

# A Few Implications of United Nations Peacekeeping Reforms on the United Nations Police

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## Abstract

*Following the Pact for the Future and Independent Study on the Future of United Nations (UN) Peacekeeping, New Models and Related Capabilities, the UN and its member states are reforming UN peace operations. The independent study suggested models ranging from those on prevention, with a focus on protection of civilians, on traditional monitoring tasks, on the support to political transitions, on key functional areas, on human security issues, on the protection of non-humans, and on new domains and spatial focus. Many of them clearly involve policing, law enforcement, or broader rule of law functions. Many require specialised police skills. This means three things. Firstly, member states' selection process needs to be skill and merit-based, and the pool of candidates needs to be diverse, beyond current practice. Secondly, where models require missions to engage with various segments of the local community, police can be well-suited but their selection, training, form of deployment and posture in the mission need to be tailored to the local situation. Lastly, smooth transition and partnerships of each mission is vital for the mission, and for the police.*

## Introduction

The United Nations (UN) peacekeeping has stayed relevant by constantly adapting to the situation since its birth.<sup>1</sup> It has several advantages compared to other potential multilateral responses, including their ability to swiftly generate uniformed and civilian

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personnel. That notwithstanding, it is facing challenges, some relating to new threats.<sup>2</sup> Larger multidimensional missions are no longer default<sup>3</sup>, and no new mission has been established since 2014.

Currently, there is a large reform effort ongoing, following the Secretary-General's call for a strategic review of UN peacekeeping in his policy brief on the requirement for New Agenda for Peace. The Pact for the Future in Sep 2024 called for a full review of UN peacekeeping. The UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO) commissioned an independent study on the Future of UN Peacekeeping, New Models and Related Capabilities<sup>4</sup>, and the study was made public in Oct 2025. There are many sectors and dimensions that are undergoing reform within it. Among them, this article will focus on the police and policing.

The independent study suggested 30 plausible models for the future. A model here means a package with a strategic goal, mission tasks, and related capabilities, and is to be distinguished from mandate. Suggested models are largely learned from previous experiences, ranging from those on prevention, with a focus on the Protection of Civilians (PoCs), traditional monitoring tasks, the support to political transitions, key functional areas, human security issues, the protection of non-humans, to models in new domains and spatial focus. Many of these models involve policing, law enforcement, or broader rule of law functions as key capabilities. Several of them require specialised police skills.<sup>5</sup> At this stage, a brief recapturing of the UN Police and policing functions in UN Peace Operations (UNPOs) is warranted.

### **The Importance of the United Nations Police**

The UN Police and its functions have grown from being non-existent in earlier missions to becoming part of the main goal and often also the exit strategy of many missions. The peak of UN Police deployment was in 2011 with around 14,000 personnel deployed across the globe. They have been delivering diverse roles, including monitoring and reporting, training, investigation, providing security including in certain settings such as election, capacity building, institution building, police reform and governance, security sector reform, executive policing including arrest and detention, and PoCs and important cities. Their roles have been increasingly professionalised. One development on the deployment

modes is that there has been a shift from largely deploying Independent Police Officers (IPOs) to deploying more Formed Police Units (FPUs) since 1999. Today, an increased number of police are deployed in the form of Specialized Police Teams (SPTs)—self-sufficient teams of a small number of police officers with specific expertise, such as sexual and gender-based violence, criminal intelligence, community policing, diplomatic protection, livestock protection, organised crime, and crime scene management.<sup>6</sup> There are also claims that certain roles that traditionally military contingents have delivered may be better delivered by police, especially in politically vulnerable situations.<sup>7</sup> Out of the 42 most frequently mandated tasks between 1948 and 2023 that the independent study cited (peace missions), at least 13 of them are tasks that should have police as a key actor, ranging from provision of security, security sector reform and governance, tasks related to local police activities, protection-related tasks, and justice-related tasks.

