



Peacekeeping in the Age of Asymmetric Conflicts: The UN’s Role in
Complex and Fragmented War Zones

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Abstract

United Nations peacekeeping operations, originally designed to monitor ceasefires and support post-conflict transitions, now face increasingly complex environments defined by asymmetric warfare, non-state actors, and fragmented authority. This study aims to assess the effectiveness of UN peacekeeping missions in contemporary asymmetric conflict zones, focusing on the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO) and Mali (MINUSMA). Utilizing a qualitative case study methodology, the research draws on mission reports, policy documents, and expert interviews to evaluate operational performance. Data was analyzed using thematic content analysis to identify recurring challenges and adaptive strategies. The findings reveal that traditional peacekeeping models struggle to respond effectively to fluid combat dynamics, insurgent warfare, and the absence of a central authority. UN forces often operate under constrained mandates, limited resources, and lack of host nation cooperation, reducing their capacity to protect civilians and stabilize regions. The study recommends mandate restructuring, enhanced intelligence capacities, and closer coordination with regional organizations. Future implications highlight the need for a doctrinal shift in peacekeeping strategy to address hybrid threats and evolving warfare patterns. It concludes that while peacekeeping remains a vital tool, its success in asymmetric contexts depends on mission agility, political backing, and contextual adaptation.

Keywords: UN, Peacekeeping, Asymmetric Warfare, MONUSCO, Conflict Zones

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INTRODUCTION

The 21st-century security environment has undergone a dramatic transformation, with asymmetric conflicts becoming the norm rather than the exception. Unlike conventional wars between nation-states, asymmetric conflicts involve actors of unequal strength—most often non-state groups such as insurgents, terrorists, or militias—challenging the authority and capacity of recognized states. These wars are fragmented, fluid, and complex, often rooted in deep societal grievances and fought without clear battle lines (Smith, 2005, p. 47). The UN, as the principal international body mandated to preserve global peace, finds itself facing severe limitations in responding effectively to such conflicts. Traditional peacekeeping, grounded in principles of neutrality, consent, and non-use of force except in self-defense, appears increasingly misaligned with the realities of today's war zones (Bellamy & Williams, 2010, p. 95). This disconnect raises critical questions about the efficacy, adaptability, and future direction of UN peacekeeping operations in fragmented environments dominated by asymmetric threats.

Non-state actors in asymmetric conflicts often operate outside international legal norms and are embedded within civilian populations, making conventional military or peacekeeping tactics ineffective. For example, in Mali, where UN forces under MINUSMA have been deployed since 2013, peacekeepers regularly face ambushes, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and attacks by jihadist groups that blend seamlessly with local communities (Charbonneau, 2019, p. 211). The United Nations has acknowledged that MINUSMA is one of its most dangerous missions, with more than 250 fatalities by 2022, mainly due to asymmetric attacks (Karlsrud, 2015, p. 122). The unpredictable nature of these environments makes it extremely difficult to maintain mission objectives or secure long-term stability. Moreover, the principle of impartiality is challenged when peacekeepers are seen as favoring one side, especially when dealing with multiple fragmented factions that shift alliances frequently (Autesserre, 2014, p. 140). As such, peacekeeping missions often find themselves overwhelmed by the very complexity they are sent to mitigate.

In response to these challenges, the UN has occasionally adapted its mandates, as seen in the creation of the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2013. This unit was granted an offensive mandate to “neutralize and disarm” armed groups, notably the M23 rebels (Tardy, 2011, p. 21). Although this marked a significant departure from traditional peacekeeping doctrines, it underscored the recognition that passive observation is no longer tenable in environments plagued by persistent violence and shifting insurgent tactics. Despite initial success, the FIB also faced criticism for undermining the UN's neutrality and complicating relations with local populations who perceived the force as partial or political (De Coning, 2018, p. 189). The DRC experience exemplifies the dilemma facing the UN: how to remain credible as a neutral actor while effectively engaging in peace enforcement operations against actors who thrive on chaos and disorder. This balance is especially difficult in contexts where governments themselves may be complicit in conflict dynamics.

