

# Key Factors that Influence the Effectiveness of UN Peacekeeping Operations

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## Abstract

*Looking back over the past 75 years of UN peacekeeping, the most enduring question has been whether peacekeeping is effective? The article goes a step further and asks what factors influence the effectiveness of peace operations? Historically, most peacekeeping operations have been successful. However, peacekeeping is currently suffering from a significant trust deficit. One significant factor that differentiates the contemporary peacekeeping operations with a stabilisation mandate from the historic record is the absence of a viable political or peace process. The article identifies five factors that influence the effectiveness of peace operations. The aim is to generate a guiding framework for effectiveness that can help future decision makers avoid the stabilisation dilemma and the perverse effects it generates. The five factors are: ripeness for resolution, viable political project, coherent and accountable political and material support, principled but adaptive mandating and leadership, and avoiding harm.*

## Introduction

Looking back over the past 75 years of UN peacekeeping, the most enduring question is whether peace operations work? In this article, I go a step further and ask what factors influence the effectiveness of peace operations?

Howard finds that, since the end of the Cold War, two-thirds, or 11 out of 16 UN peacekeeping operations, successfully ended

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and withdrew.<sup>1</sup> Despite this historic record, peacekeeping is currently experiencing a significant trust deficit, largely because the multidimensional stabilisation operations in Central African Republic (CAR), Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Mali are not meeting the expectations raised by their mandates when it comes to protecting civilians, helping host states to counter insurgents, and to end conflicts. At least, partly as a result of the perception that these missions are not achieving their mandates, and under financial pressure, the UN Security Council (UNSC) has not deployed any new UN peacekeeping operations (UNPKOs) since 2014.

This may be a temporary period of contraction and moderation for peacekeeping operations (PKOs)<sup>2</sup>, but it does signal a tension between the overall evidence that UN peacekeeping works, and the perception that contemporary multidimensional UN peacekeeping operations are problematic. This article will offer recommendations about what can be done to guide and improve the effectiveness of UNPKOs in future.

### **Key Factors that Influence Effectiveness of Peacekeeping Operations**

The article identifies five key factors that influence the effectiveness of PKOs. These factors can be used as a framework for effectiveness that can guide future decision-making regarding when - and when not to - deploy UNPKOs, and what kinds of mandated tasks UNPKOs can realistically be expected to achieve, provided they have sufficient political and material support.

### **Ripeness**

There are a few widely agreed upon prerequisites for effective conflict resolution. The first is that the parties to the conflict must have arrived at a point where they have recognised the need to seek a negotiated solution and where they themselves choose to enter a cease-fire or peace process. This implies that they have reached what Zartman has termed a mutually hurting stalemate.<sup>3</sup> This is a point in the conflict where neither party can achieve victory over the other(s) through violence or other coercive means, and the positions they are in are untenable.

The ripeness argument resonates with what is a widely agreed principle in conflict resolution, namely, that peace needs to emerge

from, and be sustained by, the people engaged in and affected by conflict. Peace cannot be imposed. The implication for peacekeeping is a validation of the principle of consent as a pre-requisite for the deployment of a PKOs.

What options does the UN have when a conflict is not yet ripe for peacekeeping? If there is a need to use force to protect civilians outside a peace process, for example in cases of a gross violation of human rights, war crimes or genocide, then the UNSC needs to authorise a coalition of the willing or a regional organisation that is willing and able to perform such a role. All the high-level strategic reviews of UN peacekeeping, including the Brahimi panel (2000) and the High-level Independent Panel of Experts on Peace Operations (HIPPO) (2015), found that UN peacekeeping is not the right tool for peace enforcement.<sup>4</sup> The advice to the UNSC has been clear and consistent; UNPKOs should not - not even as a last resort - be deployed for peace enforcement.

The point is not that the UNSC should shirk its responsibility, but rather that it has many potential options when faced with a compelling need to authorise an enforcement operation.<sup>5</sup> It should not turn to peacekeeping because it is politically or financially convenient without taking ripeness and other factors into consideration.

### **A Viable Political Project**

Both the Brahimi report (deploy only when there is a peace to keep) and the HIPPO report (the primacy of politics) emphasised that UNPKOs can only be effective when there is a viable political process that they can support and protect. This implies a cease-fire agreement, a peace agreement, or a peace process that the major parties to the conflict have committed themselves too, or a clear political roadmap towards such a peace process that is realistically achievable. A viable political project should, thus, be a prerequisite for the deployment and continuation of a UNPKOs.<sup>6</sup>

UNPKOs are effective in certain contexts but perform poorly in others, and one of the key factors that influence its effectiveness is whether there is a viable political project in place. If not, then the consistent advice to the Council from the various expert commissions, it has commissioned over the years is that it should look beyond peacekeeping to the other tools at its disposal.

