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# UN Peacekeeping: Pertinent Today, Reforming for Tomorrow

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*Since its first mission in 1948, United Nations peacekeeping has helped many countries navigate the difficult path from conflict to peace and development. Today, UN peacekeeping remains the embodiment of multilateralism in action, and peacekeepers continue to fulfill a wide range of functions required by the varied contexts in which they deploy. However, UN peacekeepers now confront increasingly complex challenges. Global tensions and divides limit the progress of peace processes on the ground. A rapidly evolving conflict landscape features a proliferation of new actors, including non-state armed groups and international organized crime, and is therefore becoming more dangerous. Peacekeepers are being targeted, not only through physical acts of violence, but also through misinformation and disinformation, which fuels conflict, distorts public perceptions of the role and mandate of peacekeepers, and impedes missions from carrying out their mandates. Yet in the face of these challenges, peacekeepers continue their work with determination to save lives, prevent conflict,*

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*and promote lasting political solutions. As the UN continues to adapt to these and other challenges, efforts are being made across many domains to enhance UN peacekeeping, including improving political strategies and capabilities, strengthening integration—both internally among civilian, police and military components and with UN and other partners—enhancing performance and accountability, strengthening strategic communications, reinforcing cooperation with host states, advancing the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, and driving digital innovation at the service of peacekeeping. The continued relevance and success of UN peacekeeping will only be achieved with the dedicated commitment and efforts of all partners to the pursuit of global peace and security.*

The pursuit of international peace and security is the primary driver of all UN peacekeeping operations. From the first deployment of military observers to the Middle East more than seventy years ago, to today's multi-dimensional missions, more than one million peacekeepers have served with commitment and courage to help monitor and preserve ceasefires that protect civilians and build peace around the world.<sup>1</sup> While the objective remains constant, environments in which peacekeepers operate are rapidly evolving. Heightened political tensions, increasingly complex conflicts, the impact of climate change and transnational crime, growing socio-economic disparities, and a surge in misinformation and disinformation create new and growing threats to the safety and security of UN personnel and the communities they serve. This makes the quest for relevant, innovative, and effective peacekeeping not only necessary, but also more crucial than ever.

## LEARNING FROM THE PAST

Peacekeeping began in 1948 with the deployment of a small group of military observers to monitor the Israel-Arab Armistice Agreement.<sup>2</sup> Other missions quickly followed, including the first armed peacekeeping deployment, the UN Emergency Force, which ended the 1956 Suez Crisis, and the UN Operation in the Congo (1960-64) which, at its peak, comprised almost 20,000 military personnel.<sup>3</sup> In the early years, missions deploying to a variety of destinations, including Cyprus, Kashmir, and Lebanon, typically consisted of unarmed or lightly armed military personnel tasked with observing and monitoring compliance with ceasefires and engaging in confidence-building measures to unite warring sides.

After the Cold War, the strategic context of UN peacekeeping changed. Intrastate, rather than interstate, conflict became more common.

Non-state actors and civilians, including children, became directly involved in the internal conflicts of Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and the former Yugoslavia. These conflicts often had transnational dimensions as they carried a risk of spill-over to neighboring countries and regions. This meant that peacekeepers were mostly deployed to active conflict situations where they faced increasingly complex tasks. Failures to intervene to protect civilians in the former Yugoslavia, Somalia, and Rwanda necessitated reforms to enable peacekeepers to better respond to new realities. Mission mandates became more complex, including a stronger emphasis on the protection of civilians and the development and enhancement of the administrative and governance capacities of host countries, leading to multi-dimensional peacekeeping operations.

In response to the evolving conflict landscape, the UN introduced several initiatives to reform peacekeeping, including the 2000 “Brahimi Report,” which addressed challenges of inadequate resources, overly ambitious mandates, the lack of coordination among international organizations, and more.<sup>4</sup> Among others, the report recommended the need for clear, credible, and achievable mandates from the Security Council, the need for improved consultation and cooperation with troop-contributing countries, the establishment of a roster of pre-selected civilian experts for deployment to peace operations on short notice, and the enhancement of rule of law institutions. The report also emphasized respect for human rights in post-conflict environments. The report further recommended that the Secretariat regularly provide mission leaders with “strategic guidance and plans for anticipating and overcoming challenges to mandate implementation.”<sup>5</sup> The 2008 Capstone Doctrine—which reiterated the three core principles of UN peacekeeping: consent, impartiality, and the non-use of force except in self-defense and defense of the mandate—codified formerly unwritten peacekeeping principles and guidelines.<sup>6</sup>