The UN Police and policing functions are also key in many of the 30 plausible models that the independent study suggests. Some models are focusing more apparently on police and broader law enforcement, security sector reform/governance, and the rule of law. Models 13 to 15 on Security Sector Reform/Governance, Rule of Law and Law Enforcement, and Police Reforms may be the clearest models in this regard. Many other models need a significant UN Police and related functions. Models 1 and 2 on Prevention Type Deployments need deterrence, early-warning, monitoring, confidence-building functions to prevent violence, to create political space, and to defuse tensions. Model 3 on PoCs may include police in all phases and stages. PoC is also part of many other models, and models on protection of non-humans (Models 23, 24 and 26) require protection roles that police can deliver, especially FPUs, jointly with military. In certain cases, such roles are better delivered by police, whose intervention may pose less concern for the host state than that by the military. Hunt claims that police may have an advantage of working in densely populated areas, where the biggest threat is of a criminal nature. Providing protection while retaining civilian character can help avoiding escalation of violence.<sup>8</sup> Models that require provision of security for specific circumstances or periods (Models 19 to 22 on Emergency Humanitarian Response, Public Health, Natural Disasters, and Humanitarian Accompaniment), may mean that

police are demanded for providing security and safety, and protecting dignity of affected persons. In models that are largely on supporting peace processes and transitions (Models 7 to 10), tasks are wide-ranging, but often include assistance to the local security sector, the rule of law, security, and security sector reform, and strengthening judicial capacity. Model 16 on Assistance to Accountability and Justice is specific on assistance to tribunals and other accountability mechanisms in the investigation and prosecution of serious violations of international law. Related tasks may require specific skills in investigation, and arrest and detention. Model 17 on Counter-Organised Crime may include providing technical expertise and assistance to national institutions, including police and law enforcement institutions, collecting, and analysing information about criminal networks, taking executive action like arrests, and tackling criminal actors and banditry. The so-called spatial models (Models 28 to 29 on Regional Security and City Security) focus on different types of threats, both likely requiring police and policing expertise.

It is apparent that the UN Police and policing functions are very important in current and future missions. Even with the general trend in downsizing and conducting more focused types of UNPOs<sup>9</sup>, policing, law enforcement, and larger rule of law functions remain key to sustaining peace.<sup>10</sup> In certain cases, a more police-centric approach may be more appealing to local stakeholders.<sup>11</sup> The question is, therefore, not whether to deploy UN Police, but how. Issues have been identified in reviews of UN Police, including in the Secretary-General's report<sup>12</sup>, including on rapid deployment, operational modes, required skills and equipment, coordination with other sectors in the mission, performance, accountability, and safety of personnel. UN Police is undergoing a major reform.<sup>13</sup> For example, the new standing operating procedure on IPOs, which clearly refers to SPTs. For the UN Police to use their full potential, three points are discussed below.

### **Skill-based United Nations Police Selection**

The first point is that the UN Police personnel's selection process needs to be skill and merit based. When UNPOs become more focused and more specific skills are sought in personnel, the UN and member states need to explore a large pool of candidates from diverse backgrounds, beyond current practice.

Police personnel are needed to respond to new threats and demands. Amongst threats discussed in the independent study, increased urbanisation of armed conflict may mean that police personnel who understand the city complexity, combining urban migration, loss of community connections and, thus, protection, putting people into vulnerable situations and increasing urban crimes are desired.<sup>14</sup> Increasingly international and region-wide armed conflicts may mean that personnel with expertise in knowledge in the regional and local political, economic, and social settings are desired. Transnational organised crimes cannot be ignored, something that is called ‘Elephant in the room’ by experts.<sup>15</sup> Police personnel are also increasingly required to deal with weapons utilising new and emerging technologies, and conflict in the cyber space. There peacekeeping personnel are required to work with specific expertise, possibly in the form of SPTs. The different modes of police deployment—IPOs, SPTs (which technically are within IPOs’ framework), or FPUUs (which are deployed as 120 to 140 national units, suited for tasks requiring coherent group response in providing security and public order)—are not interchangeable when required tasks are specific and focused.<sup>16</sup> This means that the selection and deployment system need to be able to generate desired personnel with appropriate skills. The current ratio of FPUUs within UN Police is over 70 per cent.<sup>17</sup> Where specific skills are sought, this ratio may change, as consideration on which tasks are suitable for FPUUs is necessary. In that process, capable younger generation and women candidates should be encouraged to join peacekeeping, and the UN and members states should try to facilitate this by broadening the channels for search and by removing obstacles such as hazardous work environments, for example, involving harassment.

