The Politics of Peacekeeping Performance

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Abstract

Peacekeeping performance is a complex and politicised issue. It is one of the key priorities of the Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) and Action for Peacekeeping Plus (A4P+) reform agendas. The efforts to ensure performance accountability should focus not only on individual peacekeepers, leaders, or planners but acknowledge member states' responsibility for designing appropriate mandates, allocating sufficient resources, providing political support, and contributing well-trained and equipped troops. Furthermore, measures to enhance performance should be implemented in a fair and equitable manner.

UN peacekeeping appears to be in crisis. In the fifteen years between 1999 and 2014, the Security Council authorised 21 peacekeeping missions. In the seven years since 2015, it has authorised only one mission, a small rule-of-law presence in Haiti without a military component. The major ongoing operations – in South Sudan, Mali, the Central African Republic (CAR), and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) – are struggling or downsizing. And while the recently completed missions in Cote d'Ivoire and Liberia are widely regarded as successes, this is not the case with the missions in Haiti and Darfur. In Haiti, peacekeepers' departure was followed by a return of kidnappings and violence, culminating in the assassination of the country's president. In Darfur, inter-communal conflict flared up as peacekeepers were pulling out, and 2021 saw an eightfold increase in displacement.[1] These failures have detracted attention from convincing evidence that peacekeeping works in terms of reducing violence and even helps with some economic and governance-related indicators.[2] In this atmosphere, the Secretary-General launched a reform drive called 'Action for Peacekeeping' (A4P) in 2018.

A4P and A4P+: An Overview

The eight A4P priorities are politics; women, peace and security; protection; safety and security; performance and accountability; peacebuilding and sustaining peace; partnerships; and conduct. The Action for Peacekeeping Plus (A4P+), the 2021-2023 implementation plan, highlights several areas where further progress is needed. The first A4P+ focus area is collective coherence behind a political strategy, which stresses the importance of partnerships between peacekeeping operations and member states, regional organisations, and UN family bodies. The second A4P+ focus area is the integration between military, police, civilian, and support elements in peacekeeping. The third A4P+ focus area covers capabilities and mindsets: rapid deployment, training, equipment, and intelligence. The fourth A4P+ focus area is accountability to peacekeepers, which includes the prevention and punishment of crimes against peacekeepers and the promotion of peacekeepers' physical and mental health. The fifth

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[1] UN, 'Cautiously Welcoming Power-Sharing Agreement in Sudan, Special Representative Tells Security Council Constitutional Declaration Must Be Respected', 10.12.2021, https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14730.doc.htm
[2] Barbara F. Walter, Lise Morjé Howard, and V. Page Fortna, 'The Extraordinary Relationship between Peacekeeping and Peace', *British Journal of Political Science*, 51/4 (2021), 1705–22; Vincenzo Bove, Jessica Di Salvatore, and Leandro Elia, 'UN Peacekeeping and Households' Well-being in Civil Wars', *American Journal of Political Science* (2021); Robert A. Blair, *Peacekeeping, Policing, and the Rule of Law after Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). For a dissenting view on peacekeeping's effect on host country governance, see Sarah von Billerbeck and Oisín Tansey, 'Enabling Autocracy? Peacebuilding and Post-Conflict Authoritarianism in the Democratic Republic of Congo', *European Journal of International Relations*, 25/3 (2019), 698–722.

A4P+ focus area, in turn, addresses accountability of peacekeepers, stressing zero tolerance for sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), civilian harm mitigation, reduction of the environmental footprint, and improved performance. The sixth A4P+ focus area is strategic communications, which entails the use of information to sustain support for peacekeeping, manage expectations, and counter falsehoods and hate speech. The final A4P+ focus area is cooperation with host countries – a dialogue with the government and communities.

