

The UN Peacekeeping System Today: A Working Tool or an Incomplete Mechanism

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Abstract - This article interrogates whether the contemporary United Nations peacekeeping system functions as an effective instrument of international security governance or remains an institutionally constrained and politically incomplete mechanism. Situating the analysis within International Relations debates on collective security, multilateral legitimacy, and conflict management, the study traces the evolution of UN peacekeeping from traditional inter-state monitoring operations to multidimensional and robust mandates operating in intrastate and asymmetric conflict environments. Employing a qualitative research design based on systematic analysis of secondary sources, including UN reports, Security Council resolutions, policy reviews, and peer-reviewed scholarship, the article adopts a dual-model analytical framework that contrasts peacekeeping as a working tool against peacekeeping as an incomplete mechanism. Empirical case studies drawn from Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, Mali, and Cyprus demonstrate that UN peacekeeping can significantly reduce violence, protect civilians, and stabilize post-conflict transitions when mandates are clear, resources adequate, and political consent sustained. At the same time, the findings reveal persistent structural deficits, mandate-capability gaps, financial precarity, host-state dependence, and Security Council paralysis, that undermine operational effectiveness in high-threat environments. The analysis further highlights the normative and practical tension between consent-based peacekeeping and expectations of peace enforcement in conflicts involving non-state armed actors. By integrating empirical evidence with institutional analysis, the article contributes to IR scholarship by moving beyond binary success-failure assessments and reframing UN peacekeeping as a contingent governance mechanism whose performance is shaped by global power politics, bureaucratic design, and evolving security realities. The study offers policy-relevant insights into how technological innovation, Security Council reform, and regional hybrid arrangements could recalibrate peacekeeping for a multipolar order. In doing so, it provides a grounded assessment of what UN peacekeeping realistically delivers and why its reform remains central to the future of multilateral conflict management.

Keywords: *United Nations Peacekeeping; International Security Governance; Collective Security; Multidimensional Peace Operations; Civilian Protection;*

Peace Enforcement Dilemma; Security Council Politics; Multilateral legitimacy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Since its establishment in 1945, the United Nations (UN) has been tasked with maintaining international peace and security as one of its central mandates. In the aftermath of World War II, the founders of the UN envisioned a collective security mechanism capable of preventing future global conflicts through diplomacy, cooperation and if necessary international intervention under the UN Charter, particularly Chapters VI and VII¹. This vision materialized in 1948 with the deployment of the first United Nations peacekeeping mission, the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), in the Middle East. Marking the institutional birth of UN peacekeeping, UNTSO consisted of unarmed military observers tasked with monitoring the ceasefire following the 1948 Arab–Israeli conflict.² From this initial operation, the peacekeeping system began a process of rapid adaptation, as early missions established practical mechanisms for conflict management that would later evolve into more complex and multidimensional operations.

Initially, UN peacekeeping operations functioned as lightly armed missions focused on monitoring ceasefires and facilitating diplomatic negotiations between conflicting parties. It is worthy to note that, the early “traditional peacekeeping” model relied on three fundamental principles, consent of the parties, impartiality, and non-use of force except in self-defense³. During the Cold War, “traditional” peacekeeping focused primarily on inter-state conflicts, maintaining buffers between sovereign armies with the consent of the parties involved. The landmark Suez Crisis in 1956 saw the creation of the first armed force, the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF I), which again codified the core principles of consent, impartiality, and the non-use of force except in self-defense. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the system entered a second, “multidimensional” phase.

The 1990s demanded that peacekeepers manage intra-state civil wars, necessitating a shift toward tasks such as human rights monitoring, security sector reform, and electoral assistance. The 1990s represented a turning point in the evolution of the UN peacekeeping system. Conflicts in Somalia, Rwanda, and the former Yugoslavia exposed serious deficiencies in the UN's ability to protect civilians and enforce mandates. In response, the UN launched significant institutional reforms, exemplified by the 2000 Brahimi Report, which called for stronger mandates, clearer rules of engagement, and better logistical support⁴. These reforms marked the transition toward "robust peacekeeping," emphasizing not just conflict monitoring but also state-building, human rights protection, and security sector reform.