A year later, the New Horizon Process enhanced the development of policy, capabilities, field support, and planning and oversight for peacekeeping.<sup>7</sup> Concerning policy development, the UN developed mission-wide strategies for the Protection of Civilians (POC) and training modules to bolster the capacity of missions to implement POC tasks. A strategy for critical early peacebuilding tasks in the areas of police; justice and corrections; disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration; security sector reform; and mine action was also developed. In the area of capability development, standards, operational guidance and baseline capability requirements for diverse peacekeeping functions were put in place. Systems for generating critical resources and capabilities were established, including

rosters of pre-selected civilian candidates, such as the Standing Police Capacity and the Standing Justice and Corrections Capacity. Furthermore, personnel preparedness was improved through pre-deployment, mission-specific, and scenario-based training. To enhance field support, a new service delivery model facilitated the timely establishment of new peacekeeping operations missions, improved support provided to missions, and allowed for greater accountability and efficient utilization of resources. In the area of planning and oversight, improvements were made in the timeliness of Secretariat reporting to Member States; triangular consultations among the Secretariat, the Security Council, and the troop-and-police contributing countries were strengthened; the process for senior managers' compacts to ensure accountability was enhanced; and a review of command-and-control arrangements undertaken.<sup>8</sup> These reforms contributed to professionalizing and shaping a new approach to UN peacekeeping.

Over the past two decades, the number of conflicts has risen.<sup>9</sup> Civil wars are increasingly protracted and intractable, partly because they are increasingly internationalized. They have become deadlier and more complicated, involving a wider range of armed groups and non-state actors, who often completely disregard the rules of warfare. These individuals and groups, with diverse motives and objectives and often with links to transnational organized crime, have no real interest in reaching settlements that foster lasting peace. They thrive in chaos.

Increasingly dangerous and unstable conditions create significant new risks for vulnerable communities and threaten the lives of the peacekeepers tasked with protecting them. Terrorist attacks against UN personnel are becoming more frequent and sophisticated, including ambushes, attacks on bases, and a rapid rise in the use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs).<sup>10</sup> A surge in misinformation and disinformation also feeds anti-UN sentiment, particularly in missions in Mali, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Central African Republic (CAR), and Lebanon.<sup>11</sup>

Despite these challenges, peacekeeping has a strong track record, albeit one that can never meet all needs or expectations of host communities. Peacekeepers, for example, cannot be deployed everywhere, particularly in countries that are vast in size such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Central African Republic, or act effectively when host governments fail to exercise their primary responsibility to protect their citizens. Yet civilian, police and military peacekeepers must constantly strive for new, innovative, and effective approaches to delivering their mandates.

## FACING TODAY'S CHALLENGES

Today, UN peacekeeping remains the embodiment of multilateralism in action. Peacekeepers fulfill a wide range of functions required by the contexts in which they are deployed, including as political advisers, electoral observers, state-builders, promoters of human rights, military observers, police trainers, and many other roles. The conditions in which they deploy are also increasingly complex and dangerous, due to new and constantly evolving threats. Sadly, more than 4,200 peacekeepers have lost their lives due to hostile incidents, accidents, or illness, and many more have been injured serving the cause of peace under the UN flag.<sup>12</sup> These losses serve as a stark reminder of the high human cost of the multilateral commitment to global peace and stability.

The commitment to peacekeeping has endured because it has proven to be effective, with a tangible impact on the lives of the people it serves. UN peacekeeping limits the spread of violence, helps restore stability, and creates conducive conditions for the return of internally displaced persons, refugees, and migrants.<sup>13</sup> In dozens of countries, including Cambodia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mozambique, Namibia, Tajikistan, Sierra Leone, Burundi, Timor-Leste, and Liberia, UN peacekeepers have helped end conflicts and promote reconciliation, working closely with critical partners on the ground. By providing basic security guarantees and responding to crises, these UN operations supported political transitions and helped buttress fragile new state institutions. They helped countries move toward their reconstruction goals.

The now-closed UN mission in Côte d'Ivoire, for instance, created conditions to support the return of roughly three-quarters of those who had fled the country in 2010.<sup>14</sup> The mission enabled inclusive dialogue and helped disarm over 70,000 former combatants and reintegrate them into the community.<sup>15</sup> By June 2017, the mission had supported the facilitation of two presidential and legislative elections and strengthened Ivorian security forces. Due to this peace and restored stability, Côte d'Ivoire is today among the fastest-growing economies in Africa.<sup>16</sup>

In another example, the UN Mission in South Sudan saved tens of thousands of lives when it opened its bases to civilians fleeing war and, for many, certain death, during the conflict that erupted in December 2013 between forces allied to President Salva Kiir and his deputy Riek Machar.<sup>17</sup>

Peacekeeping is also cost-effective. For the 2020-21 fiscal year, the USD 6.5 billion UN peacekeeping budget amounted to less than 0.5 percent of total global military expenditures, estimated at almost USD