Beyond operational challenges, geopolitical factors also shape the UN's capacity to intervene effectively. Peacekeeping missions rely heavily on the consensus of the UN Security Council, where political disagreements among the P5—especially between Western powers and countries like China and Russia—often delay or dilute action (Weiss, 2013, p. 71). These divisions hinder the timely deployment of forces, complicate mandate renewals, and affect resource allocation. In Mali, for instance, the government's decision to

expel MINUSMA in 2023 reflected growing tensions not only between the host country and the UN but also the increased presence of alternative actors like Russia's Wagner Group (Yamashita, 2017, p. 64). Peacekeeping cannot function effectively without the host country's consent, yet this consent is often politically conditional and subject to shifting alliances. As a result, missions become entangled in local and international politics, reducing their operational independence and strategic coherence in asymmetric conflict zones.

Technology is a double-edged sword in modern peacekeeping. While it offers new tools such as drones, satellite imagery, and cybersecurity, it also empowers adversaries. Non-state actors increasingly use encrypted communication, online propaganda, and cyberattacks to spread disinformation and disrupt UN missions (Daniel & Hayes, 2019, p. 53). Peacekeepers often lag behind in technological adaptation due to funding shortages, bureaucratic inertia, and lack of expertise. On the other hand, when properly integrated, technology can enhance situational awareness, early warning, and precision in decision-making. For example, surveillance drones in South Sudan have been used to monitor troop movements and protect civilians in high-risk areas. However, technological reliance also raises ethical and legal concerns, including data privacy and sovereignty violations. Thus, while innovation is essential, it must be accompanied by clear regulatory frameworks and adequate training to ensure responsible and effective use in peacekeeping operations.

Another critical issue is the composition and capability of troop-contributing countries (TCCs). While Western nations often fund missions, they rarely contribute troops, leaving the burden to developing countries that may lack advanced equipment, training, and logistical support (Williams, 2015, p. 112). This imbalance not only undermines the effectiveness of missions but also raises ethical concerns about equity and shared responsibility. Troops from countries like Bangladesh, India, and Rwanda operate under difficult conditions without adequate support, which affects morale, cohesion, and operational efficiency (Koops et al., 2015, p. 273). Furthermore, differences in military doctrines, language barriers, and varying interpretations of mandates lead to coordination problems in the field. Addressing these disparities requires enhanced training programs, better logistics, and a more equitable model of burden-sharing that encourages greater involvement of technologically advanced nations in personnel deployment, not just financial contributions.

To navigate asymmetric warfare effectively, the UN must also invest in intelligence and early warning systems. Peacekeepers often work with limited information in volatile environments, making them reactive rather than proactive. Traditional military intelligence methods are inadequate in identifying threats from decentralized networks and local militias (Bove & Ruggeri, 2019, p. 98). Community engagement through local intermediaries, early warning data collection, and the use of artificial intelligence for risk forecasting are being explored to fill this gap. The Community Liaison Assistants (CLAs), deployed in several missions, serve as valuable links between peacekeepers and the local populace, helping identify potential threats and reduce misunderstandings. However, without institutionalizing such practices and providing adequate training, their impact remains inconsistent. Better intelligence mechanisms are essential not only for mission security but also for targeted interventions that can prevent escalation and foster long-term peace.