The Primacy of Performance

Among A4P and A4P+ priorities, one stands out as *primus inter pares:* performance, or accountability of peacekeepers. Performance is the only priority on which the Secretariat has provided a separate factsheet of key achievements.[3] Before delving into the specifics, it is necessary to acknowledge that assessing the performance of international organisations is not easy. Most people equate such performance with that of international bureaucracies. However, the performance of international organisations depends on member states who define their tasks, set the rules for what international bureaucracies can and cannot do, and allocate resources. The debates on peacekeeping performance tend to focus on soldiers and police officers serving under the blue flag and sometimes senior UN officials planning and leading operations. Yet contributing countries resent it when their soldiers and police officers are blamed for failures that are, in their view, caused by 'lapses in oversight, communications, mission planning or adjustments to changing circumstances on the ground'.[4] In turn, Secretariat officials and missions leaders stress that member states negotiate unrealistic mandates, while host governments can be reluctant (if not outright obstructive) partners. The 2008 resignation of the Force Commander in the DRC after just seven weeks on the job is illustrative: the Spanish Lieutenant-General 'did not believe in the mandate' and viewed the national army that the mission had to support as 'grossly incompetent'.[5]

Thus, the focus on the performance of troops, police officers, or civilian officials obscures how dependent the UN is on its member states for making peacekeeping effective. Let us take the

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[3] UN, 'Action for Peacekeeping: Key Achievements on Performance', 5.12.2019, https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/201912013_a4p_performance_achievements_one_pager_final_update003.pdf

[4] Edward C. Luck, 'Making the United Nations Accountable: Managerial and Political Perspectives', in *Envisioning Reform: Enhancing UN Accountability in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Sumihiro Kuyama and Michael Ross Fowler (Tokyo: UN University Press, 2009), 25.

[5] Alan Doss, *A Peacekeeper in Africa: Learning from UN Interventions in Other People's Wars* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2020), 177.

example of rapid deployment. The Secretariat has devised various systems to promote rapid deployment, such as the Peacekeeping Capability Readiness System (PCRS).[6] However, it is ultimately member states, each facing a unique constellation of domestic incentives and barriers, that decide how many troops to provide for peacekeeping operations, and how quickly.[7] Another example is the design of peacekeeping mandates. Despite the popular perception that international bureaucracies are behind 'mission creep', the Security Council has also introduced novel peacekeeping tasks, contributing to the problem of 'Christmas Tree' mandates.[8] (Fragmented mandates are difficult to implement.)[9] Peacekeeping operations also need material and staff resources to carry forward ambitious mandates. Since peacekeeping budgets are negotiated by the General Assembly, there is a degree of mismatch between Security Council mandates and internal structures of peacekeeping missions.[10] Despite this, performance evaluations in peacekeeping mostly focus on the (in)actions of specific missions, while accountability measures target individual civilian and military peacekeepers and planners.

There are two main instruments for the Secretariat to report on peacekeeping performance: reports to the Security Council and reports to the General Assembly. Reports to the Security Council cover political and security developments in the host country and make recommendations for course adjustments. Such reports can set benchmarks, usually in the context of the mission's exit strategy, and assess progress towards their achievement. Benchmarks focus on local capacities for governance, protection of civilians, and peaceful conflict resolution. While peacekeepers help strengthen such capacities, not all transformations of host states and societies are attributable to their efforts: political and business elites, civil society, regional organisations, and bilateral donors play important roles, often eclipsing the

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[6] Katharina P. Coleman, Magnus Lundgren, and Kseniya Oksamytna, 'Slow Progress on UN Rapid Deployment: The Pitfalls of Policy Paradigms in International Organizations', *International Studies Review*, 23/3 (2021), 455–83.

[7] Timothy J.A. Passmore, Megan Shannon, and Andrew F Hart, 'Rallying the Troops: Collective Action and Self-interest in UN Peacekeeping Contributions', *Journal of Peace Research,* 55/3 (2018), 366–79; Magnus Lundgren, Kseniya Oksamytna, and Katharina P. Coleman, 'Only as Fast as Its Troop Contributors: Incentives, Capabilities, and Constraints in the UN's Peacekeeping Response', *Journal of Peace Research*, 58/4 (2021), 671–86.