Today, UN peacekeeping reveals a system facing a third-generation crisis. In 2026, the mechanism is no longer merely a functional tool but is increasingly critiqued as an incomplete mechanism struggling with the realities of asymmetric warfare and a fractured geopolitical landscape. Modern missions such as those in South Sudan (UNMISS) and the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) operate in environments where there is often no peace to keep which has intensified debates over whether the system should evolve toward more forms of peace enforcement. More so, the UN peacekeeping system remains an essential multilateral asset yet it is constrained by a severe liquidity crisis and persistent divisions among permanent Security Council members leaving its future effectiveness uncertain.

Consequently, analyzing the UN peacekeeping system requires balancing recognition of its contributions to international stability with a critical understanding of its institutional and political shortcomings a tension that continues to shape debates over whether the system functions as a working tool or an incomplete mechanism.

II. THE UN PEACEKEEPING SYSTEM AS A WORKING TOOL

The United Nations peacekeeping system serves as a significant instrument of international security by bridging the gap between diplomatic negotiation and the use of force and by providing a structured process for states transitioning from conflict to peace. Operating in some of the world's most volatile

environments peacekeeping missions combine conflict management with political engagement and institutional support rather than serving as a purely symbolic presence. When mandates are robust and adequately resourced peacekeepers can mitigate violence stabilize contested territories and create conditions that enable negotiated settlements to endure. Despite increasingly operational challenges the system continues to function as a working tool due to its capacity for conflict mitigation its multilateral legitimacy and its ability to deliver integrated policy responses across security political and humanitarian domains.

Conflict Mitigation and Stabilization

Empirical studies show that UN peacekeeping significantly reduces the likelihood of conflict escalation recurrence and cross-border diffusion especially when missions have strong mandates and sufficient troops⁵. For instance, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) played a central role in overseeing the demobilization of armed factions supporting post-war elections and restoring basic security following the 2003 Accra Peace Agreement thereby preventing a relapse into civil war and contributing to a sustained reduction in large-scale violence. Significantly, the United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) helped contain post-electoral violence between 2010 and 2011 stabilized contested territories and supported the reconstitution of state authority which limited regional spillover and reinforced longer-term political normalization. These cases illustrate how well-resourced and strategically mandated peacekeeping operations function as effective tools for conflict management rather than symbolic interventions. Peacekeeping forces reduce everyday insecurity by conducting patrols in volatile areas deterring violence against civilians and facilitating humanitarian access in contexts where state authority has eroded or collapsed. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo the deployment of MONUC and its successor mission MONUSCO helped limit the geographic spread of hostilities across multiple provinces and enabled the establishment of secure corridors for displaced populations even as deeper structural drivers of conflict remained unresolved. A further illustration of stabilization is provided by the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) which in late 2013 shifted its operational focus toward the Protection of Civilians mandate following the outbreak of civil war. By opening its bases to fleeing

populations UNMISS provided sanctuary to more than 200,000 civilians whose lives were at risk due to ethnic targeting and political violence demonstrating the capacity of peacekeeping operations to deliver immediate life-saving protection under extreme conditions.

Multilateral Legitimacy

A core strength of the UN peacekeeping system is its unparalleled legitimacy as an instrument of the UN Security Council because missions reflect a collectively negotiated mandate rather than the will of a single state or coalition. This legitimacy is anchored in the foundational principles of consent of the main party's impartiality and the non-use of force except in self-defense or defense of the mandate which distinguish UN peacekeeping from coercive interventions.⁶ UN peacekeeping derives legal and political authority from Security Council resolutions grounded in the UN Charter which authorize the deployment of international forces in sovereign territories.⁷ This legitimacy is anchored in the foundational principles of consent of the main parties, impartiality, and the non-use of force except in self-defense or in defense of the mandate which distinguish peacekeeping from coercive military action. Such moral and legal authority enables the United Nations to convene diverse domestic, regional, and international stakeholders and to mobilize global resources in support of fragile peace processes. This dynamic is evident in missions such as UNMISS in South Sudan and MINUSCA in the Central African Republic where host governments and regional actors accepted deployment largely because the operations carried Security Council authorization rather than the interests of a single external power. A further illustration of the enduring value of legitimacy is the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP), which since 1964 has supervised a de facto ceasefire and maintained a buffer zone between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. Even during prolonged political deadlocks, the presence of an impartial UN force has remained a necessary condition for preserving stability and preventing a return to large-scale ethnic conflict.