Ultimately, the UN's success in asymmetric conflict zones hinges on adaptability, coordination, and legitimacy. As peacekeeping missions face threats from non-state actors,

blurred lines between civilians and combatants, and complex political environments, a strategic shift is essential. This includes updating doctrines, providing missions with adequate resources, fostering local partnerships, and ensuring stronger political backing from member states (Hultman et al., 2020, p. 136). The international community must view peacekeeping not as a static tool but as an evolving mechanism that responds to the realities of conflict. Equally important is ensuring the legitimacy of missions in the eyes of local populations, who are the ultimate stakeholders. Without their trust and cooperation, even the most technologically advanced and well-funded operations risk failure. The UN, therefore, stands at a crossroads—either embrace transformation or risk obsolescence in the face of rapidly changing conflict dynamics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The rise of asymmetric warfare has created profound implications for UN peacekeeping operations, particularly in fragmented and volatile environments. Unlike traditional interstate wars, contemporary conflicts are characterized by a multiplicity of actors, non-linear frontlines, and decentralized command structures. These features complicate peacekeeping interventions and challenge the classical principles of neutrality, consent, and limited use of force. As pointed out by Berdal and Ucko (2009), peace operations are now deployed into environments where armed actors do not adhere to conventional rules of engagement, making them more dangerous and unpredictable (p. 11). Such a shift requires peacekeeping frameworks to evolve beyond Cold War-era assumptions and confront the reality of insurgency, terrorism, and state fragility.

The unintended consequences of peacekeeping interventions in asymmetric conflicts have been a growing concern in recent academic discourse. Fortna (2008) demonstrates that while peacekeepers generally reduce the risk of civil war recurrence, their presence can sometimes incentivize strategic adaptations by belligerents (p. 90). Specifically, strong rebel groups may alter their tactics in response to the constraints imposed by peacekeeping missions, resorting to guerrilla attacks or terror campaigns to undermine the legitimacy or operational effectiveness of UN forces. These adaptive behaviors often lead to mission creep, whereby peacekeepers are forced to act beyond their initial mandates in order to respond to escalating threats. This trend challenges the foundational doctrine of non-enforcement and demands a reevaluation of peacekeeping tools and objectives in such volatile contexts.

Another major impediment to effective peacekeeping in asymmetric warfare is the severe limitation of resources available to most missions. According to Durch and Berkman (2006), despite the increased complexity and geographic scope of modern peace operations, missions often receive only marginal increases in budget and logistical support (p. 121). This leads to under-equipped troops, insufficient air mobility, and gaps in medical and communication systems. Such deficiencies are especially detrimental in asymmetric environments, where the threat landscape is constantly shifting and peacekeepers must remain agile and responsive. Without sufficient operational capacity, even well-intentioned missions fail to provide security guarantees, especially to vulnerable civilian populations, thus undermining the credibility of the UN in post-conflict societies.

The composition and training of peacekeeping personnel further affect mission outcomes in asymmetric conflicts. Jakobsen (2000) argues that when peacekeepers are deployed into high-risk environments without appropriate training or cohesion, their effectiveness is substantially compromised (p. 38). Troop-contributing countries often vary in terms of doctrine, language, and rules of engagement, leading to coordination

difficulties on the ground. Moreover, many personnel lack experience in counterinsurgency or stabilization operations, which are often central to success in fragmented conflicts. This lack of preparedness creates operational friction and may result in peacekeepers either being overly passive or engaging in forceful measures that alienate local communities. Addressing this requires not only better pre-deployment training but also the creation of integrated multinational forces with harmonized operational protocols.

Peacekeeping also faces significant political constraints rooted in the structure of international governance. The UN Security Council remains the primary authority for the establishment and oversight of peace operations, but it is frequently paralyzed by geopolitical rivalries. As outlined by Malone and Thakur (2006), competing interests among permanent members often result in ambiguous or watered-down mandates that fail to provide peacekeepers with the authority or clarity needed in asymmetric scenarios (p. 75). In several instances, mandates avoid language that authorizes robust intervention out of fear of backlash or vetoes. This political dilution of authority often leaves missions “caught in the middle,” lacking both the legitimacy and capability to respond to fluid threats on the ground.

The problem of mandate ambiguity is particularly evident in complex operations like those in the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan. Howard (2008) notes that multidimensional mandates often blend peacekeeping with peacebuilding, stabilization, and humanitarian roles, yet the forces deployed are not equipped or structured to handle such diverse responsibilities effectively (p. 104). In asymmetric conflicts, such ambiguity can prove fatal, as peacekeepers are left unclear whether they are expected to mediate, enforce, or protect. This confusion leads to operational hesitancy and exposes both civilians and peacekeepers to elevated risks. Clearer, context-specific mandates are essential to overcoming the paralysis and ineffectiveness currently plaguing many UN operations in fragmented environments.