Perhaps the Security Council should be more creative and invest more efforts into developing new instruments. Afterall, peacekeeping itself was a new innovation 75 years ago.

### **Coherent and Accountable Political and Material Support**

It is necessary that a UNPKOs has the consent of the parties and that there is a viable political project to support and protect, but that is not sufficient. The effectiveness of peace operations is closely linked to the extent they enjoy coherent political support from the widest possible set of stakeholders.

Achieving and sustaining support for the mandate, role, and actions of UNPKOs in a continuously evolving local, regional, and international context does not happen automatically. Coherent political support is, thus, something that the pen holder(s) and other members of the Security Council, the UN Secretary-General, and international, regional, and national stakeholders need to continuously work on to sustain and enhance. Whilst the mission leadership has a role to play in this process, the high-level diplomatic investment needed to sustain and enhance such coherent political support must be driven by the Security Council, Secretary-General and other international and regional partners, and the parties to the conflict.

If international and regional support can be thought of at a vertical scale, then a horizontal level of support, a UNPKOs needs to invest in achieving and sustaining is the support of the people in the country or region where they operate. This implies support for the peace process, or political project, that an operation has been mandated to support and protect, and for the role of the UNPKOs in that process. UNPKOs are still too state centric. They need to become more people-centred, which implies that they need to engage closely with, and make themselves accountable to, the people affected by the conflict.<sup>7</sup>

Another type of support that a UNPKOs needs to build and sustain is the partnerships necessary to generate system-wide comprehensive momentum in support of the peace process. A PKO is just one actor among many actors working towards supporting a peace process, and its impact is limited to a few peace, security, governance, and social domains. There are many other actors, nationally, locally, and internationally that need to be

coordinated and integrated to ensure accountable coherent support across the wider political, security, social, economic, justice, environment, and other dimensions necessary to sustaining peace.

Lastly, a PKO needs to have sufficient material resources to enable it to achieve its mandate. Unfortunately, it is rare that UNPKOs receive adequate and appropriate material resources. It seems as if the diplomatic and bureaucratic processes that generate peacekeeping finances and resources are designed to provide UNPKOs with the minimum resources they need to remain operational, rather than with adequate resources to achieve the mandates they have been tasked with. Raising expectations that UNPKOs will, for example protect civilians, and then not providing those missions with the human and material resources and political backing to do so is immoral and irresponsible.

The consistent gap between the capabilities that expert planners determined are necessary for operations to be effective, and the size of operations authorised by the UNSC and the financial resources approved by the 5<sup>th</sup> Committee of the UNGA, further help to explain the limited effectiveness of these operations.

### **Principled but Adaptive Mandating and Leadership**

For the sustained legitimacy and credibility of specific UNPKOs, the UNSC needs to be guided by the principles of peacekeeping consent, impartiality, and the non-use of force – when it considers when and where to deploy a PKO, and what kind of mandated task to authorise.

While the principles remain constant, how they are applied in each specific context requires that those that lead and command PKOs employ an iterative adaptive mission management approach that is based on the feedback generated by a proactive experiential learning and performance assessment process.<sup>8</sup>

Consent implies that the UN is requested to support the implementation of a cease-fire or peace agreement by the parties to those agreements, or that the UN obtains the consent of the parties to the conflict for a peace operation. The consent of the host state is necessary but not sufficient on its own. When consent is obtained from only one party to a conflict – which is the case in the contemporary operations in CAR, the DRC and Mali – it undermines both the consent and impartiality principles, which

makes the use of force more likely as other parties are likely to feel marginalised and excluded.

When it is not possible or feasible to obtain consent from the parties to the conflict then it implies that such a conflict is not ripe for a peacekeeping operation. In such context the UN Security Council needs to look to the other instruments at its disposal discussed earlier.

These three principles, applied together, have been critical for the effectiveness and resilience of UN peacekeeping over the past 75 years.<sup>9</sup> Those operations that have been successful have all been based on these principles. Peacekeeping's greatest failures – the UN mission in the Congo (ONUC) in the 1960s, and Somalia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda in the 1990s – have all been associated with mandates and context where these principles have been eroded or misapplied.