Integrated Policy Responses

Since the Brahimi Report and subsequent high-level reviews UN peacekeeping has shifted toward multidimensional and integrated missions that combine security provision governance support human rights monitoring and development assistance

as mutually reinforcing components of a single mandate.⁸ Missions such as UNMIL in Liberia and UNAMSIL in Sierra Leone linked disarmament and demobilization with electoral assistance police reform and rule-of-law support which fostered post-war institutional consolidation instead of a temporary ceasefire freeze.⁹ These Integrated responses in UN peacekeeping involve close coordination with regional organizations, specialized agencies, and humanitarian actors to align political mediation with peacebuilding efforts. Joint arrangements such as AU–UN initiatives in Somalia and hybrid operations in Darfur demonstrate how peacekeeping platforms can link military stabilization with diplomatic engagement and longer-term state-building agendas, even under highly contested security conditions. A concrete example is the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), which employs a highly integrated approach. Beyond its military presence, MINUSCA has established 83 community protection committees, trained regional authorities on Protection of Civilians (POC) principles, and coordinates with UN humanitarian agencies to ensure that security gains translate into the safe delivery of aid and the gradual restoration of state authority in rural areas.

Despite enduring operational constraints and the strategic complexities of a multipolar international system, the UN peacekeeping apparatus persists as a critical instrument of international security governance. By leveraging its empirically demonstrated capacity for conflict containment, normative authority grounded in multilateral legitimacy, and multidimensional integration of military, political, and humanitarian strategies, it remains a central mechanism for advancing post-conflict stabilization and the consolidation of durable peace in fragmented and contested arenas.

III. THE UN PEACEKEEPING SYSTEM AS AN INCOMPLETE MECHANISM

The UN peacekeeping system frequently functions as a constrained security apparatus rather than a fully capacitated instrument of conflict governance, as its institutional architecture, mandate formulation, and operational doctrines circumscribe its effectiveness in complex intrastate and multidimensional crises. Meanwhile, the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping framework can be likened as the cornerstone of

global stability, it frequently functions as an incomplete mechanism due to inherent systemic flaws. These structural and political limitations manifest in persistent financing shortfalls, protracted decision-making processes, and the systemic challenges of transitioning from consent-based peacekeeping to robust peace enforcement operations within contested and high-intensity environments.

Structural and Bureaucratic Constraints

The UN peacekeeping bureaucracy is highly fragmented with mandates set by the Security Council budgets negotiated by member states and implementation left to field missions that depend on voluntary troop and police contributions.¹⁰ Moreso, the UN peacekeeping apparatus is frequently paralyzed by its own administrative complexity and the geopolitical interests of the Security Council. Decisions regarding mission mandates often reflect the strategic priorities of the Permanent Five (P5) members rather than the immediate needs of the conflict zone. This arrangement produces a persistent “capability–expectations gap” where missions receive expansive mandates on civilian protection state-building and counterterrorism yet lack the personnel equipment and intelligence support required to match those goals.¹¹ In Mali for example, the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) illustrates the structural vulnerabilities inherent in peacekeeping operations that rely on voluntary contributions. Operating with approximately 13,000 uniformed personnel across a territory larger than France, MINUSMA confronted persistent jihadist insurgencies and improvised explosive devices, making it one of the deadliest UN missions with over 300 peacekeeper fatalities by the early 2020s. The abrupt withdrawal of air assets and specialized personnel by certain member states exposed the mission’s operational fragility. Ultimately, the host government requested the UN’s exit in 2023, citing the mission’s limited capacity to counter terrorism effectively, highlighting how structural dependency, overstretch, and insufficient force protection can constrain the efficacy of multidimensional stabilization efforts.