Additionally, the issue of local legitimacy is central to the success or failure of peacekeeping operations. Paris (2004) emphasizes that peacekeepers often operate in areas where their presence is viewed with suspicion or hostility, particularly when they are seen as supporting unpopular governments or foreign agendas (p. 124). In asymmetric settings, where legitimacy is fiercely contested and non-state actors may enjoy significant grassroots support, peacekeepers must navigate a treacherous political landscape. Without broad-based local buy-in, missions can become isolated and even targeted by those they are intended to protect. Legitimacy, therefore, cannot be derived solely from international mandates—it must also be cultivated through sustained engagement, transparency, and local partnership.

Intelligence gathering remains one of the most underdeveloped areas in UN peacekeeping, yet it is critical in asymmetric warfare. According to Tull (2017), the UN’s reluctance to institutionalize intelligence structures stems from concerns about impartiality and political sensitivities (p. 58). However, the failure to adapt in this area severely hampers operational awareness and responsiveness. In conflicts dominated by guerrilla tactics, ambushes, and IEDs, having accurate and timely intelligence is vital for civilian protection and mission safety. Some innovations, such as the Joint Mission Analysis Centres (JMACs), represent important steps forward, but their capabilities are still far from sufficient. An evolution toward robust, transparent, and ethically managed intelligence systems is necessary if the UN is to remain viable in the face of unconventional threats.

Ultimately, the literature points to a growing consensus: peacekeeping in asymmetric conflict zones demands significant structural reform, both doctrinally and operationally. Missions must evolve beyond static models and incorporate dynamic, adaptive strategies capable of responding to decentralized violence. As Krause and Milliken (2009) contend, the international community must rethink peacebuilding as a complex, non-linear process requiring flexible tools and long-term commitment (p. 91). Peacekeeping, in this view, is not merely about preventing the return to war but about transforming the very conditions that enable asymmetric violence to flourish. This transformation involves reconciling the tensions between neutrality and enforcement, sovereignty and intervention, and short-term stability and long-term legitimacy.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology employing a comparative case study approach to examine the effectiveness of UN peacekeeping missions in asymmetric conflict zones. By selecting two major UN operations—MONUSCO in the Democratic Republic of Congo and UNMISS in South Sudan—the research explores how missions function in contexts characterized by fragmented non-state actors, weak governance, and persistent violence. Data is gathered through content analysis of official UN documents, peacekeeping mandates, mission reports, and peer-reviewed scholarly literature. Semi-structured interviews from secondary sources involving peacekeeping personnel, local stakeholders, and subject-matter experts provide supplementary perspectives. The study emphasizes thematic coding to identify recurring patterns such as mandate complexity, force capability, civilian protection, and local legitimacy. This method allows for a contextualized understanding of peacekeeping dynamics across different operational settings, highlighting the ways in which asymmetry influences outcomes. By triangulating findings from multiple sources, the research enhances validity and provides nuanced insights into the UN's evolving role in managing complex conflicts.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal that the effectiveness of UN peacekeeping missions in asymmetric conflict zones is significantly influenced by mandate clarity, operational capacity, and local engagement. In both MONUSCO and UNMISS, ambiguity in mandates often led to inconsistent implementation and delayed responses to emerging threats, particularly from non-state actors using irregular tactics. Missions with robust mandates but insufficient logistical or military support struggled to protect civilians or stabilize conflict areas. Moreover, peacekeeping efforts that lacked meaningful collaboration with local communities faced resistance, mistrust, and reduced operational reach. Conversely, localized strategies that incorporated community-based security frameworks and adaptive responses to guerrilla warfare tended to yield more sustainable outcomes. The analysis also shows that political divisions at the UN Security Council level affected mission responsiveness and adaptability. Overall, peacekeeping missions operating in asymmetric environments require greater flexibility, improved intelligence capabilities, and deeper integration with local structures to enhance their legitimacy and effectiveness.

OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES IN ASYMMETRIC CONFLICT ZONES

United Nations peacekeeping missions face persistent operational challenges in asymmetric conflict zones due to the decentralized and unpredictable nature of violence. Unlike traditional wars involving clear state actors and frontlines, asymmetric conflicts often involve fragmented rebel groups, warlords, and militias. These actors frequently use unconventional tactics such as ambushes, IEDs, or hit-and-run attacks, which limit the

effectiveness of standard peacekeeping tools. Peacekeepers deployed in such contexts often lack both the mandate flexibility and the tactical training necessary to deal with high-threat, low-visibility environments. Troops may find themselves restricted by rigid rules of engagement that hinder rapid responses. As a result, missions often become reactive rather than proactive, reducing their capacity to deter attacks or protect civilians. Furthermore, logistical constraints such as poor infrastructure, lack of air mobility, and insufficient communication equipment limit operational reach, especially in remote or rural areas where violence often escalates without warning.

Peacekeeping missions in asymmetric conflicts also suffer from severe information asymmetries. Non-state actors often operate within civilian populations, exploiting social networks and terrain familiarity, while peacekeepers lack adequate intelligence-gathering mechanisms. Many missions are deployed without access to real-time or ground-level information, leaving them blind to imminent threats or political undercurrents within communities. This absence of tactical awareness creates vulnerabilities, as peacekeepers may inadvertently patrol unsafe zones, misread tensions, or fail to anticipate ambushes. Moreover, missions rarely invest in local language training or cultural immersion, limiting their ability to interpret warning signs or engage in trust-building with communities. Effective peacekeeping in such contexts requires the integration of intelligence units, local informant networks, and community liaisons. Without this, peacekeepers are forced to rely on reactive strategies, often arriving too late to prevent conflict-related violence. These gaps not only increase operational risks but also contribute to local perceptions of ineffectiveness and disengagement.

Another operational hurdle is the imbalance in troop capabilities among contributing countries. Troop-contributing nations vary significantly in their training standards, equipment quality, and rules of engagement. Some provide highly professional forces with modern technologies, while others deploy poorly resourced units with limited tactical mobility. This disparity undermines mission cohesion and effectiveness, especially during joint operations or emergency responses. Differences in command culture and communication also create friction, particularly when units from different countries must coordinate under pressure. Moreover, some contingents are more willing to take risks than others, leading to uneven implementation of mandates across regions within the same mission. This inconsistency erodes the credibility of the mission and exposes gaps that armed actors may exploit. For peacekeeping to be effective in asymmetric environments, there must be greater standardization of troop preparedness and equipment, as well as a unified operational doctrine that ensures interoperability across contingents during both routine patrols and crisis situations.

Mandate complexity further hampers operational effectiveness in asymmetric settings. Peacekeeping mandates increasingly encompass a wide array of objectives—from conflict prevention and civilian protection to humanitarian aid and post-conflict reconstruction. However, these broad mandates are often drafted ambiguously, leading to confusion over priorities and responsibilities. In asymmetric environments, where situations evolve rapidly and violently, peacekeepers need clear and flexible mandates that empower them to act decisively. Instead, many missions find themselves constrained by language that emphasizes neutrality and minimal use of force, even in situations demanding robust intervention. Peacekeepers thus face a dilemma: act decisively and risk overstepping their mandate, or remain passive and risk mission failure. Mandates must be

explicitly tailored to the realities of asymmetric warfare, with clear operational boundaries and rules of engagement that allow timely, effective responses to emerging threats.