In order to respond to the demands for specialised skills, how a standing capacity, like the Standing Police Capacity and Standing Justice and Corrections Capacity, is deployed for the mission start-ups, reinforcement of an existing mission or on specific assistance, can be reviewed and expanded.<sup>18</sup>

The Pledging Guide, prepared by the UN DPO for the Peacekeeping Ministerial 2025, specifies the type of personnel and skills sought, and are helpful in this regard. Pledges typically involve personnel or technical contributions to UN peacekeeping, most notably pledges of uniformed units that will be registered in the Peacekeeping Capability Readiness System.<sup>19</sup>

### **Engagement with the Local Community**

The second point is regarding the UN Police's engagement with the local community.

One of the key success factors is continuous support and cooperation by the host state and local stakeholders.<sup>20</sup> In some missions, especially in Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, the waning cooperation by the host state and anti-mission sentiments have made the effective delivery of the mandate significantly difficult.<sup>21</sup> Local trust is not given as default and needs cultivation.<sup>22</sup> For this, effective communication with the host government and local stakeholders is vital. It requires an open, inclusive approach to all stakeholders<sup>23</sup>, engaging with a vast segment of the local population.

The independent study highlighted the need for a better understanding of the local and regional political and operational context.<sup>24</sup> To do so, having multiple channels to engage with various segments of the community is a requirement. The independent study stressed the importance of strategic communication and tackling mis/dis/mal information and hate speech.<sup>25</sup> For that, UN missions need to have transparent two-way communication with the host government(s) and the population. Providing tangible benefits to the local population was highlighted as a factor for success.<sup>26</sup> This is only possible if the UN mission understands what the local population wished for. In many of these, UN Police and police functions need to have a good community engagement based on professionalism, transparency, and trust. In other words, police can and should engage with communities.

Community-oriented policing employed by UN Police focuses on enhancing the relationship and interaction between the mission and local populations. This approach has become a pillar of mission local engagement strategies, facilitating more people-centred operations<sup>27</sup> and reducing local forms of inter and intra communal violence.<sup>28</sup> In PoC, UN Police contribute to all pillars, and in engaging with dialogue and engagement, the UN Police usually promote protection priorities directly with local stakeholders.<sup>29</sup> Where situation allows this, the UN Police can help in detecting security threats for different communities, early warning, and prevention.<sup>30</sup> The UN Police can build trust in populations who have suffered at the hands of abusive security forces, thereby,

assisting in the regaining of local trust in security forces in the long term.<sup>31</sup> Also, because they are visible in playing these roles, the UN Police personnel engaging in community-oriented policing can enhance the missions' credibility to the population they serve.<sup>32</sup>

However, for community engagement to work well, the selection and training of police personnel, their form of deployment, and posture in the mission need to be tailored to the local situation. Here, desired skills are not only policing skills but also commitment to local peace and security, knowledge of the local settings<sup>33</sup>, and appropriate language skills. Police contributing countries have different experiences with UN peacekeeping, and they provide varying types and levels of preparedness to deliver their increasingly challenging tasks. Rapidly generating enough and appropriate quality of personnel and equipment is a challenge. The gap between high expectation and implementation realities is a continuous issue<sup>34</sup> but again, good and strategic communication with the local counterparts and population would be the key.