The mandates of the contemporary 'stabilisation' operations in CAR, DRC and Mali have all significantly departed from the principles of peacekeeping. This gap between what the peacekeeping instrument is intended to do, and how it has been applied in practice in these three contexts, helps to explain the ineffectiveness of these operations. Leaving aside the high number of peacekeepers deaths in these operations, especially in Mali, the result has been a significant loss of credibility for the UN, and especially the UNSC, as well as a loss of credibility in the utility of peacekeeping as a conflict management and conflict resolution instrument. The reputational damage that has resulted from this gap has contributed to the overall decline in trust in UN peacekeeping as an effective instrument, and this has contributed to no new PKOs being authorised since 2014.

### **Avoiding Harm**

A PKO is deployed to generate certain intended effects. However, when you try to influence a complex social system, one will always also generate unintended effects. Aoi, de Coning and Thakur argue that peacekeeping operations need to anticipate that they will generate unintended effects, some of which will have perverse consequences that can cause harm to those the missions are meant to protect and serve, and to the credibility and legitimacy of these operations.<sup>10</sup>

One of the most obvious examples has been the sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) by peacekeepers of the very people they have been mandated to protect. SEA is now no longer seen as something that a UNPKO has no leverage over, and the UN Secretariat and PKOs now take a range of actions to anticipate, prevent and manage SEA. Not all unintended consequences can be foreseen and anticipated as clearly as SEA, but operations can anticipate that their actions will generate unintended consequences and they can proactively monitor for such consequences and respond to them.

Avoiding harm should be the fifth principle that guide UNPKOs because it is critically important for the moral, legal and functional credibility and legitimacy of peace operations, and, thus, a crucial factor that influence, the effectiveness of UNPKOs.

### **Conclusion**

Looking back over the past 75 years of UN peacekeeping, the question this article wanted to contribute to is what factors influence the effectiveness of peace operations? Historically, most PKOs have been successful; however, the utility of peacekeeping is currently under pressure, largely because the contemporary large multidimensional PKOs in CAR, DRC and Mali are suffering from a significant loss of trust.

One significant factor that differentiates the contemporary UNPKOs in CAR, DRC, and Mali from the historic record is the absence of a viable political or peace process. Without such a process in place, peace operations cannot be realistically expected to end the conflict, in these countries, on their own. Peace cannot be imposed.

The article identified five key factors that influence the effectiveness of PKOs. These factors can be used as a framework for effectiveness that can guide future decision-making regarding when - and when not to - deploy UNPKOs, and what kinds of mandated tasks UNPKOs can realistically be expected to achieve, provided they have sufficient political and material support. Taken together, these five key factors all confirm the moral, legal, and functional coherence of the principles of peacekeeping. These principles have been tested, they have adapted to various forms and eras of peace operations, and they have proven to be resilient

and relevant over the entire 75 years history of UN peacekeeping. Staying true to the principles and using these five factors of effectiveness when deciding where and when to deploy UNPKOs, and what kind of mandates to give them, will help the UNSC when it needs to make choices regarding which of the instruments at its disposal will be more likely to be effective in a given context.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> These 16 missions are , Namibia, El Salvador, Cambodia, Mozambique, Eastern Slavonia/Croatia, Guatemala, Timor Leste, Burundi, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, and Liberia. Howard (2019) judge that the following missions have failed: Somalia in 1993; Angola in 1993; Rwanda in 1994; Bosnia (Srebrenica) in 1995; and Haiti in 2017. Since then, the hybrid African Union (AU) – UN mission in Darfur has also been withdrawn with mixed results, bringing the total to 17.

<sup>2</sup> de Coning, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Zartman, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> The Brahimi report is available at: [https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/a\\_55\\_305\\_e\\_brahimi\\_report.pdf](https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/a_55_305_e_brahimi_report.pdf) and the report of the HIPPO panel is available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/report-high-level-independent-panel-peace-operations>.

<sup>5</sup> Karlsrud, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> See Day, Gorur, Holt and Hunt (2020) for case studies and a tool for assessing the political strategy of the missions in CAR, Darfur, DRC, Mali and South Sudan.

<sup>7</sup> de Coning, Karlsrud & Troost, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> In this regard, the implementation of the Comprehensive Planning and Performance Assessment System (CPAS) in UN peacekeeping operations represents a positive development. See Forti, 2022 and de Coning, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> de Coning & Peter, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Aoi, de Coning and Thakur, 2007.



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