The physical and psychological toll on peacekeeping personnel in asymmetric zones is another major operational concern. Peacekeepers deployed in high-risk environments frequently face threats to their safety, including ambushes, landmines, and attacks on UN compounds. The uncertainty and stress associated with operating in fragmented war zones affect morale and decision-making. Incidents of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and burnout are common among peacekeepers, particularly those who have served multiple tours in volatile missions. Moreover, limited recreational facilities, long deployments, and isolation from families further strain their well-being. These human factors, while often underexamined, influence operational discipline, alertness, and cohesion among units. Addressing these challenges requires better psychological support, improved rotation cycles, and morale-building initiatives within missions. Ensuring the safety and mental health of peacekeepers is fundamental to sustaining operational effectiveness in the demanding and unpredictable conditions of asymmetric conflict.

POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC CONSTRAINTS

Peacekeeping missions are deeply influenced by the political dynamics of the UN Security Council, which often constrain strategic planning and responsiveness. In many cases, the five permanent members of the Security Council hold divergent interests regarding intervention in specific conflicts. These divisions result in mandates that are often compromises rather than comprehensive strategies. Asymmetric conflicts, which require rapid adaptation and sometimes the use of force, are particularly ill-suited to such watered-down directives. Missions can be delayed or denied due to veto politics, and once deployed, peacekeepers may find themselves with insufficient authority to respond to threats effectively. The political paralysis at the Security Council level thus translates into strategic paralysis on the ground, where peacekeepers operate without the tools or consensus they need to make an impact. This disconnect between diplomatic negotiation and field-level reality remains one of the greatest impediments to peacekeeping success in complex war zones.

Strategic coherence is also undermined by the fragmented nature of peacebuilding efforts across UN agencies and international actors. In asymmetric conflict zones, peacekeeping missions are often expected to coordinate with humanitarian agencies, development programs, and political offices. However, without a unified strategy, these efforts can become disjointed, with different actors pursuing conflicting objectives or timelines. For instance, while military peacekeepers may focus on immediate security, development agencies may prioritize long-term governance reforms. This lack of alignment leads to inefficiencies, duplication of effort, and occasionally, tensions between agencies on the ground. A fragmented strategic environment can also create mixed signals for local stakeholders, who may exploit institutional divides for personal or political gain. Establishing integrated mission planning and inter-agency coordination mechanisms is essential to improving the strategic effectiveness of peacekeeping in highly complex and fluid environments.

The strategic use of peacekeeping as a tool of influence rather than impartial conflict resolution further complicates missions in asymmetric conflicts. Some powerful member states may use peacekeeping deployments to project soft power, gain political leverage, or support favored governments, undermining the perceived neutrality of the mission. In such cases, local actors may view peacekeepers not as impartial mediators but

as enablers of external agendas. This perception weakens the legitimacy of the mission and increases resistance among communities or opposition groups. In asymmetric warfare, where legitimacy and perception are critical, even small indications of partiality can severely hamper peacekeeping effectiveness. To mitigate this, the UN must strengthen oversight mechanisms that ensure peacekeeping mandates are implemented in accordance with their core principles, rather than influenced by the geopolitical interests of dominant states within the Security Council.

