The 75th Anniversary of UN Peacekeeping

Introduction to a Special Issue of Global Governance

1 Background

In the shadow of two world wars, the architects of the UN boldly set out in its Charter “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.” Within a few years it was clear that peace, often hard fought for, was fragile and easily broken. Peace was something that would need to be kept. In turn, peacekeeping began tentatively. As Brian Drohan notes in the first article of this special issue, the UN’s engagement was initially “built on impartiality, the nonuse of force, and consent.” The UN was to be a neutral actor that would monitor, observe, and help to build trust between two or more conflicting parties. Today, peacekeeping is often perceived as a symbol of UN innovation and adaptation. Not only has peacekeeping become “one of the most visible symbols of the UN role in international peace and security,”1 it often represents the organization at its best. At the same time, peacekeeping also calls to mind some of the UN’s darkest hours, as peacekeepers have failed in the face of persistent and horrific violence and have sometimes brought harm to the very people they were pledged to protect.

The editors of Global Governance are pleased to introduce this special issue reflecting on seventy-five years of UN peacekeeping. The contributors document UN innovations, competing expectations, efforts at adaptation, cases of significant success, moments of tragedy, as well as the efforts of scholars and policymakers to grapple with a kaleidoscopic landscape of conflict. The contributions here confirm that, to adapt a phrase from Charles Tilly, peacekeeping made the UN as the UN made peacekeeping. In the articles that follow, scholars and practitioners explore several key questions including: What is the United Nations’ peacekeeping function? How did it emerge, and how and why has it changed over time? What are the primary achievements of UN peacekeeping over the past seventy-five years and what challenges has it faced? Is UN peacekeeping effective at keeping peace? And is it fit for purpose in light of the nature of conflict today and in the future?

1 Thakur 2016, 37.
The picture that emerges from these pages is that peacekeeping is greatly needed, still evolving, and yet diminishing. This issue (2 of volume 29) traces its origins, its evolution from Chapter VI operations that did not employ force to Chapter VII operations that can “resemble war operations” with authorization to pursue combatants, to its current situation and what John Karlsrud refers to as “marginalization.” After a period of growth in the number of operations and mandates, there have been no new operations. Beyond this, there has been a decrease in the number of personnel by almost 40,000 over the past decade. The decline in UN peacekeeping operations is due to several factors including great-power divides, a lack of fit for purpose as peacekeepers were called to serve as counterterrorism agents, and significant expectations gaps. There is also evidence of the need for more localized, nimble, and civilian-centered approaches. Finally, as Andrew E. Yaw Tchie’s contribution highlights, there are innovations in peacekeeping outside of the UN, particularly in Africa. Thus, many of the observers in this issue point out that to continue to be effective and relevant, peacekeeping must be nimble and have the right mandate, context, resources, and will. In these ways, this special issue provides the basis for a clear-eyed view of whether peace can be kept in the future, especially in light of the elevated levels of uncertainty in international affairs today.

2 The Rise of Peacekeeping

It was not foreordained that the world body would end up here. The UN Charter never mentions peacekeeping—it was an innovation established incrementally based on need and a changing world. The first such endeavor was the UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), when the Security Council in Resolution 50 (1948) authorized the establishment of a small group of military observers to assist a UN mediator in supervising the implementation of the Israel-Arab Armistice Agreements. Here, the foundation of peacekeeping was built on a commitment to limit the use of force, observe strict neutrality, and obtain the prior consent of parties involved.

For the first few decades, UN peacekeeping operations were deployed only after a cessation of hostilities agreement had been reached between warring parties. UN personnel were lightly armed and served to monitor and build confidence between factions. The tools incorporated were noncoercive and usually authorized under Chapter VI of the UN Charter, which relies on mediation and negotiation. Of the more than seventy operations since 1948, most were initiated in the 1990s following the end of the Cold War. Yet over the same decade, events in Somalia, Rwanda, and Bosnia dampened the initial optimism about
the UN’s ability to keep the peace. As Adekeye Adebajo’s contribution to this issue points out, “The UN was deliberately set up in 1945 to fail or succeed based on cooperation between its great powers.” And so it was that a lack of political will in the Security Council prevented a UN mission in Rwanda from even trying to stop the genocidal slaughter of over 800,000 innocent Tutsi and moderate Hutu civilians in 1994. Soon after, the killing of more than 7,000 Bosnian Muslim civilians in Srebrenica in July 1995, with helpless UN peacekeepers acting as witnesses, further highlighted the challenges and problematic legacy of UN peacekeeping in conflicts where there was no peace to keep. Beyond political will alone, a lack of resources and restrictive UN institutional mandates undermined peacekeeping’s effectiveness. These broader institutional and political failings came into full view when allegations emerged of sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeeping personnel in Haiti, Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Somalia. The resulting crisis has deeply scarred the UN and its reputation. And as Audrey L. Comstock’s discussion in this issue highlights (and Cedric de Coning echoes), even today there is limited accountability for such transgressions.

