Peacekeeping Operations

UN's performance in peacekeeping and peacebuilding differs between quantitative and qualitative accounts. Empirical researchs demonstrate a proportional relationship between the presence of UN peacekeepers and the reduction of violence. Peacekeeping is highly effective at preventing the spread of conflict, reducing civilian deaths, and maintaining post-conflict peace. For example, studies covering conflicts in Africa between 1991 and 2011 show that as the number of UN military personnel committed to a mission increases, fewer civilians are killed. This effect underlines that the deployment of several thousand troops and police dramatically reduces targeted civilian victimization. (Walter et al., 2020)

Peacekeeping also shows deterrent effects against the resumption of war. Empirical models suggest that the presence of UN missions reduces the risk of civil war recurrence by over half (Fortna, 2008). Researchers account for the long-term impact of a peacekeeping mission after its completion result in between 75% and 85% reduction in ths risk of war resuming about

(Walter et al., 2020). These results are impressive considering UN is typically sent to the most difficult, violence-prone cases where peace is hardest to keep.

On the other hand, internal evaluations by the Office of Internal Oversight Services draws contrasting conclusions of the organization's management and field effectiveness. Out of 288 audit reports analyzed between 2013 and 2019, fewer than 3% were graded as satisfactory (Bilmes et al., 2021). Missions with enforcement mandates (26%) or humanitarian relief purposes (31%) exhibit lower success rates, and missions lasting longer than ten years succeed only 17% of the time, meaning that mandate complexity and prolonged deployments are associated with lower mission success (Mosness, 2025).

What constitutes central challenge in UN peace operations is the capability–expectations gap, which emerges when missions are insufficiently resourced to meet the expectations attached to their mandates. Peacekeepers are often tasked with broad objectives, yet may lack the training, guidance, and resources necessary to fulfill these tasks effectively (Hansen, 2025). This inconsistency is often exacerbated by misconduct, such as allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers in missions like MONUSCO and MINUSCA, which erodes the public trust essential for a mission's legitimacy (Al Midfa, 2024).

Shaping Peacekeeping Response

According to Paris' (2023) Collective Conflict Management framework, UN response is primarily based on the shared understandings of major powers about what constitutes a threat. In the 1990s, the liberal peace was the consensus response to the problem of state failure, whereas today, that consensus has fragmented and led to confusion in UN operations which continues to maintain formal liberal vocabularies while at the same time taking sovereignty-focused stabilization factors into account to satisfy the interests of powers like China and Russia (Reeder, 2025).

UN responses on the ground can be understood through three complementary approaches: persuasion, inducement, and coercion. Persuasion relies more on ideas and communication than material power. It aims to shape behavior through mediation, public dialogue, and moral pressure. The mission in Namibia stands out as a clear example of how effective persuasion can be in achieving peaceful outcomes. Inducement involves offering material or institutional

incentives to encourage cooperation. This can include development aid, political recognition, or other benefits that motivate local actors to comply with the mission's objectives. For instance, UNIFIL in Lebanon has frequently used financial and institutional inducements to maintain collaboration among different stakeholders. Coercion entails measures such as monitoring, deterrence, and the use of force in a limited, defensive sense to uphold mission mandates. While peacekeepers generally avoid offensive military operations, attempts to use force often encounter challenges due to the lack of standardized military command structures and interoperable equipment. Taken together, these approaches show how UN missions balance diplomacy, incentives, and security measures to tackle complex conflict environments, emphasizing that force is usually a last resort rather than the primary tool. (Howard, 2019)

Policy Perspective: Toward a Modular Subsidiarity Model

To improve the performance and relevance of United Nations peace operations in a multipolar world, the organization must undergo a paradigm shift from multidimensional missions to a "Modular Subsidiarity Model". This argument is predicated on the evidence that the current stabilization model is financially unsustainable, politically overextended, and frequently incompatible with the predatory political ecosystems of modern conflicts.

First of all, the United Nations should abandon the attempt regime change and instead focus on deploying specialized, modular units that can be integrated into broader regional or national frameworks. These modules focused on specific tasks like election security, cybersecurity, human rights monitoring, or mine action allow for a more nimble, time-bound, and targeted presence (Wane et al., 2024). This modularity addresses the capability-expectations gap by aligning mission tasks with specific, resourced expertise rather than broad, unachievable mandates.

The United Nations should also transition its role from the primary security provider to the primary facilitator and standards-setter for regional interventions. Hence, UN can cluster it's resources on conducting its oversight and work more efficiently while benefiting from comparative advantages of other international or regional organizations like the African Union, especially its ability to conduct rapid stabilization and counter-terrorism. This model solves the liquidity crisis since financial burden is shared and prevents the UN from becoming a party to conflicts, which would enable it to preserve its impartial status.

Lastly, peacekeeping policy must be reformed to mandate the integration of local experiences in the design and planning stages of all interventions. In the same regard, the UN must decentralize decision-making power and grant field missions the strategic autonomy to adjust to ground realities without waiting for directives from a polarized Security Council. Local leadership is a practical necessity for ensuring that technical knowledge takes root and that peace processes are viewed as legitimate in the eyes of locals.

Conclusion

The transformation of United Nations peace operations from the 1990s to the present time proved capable of adapting to changing geopolitical conditions while preserving its principles. It is once more facing a challenging situation in which a transition from the liberal peace of the post-Cold War era to the networked multilateralism of today's multipolar world is necessary which requires a rethinking of the United Nations' strengths and weaknesses. While the organization remains the only entity capable of undertaking broad spectrum of peacebuilding tasks with peacekeeping functions, its future success depends on its ability to embrace a more modest, specialized, and partnership-oriented role.

Replacing broad liberal aims with modularity and subsidiarity, prioritizing political solutions over military stabilization and empowering regional and local actors will create opportunities for the United Nations to close the gap between its universal ambitions and its operational realities. The primacy of politics must be adhered to, so that the organization can continue to navigate the new international disorder with its credibility and moral authority preserved. However, putting aside all these prospects, the survival of the UN peacekeeping as a collective security mechanism ultimately depends on whether the United Nations and its Member States can overcome competition and find the cooperation, solidarity, and trust required to manage the threats of the 21st century.

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