

Workshop Report

From Protection to Reflection:

The Future of UN Peacekeeping and the Protection of Civilians

On May 22, 2024, the United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR) and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung New York Office (FES NY) hosted a workshop for experts from the UN Secretariat and the New York-based Think Tank/Civil Society community. The discussion took place on the occasion of the annual Protection of Civilians (PoC) week, coinciding with the 25th anniversary of the UN Security Council's first resolution on PoC ([S/RES/1265](#)). The key issue was the future of the PoC agenda in a peace and security environment characterized by a diminished role for UN Peacekeeping Missions (PKOs).

Without assuming to reflect fully on the entire debate, what follows is a separate summary of three interlinked dynamics: First, the increasing stalemate and malfunctioning of the Security Council and multilateral decision-making in general. Second, the evolution in PKOs and Special Political Missions (SPMs). Third, the evolution of the PoC agenda.

1) Increasing stalemate: The inability of multilateral processes and institutions to foster peaceful solutions is currently on full display for a number of armed conflicts. For these major confrontations, the blockage in the Security Council is back to the Cold War level. For geopolitically less contested files, a modicum of cooperation continues. The UN General Assembly has not been able to fill this void. At the same time, it was argued that peacekeeping is one of the few tools that enjoys the support of the Permanent Five Security Council Members (P5). Moreover, if history is any guidance, it was often at moments of great geopolitical divisions when new missions, both PKOs and SPMs, were created: The Council agreed on the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) in 2014, after Russia's first invasion of Ukraine. Before that, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) was established in 2003, right after the Iraq invasion of a US-led coalition. During the Cold War period, among others, the missions UNMOGIP and UNFICYP were established. For the moment, however, it seems unlikely that the Council has an appetite for multidimensional peacekeeping missions.

2) Evolution of peace operations: Overall, many of the large-scale peace operations, starting from 1999 and onwards, were fundamentally successful, and peacekeeping is widely considered an effective tool to diminish the intensity of conflict. At the current point in time, however, there is a residue of missions that partly rendered unsatisfying outcomes and that are developing feasible exit strategies (for example, MONUSCO). Over time, extra tasks were added to the mandates of these missions, leading to the contention that some of these missions were no longer fit for purpose.

Peace operations' weaknesses in implementing their mandates, combined with domestic political pressures and rising instability, can result in tense relations between host states and multilateral actors, which, in the case of Mali, lead to the withdrawal of the host state's invitation and closure of MINUSMA. Conversely, while there are some warnings that the demise of POs could become a self-fulfilling prophecy and troop levels being down from over 100,000 in 2017, many shared the view that the currently active, large peace operations (MINUSCA; UNMISS) are here to stay. Consequently, there continue to be many peacekeepers in missions, on which the international community must not give up as they work to protect civilians.

Two alternatives to multidimensional “Peak PKOs” were discussed:

a) transformation into Special Political Missions (SPMs). Smaller SPMs are often conceived as an alternative to large-scale PKOs, from which useful lessons can be derived. Going forward, discussants noted with appreciation that the draft versions of the UN Member States’ “Pact for the Future” put an emphasis on flexible mandates. Yet there was also concern that Member States would overburden SPMs by prescribing them to do more with less.

b) relegation to a regional organization. Special attention was given to Security Council Resolution [S/RES/2719](#) by which the Council agreed to consider, on a case-by-case basis, the funding for African Union-led peace support operations via the UN’s assessed peacekeeping budget. The details concerning the implementation of this resolution still need to be figured out. Although there are strong arguments for the greater effectiveness of regional actors, two crucial issues arise. First, is there enough evidence to suggest that regional actors won’t encounter the same host-country collaboration problems that other multilateral actors are currently facing? Second, isn’t the main argument for purported greater effectiveness of those missions—their vested interest in regional safety and security—also a significant argument against them? In addition, the African Union (AU) does not have the financial resources to independently fund multidimensional missions, and will, therefore, need to mix and match various tools, including for funding. Besides, it was noted that the AU’s compliance framework, for example, is less comprehensive than the UN’s PoC agenda.

3) Evolution of PoC concept: Protecting civilians is a political challenge, which is interpreted differently by different actors. It was noted that members of the Security Council tend to prefer security files as opposed to thematic files such as PoC and accountability. The bottom line is that peace operations and, ultimately, PoC can only be successful if the host country and the respective mission have a good collaboration. Participants highlighted that PoC approaches tend to be more palatable for governments when intertwined with the building of national governmental capacities and approaches towards increasing host state sovereignty. Other participants wondered about the cases where UN Missions leave and what will happen to the hundreds of thousands of civilians left behind. It was feared that in the future, the PoC agenda may be split off of the PO mandates, which would open up a whole different set of challenges.

The debate concluded with the hope that it bridged some false dichotomies (i.e., state vs civilian-focused, POs vs. SPMs; UN vs. regional organizations). What lies ahead is a phase of radical uncertainty. While there are currently no new large, multi-dimensional UN POs on the horizon, peace operations and protection of civilians are here to stay, albeit not necessarily in the current combination. A new division of labor between the UN, the AU, and regional organizations to maintain peace in Africa is evolving, but some of the old problems of political will or resources to protect civilians will likely not be resolved automatically.

Moreover, other conflicts (i.e., Ukraine, Gaza) have reached levels of complexity that will eventually require solutions currently inconceivable. Once experimentation with other, equally or even more subprime options is exhausted, the pendulum could potentially swing back towards a substantial involvement of the UN.

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