Over time, UN peacekeeping expanded to include providing humanitarian assistance, creating a political infrastructure, and even acting as the interim government in places like East Timor (1999) and Kosovo (1999). More recently, peacekeeping has morphed into operations that are more accurately described as “peacemaking” or “peace enforcement,” as UN personnel attempt to compel warring factions to end their hostilities. Some recent peacekeeping operations are described as “stabilization efforts” and include elements of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism; this is the case in Mali, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, and South Sudan. In these situations, often there is no peace to keep, no cease-fire to monitor, and, most importantly, no consent from the local warring stakeholders. As UN peacekeepers have been increasingly asked to “mend broken states and societies” and to protect civilians, more of them have been required overall, and more military and police personnel in particular. In early 2023, the total number of UN uniformed peacekeepers, police, and civilian personnel stood at 76,000 deployed across twelve missions. This has prompted criticism regarding the “militarization” of UN peace operations and, as the Karlsrud suggests in this volume, rather than pursuing peace, in certain cases it appears that “the UN is at war.”

In the field, peacekeeping operations reflect and reproduce enduring pathologies associated with gaps between mandates and capacities. UN operations

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2 Bellamy and Hunt 2015.
remain chronically underfunded and underequipped, while those in uniform are sometimes undertrained and missions are understaffed. This in part derives from the fact that, following the failures of the 1990s, Member States from the Global North have reduced their military personnel support for peacekeeping. At the same time, expanding mandates have yielded more casualties. Twenty-first-century peacekeeping is a tough and too often deadly, business. Since 1945 there have been 4,280 recorded UN peacekeeper fatalities, with the majority of these (3,217) taking place since 1990. Troop-contributing countries from the Global South have borne the brunt of this, notably India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Ghana, Ethiopia, Nepal, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Jordan.3

Yet many of the challenges the UN faces are not the fault of the UN. Importantly, the nature of conflict has changed. There are growing instances of intrastate and transnational violent conflicts. At the time of this writing in early 2023, there are twenty-seven ongoing armed conflicts, many of which transcend state borders and include nonstate armed groups with their own agendas. Peacekeepers are more likely to be deployed in these, the most difficult of cases, characterized by wars that are long or end in stalemate, where there are three or more parties, and where access to important commodities is at stake.4 More than half of all UN peace operations have been deployed in response to conflicts taking place across the African continent. As Tchie points out, many of these conflicts are driven by state instability or failure, which render the challenges facing any form of UN intervention more acute. This is combined with weakening security architectures and arms control regimes. Against this background, the Covid-19 pandemic created an additional layer of challenges. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the political will needed to initiate and sustain peacekeeping often falters. As Richard Ponzio and Muznah Siddiqui as well as John Karlsrud highlight herein, at the very moment the planet needs such assistance in the form of neutral international instruments to tamp down violence and protect humans, the appetite for such endeavors wanes.

3 Reform ... and Reward?

In the dialectical nature of these things, over the past seventy-five years, there have been many peacekeeping reform efforts undertaken by the UN. In the

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3 See “Fatalities” 2023.
1990s, the UN added a 50 percent increase in staff, including experts in demining, training, and civilian policing. More restructuring followed the 2000 Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations (Brahimi Report), which called for enhanced planning and management of complex operations, information gathering, conflict prevention, as well as appropriate staffing levels for more robust operations. Other recommendations included creating rapid deployment teams (but note Drohan’s observations, in his article, regarding the endemic challenges of this option). In 2007, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon created a separate Department of Field Support to offer enhanced planning and management. A specially commissioned High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) issued a further, significant review in 2015 that continues to guide reform efforts. One scathing observation was that “United Nations bureaucratic systems configured for a headquarters environment limit the speed, mobility, and agility of response in the field.” It called for “an awakening” to the “distinct and important needs of field missions,” including restructuring the Secretariat’s peace and security architecture. Like the Brahimi Report, it echoed the need for robust force capacity and quick responses. Beyond this, the report called for “four essential shifts” with political solutions the centerpiece of peacekeeping, declaring that “lasting peace is not achieved nor sustained by military and technical engagements, but through political solutions.” It also called for a “more inclusive peace and security partnership,” with strengthened local communities and regional partnerships. Overall, it recommended more accountability, inclusiveness, and oversight, while warning about the UN’s venture into fighting terrorism and moving away from strict neutrality.