[8] Kseniya Oksamytna and Magnus Lundgren, 'Decorating the "Christmas Tree": The UN Security Council and the Secretariat's Recommendations on Peacekeeping Mandates', *Global Governance*, 27/2 (2021), 226–50.

[9] Robert A. Blair, Jessica Di Salvatore, and Hannah Smidt, 'When Do UN Peacekeeping Operations Implement Their Mandates?', *American Journal of Political Science* (2021).

[10] Katharina P. Coleman, Jessica Di Salvatore, Kseniya Oksamytna, and Sabine Otto, 'Introducing the UN Civilian Posts in Peacekeeping Operations (UNCiPPO) Dataset', working paper (2022).

UN. For this reason, progress towards benchmarks is an imperfect measure of peacekeepers' impact.

Reports to the General Assembly account for how the money is spent and make proposals for next year's budgets. Budget proposals list planned activities and request resources to implement them. Since the mid-2000s, following the introduction of 'results-based budgeting' (RBB), such reports record activities under several broad headings that reflect mandated priorities. For example, in the UN mission in Mali, the components for the 2020-2021 budget cycle (besides standard 'executive direction and management' and 'support') are political engagement and implementation of the peace agreement; protection of civilians; human rights and reconciliation; and return of state authority, stabilisation, and the rule of law. While proposed budgets seek to link outputs, accomplishments, and indicators of achievement, the three can be hard to distinguish: for example, an 'increase in the number of community dialogues' as an indicator of achievement is associated with the organisation 'of 39 dialogues in support of community conflict-management efforts' as an output,[11] sidestepping the question about impact. In this atmosphere, the Secretariat faces pressures to demonstrate that it treats peacekeeping performance seriously.

A visible way to promote, or at least to create an impression of promoting, accountability is to fire leaders of underperforming missions: Special Representatives of the Secretary-General (SRSGs) or Force Commanders. However, since member states invest diplomatic capital in securing peacekeeping leadership posts for their nationals,[12] they also protect such leaders from early dismissals.[13] The absence of 'clear, agreed-upon set of rules or standards for accountability' does not help to prevent the politicisation of the process.[14] The UN Secretariat has introduced Senior Management Compacts to assess and improve the performance of SRSGs, but most officials doubt that they are linked to actual decisions on tenures.[15] There have been only two cases of public dismissals of peacekeeping leaders: of the SRSG in the

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[11] UN, 'Budget for the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali for the period from 1 July 2020 to 30 June 2021: Report of the Secretary-General' (2020), 34.

[12] Kseniya Oksamytna, Vincenzo Bove, and Magnus Lundgren, 'Leadership Selection in United Nations Peacekeeping', *International Studies Quarterly,* 65/1 (2021), 16–28.

[13] Magnus Lundgren, Kseniya Oksamytna, and Vincenzo Bove, 'Politics or Performance? Leadership Accountability in UN Peacekeeping', *Journal of Conflict Resolution,* 66/1 (2022), 32–60.

[14] Namie Di Razza, *The Accountability System for the Protection of Civilians in UN Peacekeeping* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2020), 12.

[15] Philipp Lottholz and Sarah von Billerbeck, *Senior Leadership Performance Management in International Organizations* (Reading: University of Reading, 2019).

