Extending UN Peacekeeping Financing Beyond UN Peacekeeping Operations? The Prospects and Challenges of Reform

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Adequate financing is fundamental to the success of any peace operation. In June 2015, the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations advanced three proposals that would extend UN peacekeeping financing beyond its current boundaries to produce a more comprehensive system of funding peace operations. It advocated giving UN special political missions access to backstopping and transitional funding mechanisms created for peacekeeping operations; providing more predictable financing for UN-mandated African Union–led peace operations; and establishing a single peace operations account to finance all UN peace operations. Yet reforming UN peacekeeping financing is notoriously difficult, not least because of deeply politicized cleavages among member states.

This article explores the ongoing debates that the panel’s proposals—and the subsequent UN Secretariat implementation report—intersected with and contributed to. It also highlights the complex interplay between panel members, Secretariat officials, and member states in the politics of UN financing reform. It identifies three critical success factors for reform proposals: proposal quality, the proposal’s ability to avoid inflaming political cleavages, and the strength and commitment of the support coalition it mobilizes. Although implementation ultimately depends on states, panel members and Secretariat officials play key roles in attempting to craft proposals that strike a propitious balance among these factors. Keywords: United Nations, peacekeeping financing, High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations.

In October 2014, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon established the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations to conduct a “comprehensive assessment of the state of UN peace operations today, and the emerging needs of the future.”¹ The panel’s June 2015 report included three proposals for a more comprehensive system of funding peace operations that would extend UN peacekeeping financing beyond its current boundaries. It advocated giving UN special political missions access to backstopping and transitional funding mechanisms available to peacekeeping operations; providing more predictable financial support to UN-mandated peace operations led by the African Union (AU); and establishing “a single ‘peace operations account’ to finance all peace operations and related back-stopping activities in the future.”² The financial implications of these proposals varied significantly, but
they shared the notion of expanding what types of operations have access to UN peacekeeping financing—thus venturing into the deeply politicized terrain of UN peacekeeping financing reform.

The panel’s report was only one step in a larger process of potential reform. It built on earlier reform efforts, and its impact depended on the response it elicited from UN member states and Secretariat officials. The first step of this response was a September 2015 Secretary-General’s implementation report,3 which was followed by initial General Assembly deliberation and further—and continuing—debate in the General Assembly’s committees, including the sixteen-member expert Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions and the Fifth Committee (Administrative and Budgetary), which includes all UN member states. Any decisions must ultimately be made by a General Assembly plenary meeting. Thus, as with most High-Level Panels, “the report is neither the start nor the end of the process but the mid-point.”4 Yet as milestones in an ongoing process, the panel’s recommendations and the Secretary-General’s implementation report provide an excellent prism for examining not only the specific issue of extending UN peacekeeping financing beyond UN peacekeeping operations, but also the wider politics of UN peace operations financing reform. In this article, I explore the critical debates that the panel’s proposals intersected with and contributed to, and in doing so highlight the complex interplay between panel members, the UN Secretariat, and member states that is necessary—but not always sufficient—to generate momentum toward reform.

I begin by situating the panel’s proposals in the overall context of general difficulties of UN reform and specific acrimony about UN peacekeeping financing. I then argue that a reform proposal’s implementation prospects depend critically on three interacting success factors: the proposal’s quality, the extent to which it avoids inflaming cleavages among member states, and the strength and commitment of the supporting coalition it mobilizes. Implementation ultimately depends on states, but panel members and Secretariat officials play key roles in attempting to craft proposals that maximize each success factor while striking a propitious balance between them when necessary. Panel member and Secretariat efforts often reinforce each other, but may diverge if their assessments of the optimal balance of success factors differ.

I then turn to the panel’s three proposals for extending UN peacekeeping financing. I aim both to provide insight into the substantive policy questions and to illustrate three distinct reform dynamics: a flawed reform effort unlikely to be implemented (the single peace operations account); a proposal of widely recognized merit whose implementation depends on disengagement from politicized debate (the special political missions case); and a largely meritorious but divisive proposal (on AU-led peace operations) where progress depends on the strength of the supporting coalition—which itself is a function of the proposal’s ability to engage and accommodate the interests of potential opponents.