

The Pact of the Future and its Implications for Peacekeeping

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Abstract

United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKOs) have been an important tool for international security but are now struggling to meet the fast-evolving conflict challenges. This article draws inspiration from the Pact of the Future and explores how UNPKOs can be reformed and emboldened to meet the 21st Century conflicts characterised by asymmetric warfare, stiffening geopolitical tensions, the involvement of Non-State Actors, and an ever-increasing intersection with technology and climate change.

Introduction

The United Nations (UN) Summit of the Future, referred to as a 'Once-in-a-Generation' opportunity, took place on 22-23 Sep 2024, with over 130 heads of states adopting the Pact of the Future (A/RES/79/1), which is considered 'The most comprehensive international agreement in decades'.^{1 2 3} The Pact covers a wide range of issues, including global equity, climate action, and peace, addressing areas on which agreements could not be reached earlier, aiming to embolden international institutions to shape our shared future in a contemporary world that has changed radically since these institutes were created.⁴ While the leaders pledge to 'Promote international stability, peace, and security, whereby, conflicts and crises are resolved through peaceful means' (Commitment 11 of the Declaration on Future Generations), roughly 60 armed conflicts, highest ever recorded, are gripping the world today, leaving about 2 billion people in conflict-affected areas.⁵ Meanwhile, the global military spending soared to an all-time high

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of USD 2.443 tn in 2023, a year-on-year increase of 6.8 per cent.⁶ The World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2025 at Davos ranked conflicts as the 'Greatest danger facing world' in its latest Global Risk Report.⁶

Amidst these conflicts, UN Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKOs) are falling into deepening unprecedented scrutiny. The Pact of the Future emphasises on redefining multilateral cooperation and augmenting the efficiency of global governance, and stresses on modernising UNPKOs for increasing their operational efficiency, while leveraging emerging tools such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and data-driven conflict prevention mechanisms to tackle the root causes resulting in and fuelling conflicts. As UNPKOs, especially the stabilisation missions such as UN Organisation Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO), are being questioned on legitimacy coupled with operational constraints and political complexities, the Pact provides a guiding framework for much-needed reforms.

Since their inception 77 years ago, UNPKOs have evolved significantly from their meek beginning as conventional peacekeeping efforts during the Cold War, to today's multifaceted missions addressing a multitude of dimensions. Over the decades, the scope of UNPKOs have evolved significantly in nature, goals, and challenges. Although, the traditional UNPKOs seem to struggle to catch-up with the shifting landscapes and adapt to the complex and multidimensional threats. This, however, in no way negates the need for UNPKOs, especially in the current geopolitical environment. UNPKOs, once believed to be the cornerstone of conflict resolution and stabilisation, are increasingly burdened by multiple challenges. While 11 out of 16 UNPKOs have 'Successfully ended and withdrew' since the Cold War, their effectiveness is under constant scrutiny because of an amalgamation of constrained resources, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and the ever-evolving nature of modern conflicts.⁷ This resulted in no new UNPKOs being sanctioned since 2014. The current situation of MONUSCO bears the testimony of these challenges, leaving the mission struggle for maintaining its legitimacy and operational relevance.

In today's era, signified by asymmetric conflicts, stiffening geopolitical tensions, and an ever-increasing intersection with technology and climate change, reforming UNPKOs is not just an option, but a necessity which is imperative for maintaining international stability. The present-day conflicts, manifesting as protracted civil wars, non-state actors, polarisation, and hybrid threats, call for a transition from reactive peacekeeping to proactive conflict prevention and stabilisation. Without substantial reforms, UNPKOs will further become susceptible to loss of credibility, risking diminishing their role as the central pillar of global peace and security.

Challenges Faced by Existing Missions: The Case of United Nations Organisation Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo

MONUSCO, one of the longest running and most expensive UNPKOs, has been grappling with intensifying challenges recently, undermining its ability to fulfil its mandate. Originally deployed in 1999 to supervise a fragile peace process, MONUSCO's mandate has been expanded to include Protection of Civilians (PoC), disarmament, demobilisation, repatriation, reintegration and resettlement, and security sector reforms. These additional responsibilities burdened the mission, which is limping on a thin budget, while it faces stark resistance from Congolese authorities and locals.

In spite of MONUSCO's deployment since decades, the situation in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) continues to remain fragile. Armed groups, including M23 and the Allied Democratic Forces, continue to commit atrocities against civilians. Recently, the rebels seized Goma, where the Force Headquarters is situated, and have taken control of Bukavu ahead of the African Union (AU) Summit, while killing hundreds of civilians.⁸ The mission's inability to decisively arrest violence and discharge its PoC mandate has fuelled resentment leading to protests demanding its withdrawal. This is exacerbated by the sentiment that UNPKOs prioritise foreign interests over local needs, further weakening their legitimacy.

UNPKOs operate under strict mandates, constraining their ability of offensive actions, leading to disappointment in host nations expecting more decisive interventions. The DRC government has

repeatedly called for MONUSCO's withdrawal, underscoring the tension between national sovereignty and UNPKOs. Moreover, stabilisation missions often find themselves in difficult situation as they do not have consent of all the warring parties, increasing the risk of offensive action by non-consenting parties while the mission is held by limitations on use of force. This issue is likely to become more eminent in present-day conflicts, where all the warring parties are unlikely to consent to UNPKOs. Beyond MONUSCO, UNPKOs are incapacitated by a broader set of structural and financial challenges:

- With the UN being a bureaucratic organisation, UNPKOs are held back by complex decision-making processes, sluggish response to predicaments, and fragmented coordination among member states, UN agencies, and other stakeholders. This systematic inertia hinders UNPKOs' ability of adapting to evolving conflict landscapes.
- With an annual budget often exceeding the entire UN general budget, UNPKOs are a cash-intensive affair. As an element of the UN, UNPKOs are not immune to their dependency on member states for financial contributions. The 2024-25 budget for UNPKOs is USD 5.6 bn, an 8.2 per cent decrease from USD 6.1 bn in 2023-24.⁹ The rapid change in policies of the United States post 2024 presidential elections might further deteriorate the financial health of UNPKOs in face of increasing conflicts globally. Member states delaying their dues and funding cuts from major donors, coupled with the snowballing global crises and straining resources, jeopardise UNPKOs.
- UNPKOs struggle to develop clear success metrics or transition plans for post-mission stability. This lack of clear exit strategy and elongated deployment in absence of a well-defined timeline for withdrawal contributes to the frustration of the national authorities.
- Modern-day conflicts are becoming more asymmetric, which the traditional UNPKOs were not designed to tackle. They continue to largely remain reactive rather than preventive, obstructing their ability to de-escalate tensions before they mushroom into full-scale conflicts.