CAR, Babacar Gaye of Senegal, over SEA allegations in the mission under his leadership and of the Force Commander in South Sudan, Johnson Mogoa Kimani Ondieki of Kenya, over ineffective response to the 2016 violence in South Sudan's capital, Juba. In response to the latter, Kenya temporarily withdrew its 1,000-strong contingent from South Sudan, arguing that Ondieki had unfairly taken the fall for a system-wide failure. The Secretariat had to offer Kenya the command of the mission in Darfur to lure it back into contributing to the South Sudan operation.[16]

Given the downward trends in peacekeepers' numbers, the Secretariat should be able to repatriate units and leaders more easily (since other contributors should be willing and able to step in), as well as choose the best-trained and equipped units. However, the decreasing need for peacekeepers coincided with the rise in stabilisation mandates and asymmetric threats. For this reason, the UN still struggles to find troops willing to deploy to volatile or inhospitable regions within host countries.[17] The UN has instituted a 'risk premium' to encourage contributors to put their troops forward for dangerous tasks. This policy, however, might have a disproportionate effect on those contributors for whom peacekeeping reimbursements (currently $1,428 per soldier per month) matter economically:[18] in other words, poorer countries, often from Africa, might end up bearing the brunt of dangerous deployments.[19] In this difficult climate, the Secretariat has to exercise care not to alienate crucial stakeholders while taking concrete steps to improve performance and accountability.

Evaluating and Enhancing Peacekeeping Performance

The first concrete mechanism that the Secretariat has introduced is the Comprehensive Planning and Performance Assessment System (CPAS), an online data analysis platform that helps missions develop integrated plans, track progress, and show impact. The second mechanism is the Military Performance Evaluation Taskforce aimed at enhancing pre-deployment training and ensuring that all military contingents meet UN standards. The third mechanism is the Performance Assessment Regime for UN Police, which covers both

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[16] Anadolu Agency, 'Kenya to Return Peacekeeping Force to South Sudan', 29.01.2017, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/kenya-to-return-peacekeeping-force-to-south-sudan/737316
[17] For example, Chad is the only contributor that has agreed to the permanent stationing of its infantry battalions in dangerous and remote northern parts of Mali. Signe Cold-Ravnkilde, Peter Albrecht, and Rikke Haugegaard, 'Friction and Inequality among Peacekeepers in Mali', *The RUSI Journal*, 162/2 (2017), 34–42.
[18] Only a small number of poorer countries earn money from such reimbursements. Katharina P. Coleman and Benjamin Nyblade, 'Peacekeeping for Profit? The Scope and Limits of "Mercenary" UN Peacekeeping', *Journal of Peace Research,* 55/6 (2018), 726–41.
[19] Kseniya Oksamytna and Sarah von Billerbeck, 'Race and International Organizations', working paper (2022).

individual police officers and Formed Police Units (FPUs). The fourth mechanism is Force Commander unit evaluations, which are conducted regularly and shared with New York headquarters.

The fifth, perhaps most controversial, mechanism is investigations into underperformance by the Office for Peacekeeping Strategic Partnership (OPSP). The Office, established in 2013, conducts reviews of all ongoing missions and participates in special investigations after critical incidents. OPSP's involvement may follow or complement other types of investigations, for instance, by the human rights division of the mission in question or by specially constituted Boards of Inquiry or investigation teams. Two episodes in South Sudan – the attack on the Malakal Protection of Civilians (POC) site in February 2016 and the abovementioned July 2016 violence in Juba – illustrate the dilemmas that investigations pose. At Malakal, fighting broke out between POC site residents and drew in government troops from the outside, killing at least 30 civilians. An internal investigation by the mission blamed command-and-control deficiencies, incorrect interpretation of the rules of engagement (RoE), and poor coordination between civilian, military, and police components.[20] A Board of Inquiry that flew in from New York concluded that peacekeepers sought written authorisation to use force from the sector command, which was unnecessary under the RoE, and that sentries guarding the POC site's perimeter abandoned their posts. The Secretariat promised repatriations but refused to name underperformers.[21] Half a year after the incident, the Secretariat repatriated a Rwandan battalion commander. An Indian battalion commander, who was supposed to be sent home, quietly stayed until the end of his rotation. The calls to repatriate the entire Ethiopian contingent, which had abandoned the sentry posts, were 'overtaken by geopolitical concerns'.[22] After the July 2016 violence in Juba, an independent special investigation singled out the Chinese battalion for abandoning the posts along the POC site's perimeter and the Nepalese FPU for failing to uphold order within the POC site.[23] Identifying specific units was a step towards accountability.