2 trillion.<sup>18</sup> Academic research has shown that countries and regions that host UN peacekeeping missions experience fewer civilian<sup>19</sup> and combatant deaths,<sup>20</sup> fewer mass killings, longer periods of post-conflict peace, and fewer repeat wars than those that do not.<sup>21</sup>

When I visit our missions and interact with local communities, I am humbled by their trust in UN peacekeepers. The deep links forged by peacekeepers with communities and their regular engagement with people, together with the tangible evidence that peacekeepers save lives, is a testament to the desire of a vast majority of host populations who want them to stay and do more. However, UN peacekeeping faces increasingly complex challenges. Increased division among Member States has resulted in a fraying consensus, such that mandates for peacekeeping missions are no longer passed as easily or unanimously by the Security Council. Diminishing host-state consent and issuing elaborate and ambitious mandates without the resources to match are also more common. Global political tensions play out on the ground and in the Security Council as the lack of strong and united support for political efforts eases pressure on parties to agree to compromises that would foster transition from conflict to peace and recovery. Political solutions progress more slowly or not at all, despite lengthy mediation efforts. This prolongs the impact of conflict and the ability of our operations to implement core mandate activities, including protecting civilians, preserving ceasefires, and building state capacities that ultimately create conditions for peacekeepers to exit and leave behind a country on the path to sustainable peace and progress. Peacekeeping is, above all, a political tool, and its success cannot be achieved without a strong collective commitment to political efforts.

In 2018, the UN Secretary-General launched the Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) initiative with a call for collective action to make peacekeeping stronger and safer, with well-structured, equipped, and trained forces, and a set of realistic expectations, as well as a commitment to mobilize greater support for political solutions.<sup>22</sup> At its core, the initiative underscores the extent to which UN Peacekeeping is an embodiment of partnership, with different actors leveraging their strengths to jointly address challenges. While the UN Secretariat works to improve, all peacekeeping partners need to do their part.

Most UN members (155 of 193 Member States) and four partner organizations heeded this call and endorsed the Declaration of Shared Commitments on UN Peacekeeping Operations.<sup>23</sup> The declaration serves as a roadmap, setting out mutual and respective commitments for

peacekeeping partners under eight thematic areas: politics; women, peace, and security (WPS); protection; safety and security; performance and accountability; peacebuilding and sustaining peace; partnerships; and the conduct of peacekeepers and peacekeeping operations.

In line with these A4P priorities, peacekeeping partners have acted to support political solutions; improve the responsiveness, flexibility, and equipment of missions; prevent and respond to misconduct; increase the participation of women in peacekeeping; improve medical care for peacekeepers; enhance performance, accountability, and transition planning; and bolster partnerships across UN missions. Our strengthened partnerships with other international and regional organizations, such as the African Union, Economic Community of Central African States, and European Union, to name a few, have promoted political solutions and made progress in improving the safety and security of our personnel, enhancing performance, and increasing the number of women in our operations.

As an example of improved operations, the mission in South Sudan adopted a more proactive, robust, and agile approach to protection, rapidly deploying troops to conflict hotspots to reduce violence and create safe conditions that allowed displaced civilians and families to return home.<sup>24</sup> Nearby, our peacekeepers in Abyei are also focused on strengthening protection efforts by embracing a more mobile and flexible posture along with increasing engagement with local communities and stakeholders, in line with the recommendations of a recent strategic review.<sup>25</sup> The United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) has increased the number of regular patrols it carries out to protect civilians and defuse tensions in the area. In one incident in May 2022, peacekeepers in the Southern Area of Operation, in Athony, Malual, and Kadhan, responded to multiple attacks against local communities and were able to force the withdrawal of the attackers. During the incident, peacekeepers temporarily evacuated dozens of community members safely to a UNISFA base. Recently, UNISFA facilitated the Traditional Leaders Peace Dialogue in Uganda, bringing together leaders from the Ngok Dinka and Misseriya communities, which resulted in an agreement between both sides to find sustainable solutions to peaceful coexistence amongst communities in Abyei.<sup>26</sup>

In Southern Lebanon, too, we are working with troop-contributing countries toward creating a more agile and mobile force with improved monitoring capacity by replacing some of the heavy infantry functions with reconnaissance capacities, including high mobility light tactical vehicles.<sup>27</sup>

## REFORMING FOR TOMORROW

In 2020, the UN began an assessment of achievements, remaining gaps, and ways to further strengthen peacekeeping. This process culminated in the March 2021 launch of A4P+, which establishes seven priority areas to drive forward the implementation of A4P over the coming years.<sup>28</sup>

The first is to ensure collective coherence behind political strategies so that peacekeeping missions adopt a common internal approach and join with external partners in a collective effort to secure political solutions. This approach appeared in the work by United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) to use its convening power and good offices to defuse tensions ahead of the formation of a government in the DRC last year. In Mali, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) works closely with regional partners to find a compromise on the political transition. While we are making progress in some places, we need more political support and closer engagement with Member States and partners, including regional and sub-regional organizations in order to have a greater impact and deliver sustainable peace.