Resource and Funding Gaps

The gap between ambitious mandates and actual financial backing renders the peacekeeping mechanism incomplete. As of 2024, the UN peacekeeping budget faces a severe liquidity crisis, with outstanding arrears from member states

exceeding \$1 billion.¹² This fiscal instability forces missions to operate with aging equipment, insufficient medical facilities and a lack of advanced technological surveillance, such as Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), which are essential for monitoring vast territories. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), the mission has been tasked with protecting civilians across a territory roughly the size of Western Europe. However, with approximately only one peacekeeper for every 48 square kilometers of volatile terrain, the resource-to-task ratio is mathematically impossible, leaving large populations vulnerable to militia attacks despite the UN’s presence. Similarly, a comparable constraint is evident in South Sudan, where UNMISS has struggled to secure vast rural areas due to shortages in mobility assets and force protection capabilities, limiting its ability to project presence beyond urban Protection of Civilians sites and reinforcing a pattern in which mandate ambition consistently outpaces logistical and financial capacity.

The “Peace Enforcement” Dilemma

A fundamental flaw in the current mechanism is the ambiguity between traditional peacekeeping and peace enforcement. Modern conflicts often involve non-state actors and violent extremists who do not respect the “consent of the parties” principle. The doctrinal shift toward more robust mandates exposes a core dilemma: UN peacekeepers are expected to protect civilians and sometimes “neutralize” armed groups yet they are neither designed nor resourced to wage sustained offensive operations against determined adversaries.¹³ Traditional principles, consent impartiality and limited use of force, sit uneasily with expectations that missions will confront spoilers’ terrorists and criminal networks that reject any peace process. Peace enforcement also risks eroding perceived impartiality because armed factions and local populations may see UN troops as allies of the government or one coalition rather than neutral guarantors of a peace accord.¹⁴ In Mali, segments of the population and state authorities increasingly perceived MINUSMA as aligned with Western security agendas, a perception that fueled domestic political backlash and facilitated the acceptance of alternative military partners despite the mission’s civilian-protection mandate. Simultaneously, troop-contributing countries have remained reluctant to absorb high casualty risks associated with enforcement-oriented tasks under UN command, resulting in cautious force postures,

restrictive rules of engagement, and a widening gap between the robust language of Security Council resolutions and operational behavior on the ground. A comparable dynamic is evident in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where the UN Intervention Brigade within MONUSCO represented a rare attempt to bridge this enforcement deficit by authorizing offensive operations against the M23 rebel group. Although the brigade achieved short-term military gains, the absence of a comprehensive political settlement and the UN's institutional hesitation to sustain a fully coercive posture enabled conflict dynamics to re-emerge over time, underscoring that without a credible transition from military containment to political transformation, peacekeeping remains an incomplete mechanism rather than a durable conflict-resolution instrument.

More Importantly, the UN peacekeeping system remains structurally and normatively important yet it operates as an incomplete mechanism because its effectiveness is tightly constrained by political dynamics and host-state dependence. Peace operations do not simply reflect technical assessments of needs they are negotiated products of Security Council politics where veto powers and shifting alliances determine whether crises receive robust mandates limited monitoring missions or no UN presence at all. In conflicts such as Syria and Ukraine the absence of large-scale UN peacekeeping has not reflected a lack of human suffering but the refusal of key Council members to authorize deployments that might challenge their own interests or those of close partners which reveals how geopolitical rivalry can nullify the system's crisis-management potential. Even where missions are established their performance and longevity depend heavily on the will of host governments which can enable or disable operations through legal and administrative tools rather than direct confrontation. Practices such as restricting patrols denying flight clearances delaying visas or expelling key personnel allow authorities to shape what peacekeepers can see report and do on the ground thereby narrowing the space for impartial monitoring and civilian protection. The 2023 request by Mali's authorities to end MINUSMA after critical human rights reporting and the difficulties earlier missions faced in Ethiopia and Eritrea once consent eroded show how quickly a mission can be downsized or terminated despite continuing security threats when host leaders decide that UN scrutiny is politically inconvenient. These

patterns underscore that the UN system is incomplete not only because of capability gaps but because its core instruments remain hostage to the strategic calculations of powerful states and the sensitivities of governments that can revoke consent at will. As long as robust mandates deployment decisions and operational access hinge on these political conditions' peacekeeping will remain uneven and often fragile capable of mitigating violence and supporting transitions in some contexts yet unable to act or to stay where its presence is most needed.

IV. FUTURE PROSPECTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The UN peacekeeping system can evolve beyond its current limitations through targeted reforms that leverage emerging technologies strengthen institutional structures and redistribute authority toward more inclusive global security arrangements. These changes would address chronic underfunding political gridlock and operational rigidity while adapting to multipolar realities and digital-era threats.