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[20] UN, 'Note to Correspondents on the Special Investigation and UNHQ Board of Inquiry into the Violence in the UNMISS Protection of Civilians Site in February 2016', 21.6.2016, https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2016-06-21/note-correspondents-special-investigation-and-unhq-board.

[21] Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC), *Under Fire: The July 2016 Violence in Juba and UN Response* (Washington, DC: CIVIC, 2016), 29.

[22] Ibid., 30.

[23] UN, 'Executive Summary of the Independent Special Investigation into the Violence in Juba in 2016 and the Response by the United Nations Mission in South Sudan', 1.11.2016, https://undocs.org/S/2016/924

Two episodes in the CAR are equally illustrative of the sensitive and complex nature of accountability. A special investigation into peacekeepers' weak response to the 2017 violence, when 115 civilians were killed in a single attack, criticised poor planning and inadequate training but stopped short of naming underperformers.[24] Another investigation, involving OPSP, focused on the 2018 attack on the Alindao displacement camp with more than 100 civilian victims. While this incident led to the repatriation of the Mauritanian contingent, some member states believed that the blame had been attributed unfairly. The Mauritanian troops were severely overstretched: only 54 peacekeepers guarded a camp of more than 20,000 people. They had no community liaison assistants (local staff engaging with communities to identify threats), and no civilian staff had visited Alindao for four months. At the same time, the Mauritanian troops had a poor understanding of the RoE, exhibited passivity, and might have harboured bias in favour of the Muslim attackers.[25] This example highlights the civilian, police, and military components are all responsible for analysis, preparedness, and planning, but it is ultimately troops and police officers who protect civilians during attacks.

In contrast to special investigations or inquiries into one-off incidents, independent strategic reviews of peacekeeping operations provide an overall analysis of performance. Such reviews can be requested by the Council or the Secretariat. Missions are sometimes suspicious of them, interpreting them as 'as signs of no confidence in their work'.[26] However, the Secretariat can use such reviews to highlight the achievements of peacekeepers, difficulties caused by developments beyond their control, and issues with mandates and budgets. The results of the strategic reviews of the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), and the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) are public. In the cases of MONUSCO and UNMISS, member states had been frustrated by the lack of progress and the mounting costs of the operations. However, the three reviews stressed the difficulty of peacekeepers' environment: both the DRC and South Sudan have high levels of displacement and low levels of human development, political elites whose interests are threatened by governance reforms, dysfunctional or predatory security forces, and weak judiciaries. And while bad news dominates headlines, both

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[24] UN, 'Note to Correspondents on the Findings of the Central African Republic Special Investigation', 21.1.2018, https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2018-01-24/note-correspondents-findings-central-african-republic

[25] Namie Di Razza, *Accountability System for the Protection of Civilians in UN Peacekeeping. Case Study: Central African Republic* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2020).

[26] Daniel Forti, 'Learning From Recent Independent Reviews of UN Peace Operations', 22.4.2021, https://theglobalobservatory.org/2021/04/learning-independent-reviews-of-un-peace-operations

missions have contributed to a reduction in violence, protected hundreds of thousands of civilians, built up local human rights institutions, helped strengthen the rule of law, and advocated for women, youth, and civil society. Evaluations should focus not only on failures and sanctions but also identify best practices and reward good performance.

The Way Forward

The focus on improving peacekeeping performance should not be seen as an attack on the institution or contributing countries. It is a recognition of peacekeeping's importance and potential. The UN should ensure that efforts to enhance performance are implemented in a fair and equitable manner. Member states should avoid politicising the process and play a constructive role in mandate design, budgeting, and the provision of well-trained troops. Success is a shared responsibility.