### **Partnerships and Smooth Transition**

The third point is that smooth transition and partnerships, both within the mission, and between the mission and partners inside and outside the UN, are vital for the UN Police and the mission as a whole. Partnerships and smooth transition are highlighted in the independent study as well.<sup>35</sup>

First part of this is within the mission. UN Police work together with military counterparts, including in protection-related duties. Because the line between violence, threats of a military nature, and those of a criminal nature is blurred, it is all the more important for the UN Police to work closely with military.<sup>36</sup> UN Police also collaborate closely with human rights and civil affairs personnel within the mission, in particular, in protection-related tasks. Investigation is another area that police and human rights divisions work together.<sup>37</sup>

Partnerships are also about working with local actors, chiefly the local police and security sector. The UN Police may undertake operations that provide for the physical protection for civilians or important non-human subjects, such as key installations or natural resources, in partnership with host-state police. Commonly, UN Police provide operational support to host State law enforcement

agencies, such as in responding to serious public order issues or conducting joint patrols with national police or other security forces.<sup>38</sup> These joint operations with national counterparts have been seen as largely successful in cultivating trust.<sup>39</sup> This needs to be in accordance with all ethical codes and accountability, including Human Rights Due Diligence Policy.

Another key area in partnerships and transition is to place peacekeeping in the broader peacebuilding spectrum. This is effective only if peacebuilding and development actors are working closely with the mission from the start. Policing and the rule of law are good areas to bridge these actors. Police support and build the capacity of local police and security actors, encourage resilience and ownership of security of local actors, thereby, contributing to the prevention of occurrence or recurrence of armed conflict or violence. Police reform or governance can be a beneficial aspect of UNPOs transitions and exit strategies. This may also help realising the goals of sustaining peace and prevention agendas.<sup>40</sup> Actively seeking ways to work with UN country teams, UN peacebuilding, and development actors is necessary in the very challenging operating environments that the missions are deployed in. In the independent study, named potential UN partners include UN Office on Drugs and Crime, UN Office of Counterterrorism, UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, World Health Organization, and UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. It may also be an advantage that the UN Police can be deployed in special political missions or in other outside-of-mission environments. It may be a big asset in ensuring cooperation across UN actors working in peace and security.

The independent study found that partnerships should be sought actively outside the UN, too, including non-traditional ones. International Criminal Police Organization and international financial institutions such as World Bank were named as potential key partners in the independent study. Regional Organisations and arrangements are vital partners, sub-regional ones are increasingly becoming important partners. Relevant private entities may also be partners in certain situations. Innovation as to in-house and external partnerships has been ongoing, and such partnerships can help deliver collective challenging tasks.



As the independent study highlighted, a smooth transition from keeping peace to building a longer-term foundation for peace and development requires good planning, in full cooperation with other UN presences in the country and beyond. The required tasks are wide-ranging compared to what the limited number of UN Police personnel can provide with the authorised strength. Virtually all these police-related tasks are expected to be carried out in partnership with the UN and external partners. There is a need for innovation in partnerships.

### **Conclusion**

In sum, the role of the UN Police has become increasingly important, while achieving their objectives has become more difficult in increasingly challenging operating environments. Looking toward the future, they remain key players. Three implications of the ongoing UNPO reform initiatives on the UN Police were discussed.

Firstly, UNPOs need to be more focused, with specific strategic goals, and for that, UN Police personnel must be selected based on their skills. This is possible only if the pool of candidates is diversified beyond current practice.

Secondly, where missions aim to engage with various segments of the local community, police can be well suited. However, appropriate personnel with relevant skills must be carefully selected and deployed. Their selection, training, form of deployment, and posture in the mission should be tailored to the local context.

Lastly, smooth transitions and strong partnerships are vital for the success of missions and the police. Close cooperation within the mission is essential, and creative collaborations with partners both within and outside the UN are necessary. Peacekeeping cannot be isolated but must be integrated into the broader framework of peacebuilding.