The second priority is to enhance strategic and operational integration of planning and activities on the ground to improve our impact on protecting civilians and building peace, including enhancing collaboration between civilians, police, and military components of missions. The rollout of a new Comprehensive Planning and Performance Assessment System (CPAS)—which helps identify key objectives relevant to mandate delivery, actions taken, and the resulting impact—will help improve decision-making, performance, and mandate implementation.<sup>29</sup>

Even with an updated strategy and integrated approach, optimizing effectiveness requires the right capabilities at the right time, in the right place, and with the right mindset. Last year's Peacekeeping Ministerial meeting in Seoul provided an important opportunity to address capability gaps, with more than sixty Member States announcing new pledges, including the deployment of Quick Reaction Forces, helicopters, unmanned aerial systems, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) units.<sup>30</sup> While peacekeepers need appropriate equipment, they must also deploy with a full understanding of what robust peacekeeping means and be willing to act accordingly. In addition, workforce diversity is vital in improving our impact. We are working closely with Troop and Police Contributing Countries to achieve gender parity, create more



enabling mission environments for women, and attract more senior female military and police leaders within our ranks.<sup>31</sup>

We must also strengthen our accountability to peacekeepers. Following the launch of an action plan to improve safety and security in 2018, uniformed fatalities among peacekeepers decreased significantly from twenty-seven in 2018 to twelve in 2020. However, there was an increase to twenty-four in 2021 and as of April 22, 2022, twenty uniformed peacekeepers have died from malicious acts.<sup>32</sup> Many of the recent fatalities result from attacks against peacekeepers in Mali through IEDs used by non-state armed groups.<sup>33</sup> In response, a UN task force has been established along with an explosive threat mitigation framework in Mali, and we have increased our ability to detect and clear IEDs during convoys and patrols.<sup>34</sup> We are also seeking to enhance night-flying capabilities, early warning systems, situational awareness, intelligence-gathering capabilities, and base defenses.

Along with accountability *to* peacekeepers, enhancing the accountability *of* peacekeepers is also a priority. All UN personnel must strictly adhere to the highest standards of conduct. Any misconduct, including sexual exploitation and abuse, is unacceptable, and a breach of trust between the UN and the communities we serve. In these instances, our priority is to support victims through prevention, enforcement, and remedial action. Our efforts, in partnership with Member States, show progress in some areas, including through the socialization of best practices and through lessons learned from recent incidents. However, together we must do more, and we must all play our part, including through adequate vetting, systematic training, accountability mechanisms, and victim support. This must result in critical attention by Member States to pending investigations as well as paternity claims and child support claims, among others.

Strategic communication is at the heart of reform and is vital to securing the political and public support needed to effectively carry out our mandates. In this regard, leaders at headquarters and within missions are required to fully integrate strategic communications into all decision-making and risk management. We are focusing on producing compelling, human-focused stories backed by credible data to demonstrate the impact of our work. Building the capacity of civilian, police, and military communications personnel is a priority, along with strengthening partnerships with other global and local actors to improve our credibility and transparency. This is particularly important in combatting the surge of mis- and disinformation.

Finally, constructive engagement and cooperation with host countries are vital. Too often, missions face restrictions and serious violations of Status of Forces Agreements signed with the host country that allows us to implement our mandates in a safe and unhindered manner. While required by the Security Council to carry out our mandates, we need the full support of host governments and Member States throughout the UN system to do so.

Within each of the A4P+ priorities, we are mainstreaming the WPS agenda. Ensuring our work is gender-responsive and enhances women's full, equal, and meaningful participation in peace and political processes is critical in the face of evolving conflicts. Mission leaders continue to prioritize WPS, and we are seeing results. For example, in CAR and Kosovo, there has been an increase in women representatives in their respective parliaments. In Mali, more women than ever are involved in the Peace Agreement Monitoring Committee, and, in South Sudan, several women now hold key leadership positions. These achievements offer a glimmer of hope, but women's leadership and participation are still far from the norm.

The newly launched Strategy for the Digital Transformation of UN Peacekeeping also sets an ambitious agenda for driving innovation, capitalizing on new technology, and cultivating new ideas. It will build the capacity and culture necessary to strengthen the timely detection, analysis and response to potential threats and align the responsible use of technology with the values of the Organization.

Above all, UN peacekeeping must, at its core, remain a political tool for securing and sustaining global peace. The primacy of political solutions lies at the heart of our work and will continue to be a beacon guiding the multilateral endeavor for a peaceful, stable, and prosperous world. The continued relevance and success of UN peacekeeping will only be achieved with the dedicated commitment and efforts of all partners to the pursuit of global peace and security, ensuring that people, peace, and progress remain our priority. *f*

## ENDNOTES

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