Digital tools offer practical pathways to enhance situational awareness rapid response and stakeholder engagement in peacekeeping operations. Satellite imagery drone surveillance and AI-driven predictive analytics enable missions to track armed group movements detect mass atrocities and allocate resources preemptively across vast theaters where ground patrols alone fall short. For instance, real-time data fusion from social media geospatial sensors and local reporting helped MONUSCO in the Democratic Republic of Congo anticipate militia attacks and protect displacement camps more effectively than traditional intelligence cycles. Deploying secure digital platforms for virtual negotiations would also allow envoys to consult remote community's diaspora groups and civil society without relying solely on physical access often blocked by host restrictions.

Blockchain-based logistics systems could streamline supply chains cutting procurement delays from months to days while ensuring transparent aid distribution in corrupt environments. Cybersecurity protocols tailored for field missions would safeguard communications against state-sponsored hacking which compromised operations in Mali and South Sudan. These innovations demand upfront investment in training interoperability standards and

data-sharing agreements across contributing states yet they promise disproportionate gains in operational tempo and credibility.

Expanding the Security Council's permanent membership to include rising powers such as India Brazil Germany Japan or regional representatives from Africa and Latin America would better reflect 21st-century geopolitics and reduce veto-induced paralysis on peacekeeping deployments. A reformed Council with 7–9 permanent seats and expanded veto restraint mechanisms could generate more consistent mandates for missions in Syria Yemen or Ukraine where current P5 divisions have blocked action. Germany and Japan already contribute significantly to budgets and troops; granting them permanence would incentivize deeper commitments to robust operations rather than selective engagement. Synodical voting thresholds or suspending vetoes on civilian-protection resolutions would prevent single states from derailing consensus on mass-atrocity response. Historical precedents like the 1965 expansion demonstrate that measured enlargement strengthens rather than weakens the Council's authority provided new members embrace collective responsibility.

Peacekeeping budgets must rise from the current \$6.5 billion annual ceiling, less than 0.5% of global military spending, to at least \$10 billion with mandatory assessed contributions scaled to GDP and a reserve fund for surge capacity. Underfunding forced MINUSMA's 2023 withdrawal with only 65% of authorized aviation assets leaving northern Mali exposed to jihadist resurgence. Doubling helicopter and drone fleets guaranteed through multi-year contracts would eliminate chronic gaps that expose troops and civilians alike. A dedicated peace enforcement trust fund financed by a 0.01% levy on arms transfers would underwrite offensive capabilities for high-threat missions without annual haggling. Redirecting 5% of national defense budgets from major powers toward UN operations could generate \$50 billion yearly enabling multidimensional mandates that integrate security with justice reform and economic recovery from the outset.

Shifting toward hybrid models that empower regional organizations like the African Union European Union or ASEAN would distribute burdens and tailor responses to local contexts. The AU's G5 Sahel Joint

Force and UN hybrid mission in Darfur proved that delegated authority accelerates deployment and aligns strategies with regional priorities while UN oversight ensures compliance with international law. Framework partnerships should grant regional bodies Chapter VIII funding access and command over initial phases with seamless UN transition once stability consolidates.

Local ownership requires elevating women's groups youth networks and traditional authorities into mission planning through permanent consultation mechanisms rather than sporadic outreach. Track II diplomacy platforms linking field commanders with non-state actors would sustain dialogue during flare-ups preventing escalations that overwhelm under-resourced contingents.

Systemwide enlightenment demands candid self-assessment through independent reviews that hold underperforming troop contributors and Secretariat officials accountable with rotation bans for repeated failures. Mandatory doctrinal updates every five years incorporating field lessons and geopolitical shifts would prevent obsolescence as seen in outdated rules of engagement during Rwanda's genocide. Cross-training programs embedding peacekeepers with special forces and cyber units from contributing states would build enforcement-ready skills without upending impartiality principles. Ultimately these reforms hinge on member states treating peacekeeping as a core security investment rather than an optional charity. Incremental steps, pilots expanded Council seats standby forces and regional hybrids, can compound into a system capable of deterring aggression protecting the vulnerable and forging lasting settlements in an era of hybrid threats and fractured sovereignty.

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