### **Endnotes**

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<sup>2</sup> UN Peacekeeping, 'The Future of Peacekeeping, New Models, and Related Capabilities', 1 Nov 2024, pp 12-17, accessed 2 Feb 2025 <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/study-on-future-of-peacekeeping-new-models-and-related-capabilities>

<sup>3</sup> Annika Hilding Norberg (ed.), 'Ideas Notes 2030: Strategic Reflections on the Future of UN Policing', *Geneva: Geneva Centre for Security Policy*, 2024, pp 20-21, accessed 03 Feb 2025

<sup>4</sup> UN Peacekeeping, 'The Future of Peacekeeping'

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pp 18-38

<sup>6</sup> UN Police, 'United Nations Police', accessed 18 Feb 2025 <https://police.un.org/en>

<sup>7</sup> Ai Kihara-Hunt, *Holding UNPOL to Account: Individual Criminal Accountability of United Nations Police Personnel* (Leiden: Brill Nijhoff, 2017), pp19-20, accessed 12 Feb 2025

<sup>8</sup> Charles T. Hunt, 'Protection through Policing: The Protective Role of UN Police in Peace Operations', *New York: International Peace Institute*, 2020, p 6, accessed 13 Feb 2025 [https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2002\\_Protection-through-Policing.pdf](https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2002_Protection-through-Policing.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Hilding Norberg, 'Ideas Notes 2030', p 12

<sup>10</sup> UN, 'New Vision of the Secretary-General for the Rule of Law', Jul 2023, p 4, accessed 18 Feb 2025 <https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/New-Vision-of-the-Secretary-General-for-the-Rule-of-Law.pdf>

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<sup>12</sup> UN, 'Report of the Secretary-General on United Nations Policing', S/2016/952, Oct 2016, accessed 17 Feb 2025 <https://police.un.org/en/report-of-secretary-general-united-nations-policing-2016>

<sup>13</sup> UN Police, 'United Nations Police'

<sup>14</sup> Hilding Norberg, 'Ideas Notes 2030', p 39

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, pp 85-91

<sup>16</sup> Ai Kihara-Hunt, 'Kokuren Keisatsu no Busouka no Youin Bunseki (An Analysis of the Factors Behind the Arming of UN Police)', In *United Nations Studies*, edited by Japan United Nations Studies Association (Tokyo: Kokusai Shoin, 2018), pp 165–190, accessed 19 Feb 2025

- <sup>17</sup> UN Police, 'United Nations Police'
- <sup>18</sup> UN Peacekeeping, 'The Future of Peacekeeping'
- <sup>19</sup> UN, 'Pledging Guide for the 2024 United Nations Peacekeeping Ministerial', 24 Dec 2024, p 1, accessed 20 Feb 2025 [https://www.un.org/peacekeeping/sites/default/files/pkmin\\_pledging\\_guide\\_2024\\_dec24.pdf](https://www.un.org/peacekeeping/sites/default/files/pkmin_pledging_guide_2024_dec24.pdf)
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- <sup>21</sup> Hilding Norberg, 'Ideas Notes 2030', p 69
- <sup>22</sup> Hilding Norberg, 'Ideas Notes 2030', p 39
- <sup>23</sup> Hilding Norberg, 'Ideas Notes 2030', p 40
- <sup>24</sup> UN Peacekeeping, 'The Future of Peacekeeping'
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid, pp 41-42
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid, pp 46-47
- <sup>27</sup> Hunt, 'International Policing', p 54
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid
- <sup>29</sup> Hunt, 'Protection through Policing', p 8
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid
- <sup>32</sup> Hunt, 'International Policing', p 54
- <sup>33</sup> UN Peacekeeping, 'The Future of Peacekeeping', pp 47-48
- <sup>34</sup> Hunt, 'International Policing', p 58
- <sup>35</sup> UN Peacekeeping, 'The Future of Peacekeeping', p 49
- <sup>36</sup> Hunt, 'Protection through Policing', p 14
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid, 17
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid, 6
- <sup>39</sup> UN Peacekeeping, 'The Future of Peacekeeping', p 46
- <sup>40</sup> Hunt, 'International Policing', pp 53-54