In response to the HIPPO report, Ban Ki-moon and António Guterres initiated several reforms. Given the call for adequate capacity to meet mandates, there have been slight movements away from large deployments with the creation of more tailored approaches that can mobilize quickly and integrate security, development, and human rights components in a conflict-specific approach. With the hope of streamlining communications, improved planning, and more coherent policies, the Department of Political Affairs merged with the Peacebuilding Support Office and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations to create the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA). The goal is to move away from reactionary peacekeeping operations that are

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5 UN General Assembly and Security Council 2000.
7 Ibid., 24, 10, and 26.
perpetually “firefighting crises.”

Moreover, in the vulnerable area of sexual violence, Karin Johansson and Anne-Kathrin Kreft highlight that four of the most high-profile missions have explicit mandates to address this issue. Yet as A. Walter Dorn’s contribution points out, the UN must learn from its successes and focus on integration of new technology and adequate training, while Comstock highlights the clear need for accountability. De Coning’s article highlights the need for peacekeeping to focus not only on stability, but also on the protection of civilians. He adds that such endeavors must be ripe, coherent, well-supported, and inclusive of programs that also address rule of law and human rights. Most of the authors in this issue found that, without such holistic focus, UN peacekeeping is severely compromised. Yet Karlsrud’s contribution cautions against the overcommitment of peacekeeping mandates that have led to ineffectiveness and, in turn, disillusionment over its capacities to stabilize broken societies.

Other reforms have emerged in response to actions elsewhere in the UN system. One important innovation followed Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), calling for greater participation of women in peacekeeping and protection activities. And as Kreft and Johansson point out in this issue, “The UN Department of Peace Operations has been at the forefront as sensitivity to gender-related aspects of security have gained traction within the UN.” In 1993 women made up 1 percent of deployed UN peacekeeping personnel; by 2021 this number had risen with 5.6 percent of military contingents and over 19 percent of military experts, military observers, and staff officers being women.

This represents a quadrupling of women military and police personnel since the first statistics were published in 2005 (yet still just a little over 6 percent of personnel). Recently, the UN announced a 2028 target for women in peacekeeping of 15 percent for military contingents, 25 percent for observers and staff, and 20 percent for formed police units.

While good intentions do not guarantee good outcomes, some evidence suggests that the willingness to reform and innovate has indeed paid off. Despite the setbacks and growing challenges, many academic studies have found that “peacekeeping works” and that UN-sanctioned operations reduce the amount of violence and the duration of conflict, and also that it increases the longevity of peace.

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8 Sherman 2020.
(particularly in cases of traditional peacekeeping). The findings are that these operations have reduced the risk of war by half, many scholars find that the risk of another war occurring within five years drops between 23 and 43 percent. In fact, according to one study, 60 percent of peacebuilding missions between 1987 and 2007 experienced no renewed conflict within five years. De Coning’s piece in this issue also explains that while peacekeeping makes “significant contributions to preventing the outbreak of large-scale conflict,” the security situation in many places with peacekeeping operations continues to deteriorate.

As this suggests, claims regarding the effectiveness of peacekeeping are often relative and some scholars contend that “the United Nations could have done better.” For them, “better” would mean tripling the UN peacekeeping budget ($6.58 billion in 2020–2021) to around $17 billion a year (to provide some perspective, the 2023 US defense budget was close to $840 billion). Another study, however, concludes that “it might be too much to expect those [missions in the most difficult conflicts] to make a significant difference in the behavior of implacable enemies.”

Scholars also point out that local perspectives and engagement matter since often UN agency (as well as a country’s own government) may lack full knowledge of local populations and circumstances that matter for peacebuilding. Adebajo’s and Tchie’s contributions in this issue call for enhanced engagement with regional and local communities. An article in this journal ten years ago highlighted how local communities seek more ownership of the process, quoting some as saying, “We need tools we can understand and use in our own contexts ... we want a bottom up process; we are our own experts.” The efforts to integrate regional and local actors has been spotty at best, but remains vital in any assessment of whether and how peacekeeping works.

4 Give Peacekeeping a Chance

The UN is an organization of Member States that manifests an ideal type of state sovereignty that is itself out of step with the nature of conflict today,
which is neither state-based nor operates within state confines. There are also pathologies inherent to the organization regarding the creation and implementation of peacekeeping operations given the political nature of their initiation and case selectivity. As the conflicts in Ukraine (2022–) and Syria (2011–) brutally underline, the process of determining which populations are saved from the “scourge of war” is political and based on the strategic interests of great powers, not necessarily the extent of human suffering. The contributors to this special issue make clear that the UN must once again innovate—this is not the time for tinkering. Given the interconnected aspects of many of the challenges of global governance, particularly in the arena of peace and security, the UN must undertake transformative change. At the same time, the articles that follow make it hard to avoid the conclusion that the historical imbalance between the prevalence of conflict and the capacity of the international community to respond to it will persist, and perhaps worsen, in the future.

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Bibliography