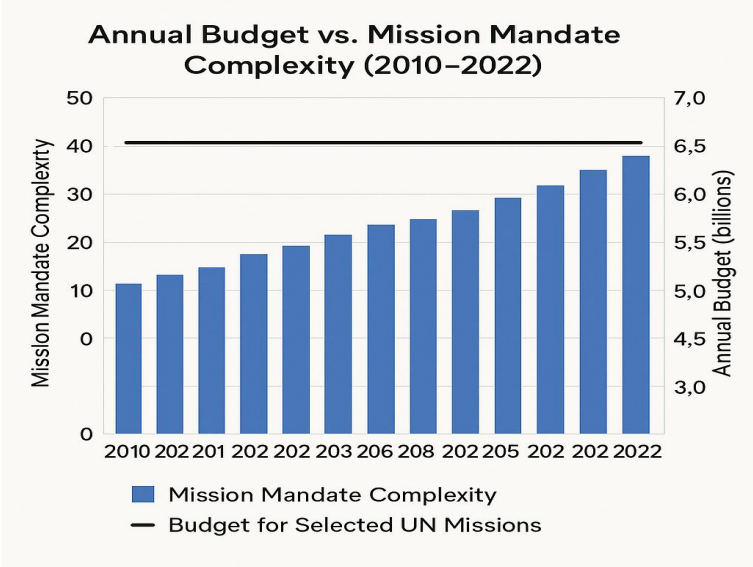
Funding is another strategic constraint that influences peacekeeping performance. Many missions operate under tight budgetary restrictions that do not match the complexity or scale of the conflict environments they are tasked with stabilizing. Budget allocations may cover troop deployment but fall short in providing advanced surveillance, intelligence capabilities, or logistical support. As asymmetric threats demand mobility, precision, and adaptability, peacekeepers require more than boots on the ground—they need drones, helicopters, communication systems, and rapid-response capabilities. Without adequate funding, peacekeeping becomes a symbolic rather than strategic endeavor, offering presence without protection. Donor fatigue, political bargaining over contributions, and competing global crises further limit the UN's ability to finance robust missions. A reevaluation of the peacekeeping funding model is necessary to ensure that missions are not only deployed but equipped to succeed in the environments they enter.

The strategic dilemma of exit timelines adds further complexity. In asymmetric environments, conflicts often simmer for years, with occasional flare-ups. Pressures from donor nations or UN member states for mission drawdowns or handovers to national governments often do not align with ground realities. Premature withdrawal of peacekeeping forces can leave security vacuums that non-state actors quickly exploit. Conversely, indefinite presence can create dependency or resentment among local populations. The strategic calculus must therefore balance the need for sustained engagement with long-term local capacity building. Crafting responsible and flexible exit strategies, tied to measurable stability benchmarks rather than fixed timelines, is vital for ensuring that peacekeeping missions contribute to lasting peace rather than temporary calm.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND LOCAL LEGITIMACY

Community engagement has emerged as a crucial factor in the success or failure of peacekeeping operations in asymmetric conflicts. In fragmented war zones, civilian populations are often caught between multiple armed actors, and their trust in external forces is fragile. When peacekeepers maintain consistent dialogue with local communities, respond quickly to protection concerns, and show cultural sensitivity, they are more likely to be perceived as allies rather than occupiers. This perception can generate valuable intelligence, community cooperation, and early warning signals, all of which enhance operational effectiveness. In contrast, missions that remain distant or overly militarized often alienate the populations they are meant to protect. Building local legitimacy requires more than patrols or aid drops—it demands active listening, representation of community concerns in mission planning, and the inclusion of local stakeholders in security discussions.

ANNUAL BUDGET VS. MISSION MANDATE COMPLEXITY (2010–2022)



The integration of local actors into peacekeeping strategies has proven particularly useful in environments where state institutions are weak or distrusted. Local leaders, religious figures, and community-based organizations often hold greater sway over daily security dynamics than formal authorities. When peacekeeping missions take time to understand these informal networks, they are better positioned to mediate disputes, prevent escalations, and deliver aid more effectively. Moreover, partnerships with local civil society groups help to identify conflict drivers unique to specific regions, whether they stem from ethnic tensions, land disputes, or historical grievances. However, missions that ignore local dynamics or apply a one-size-fits-all model risk misinterpreting tensions or inadvertently empowering one group over another. Effective community engagement requires decentralizing decision-making within missions and empowering local liaison officers to adapt approaches based on regional nuances. Such flexible and inclusive practices build durable relationships that contribute to mission credibility and resilience in volatile environments.

Language and communication barriers represent another layer of difficulty for peacekeeping forces engaging with local populations. In many missions, troops and officials do not speak the local language, leading to misunderstandings, reliance on translators, or failure to fully grasp cultural contexts. This communication gap not only hampers community engagement but also diminishes the ability to gather intelligence, mediate conflicts, or clarify the mission’s role. In asymmetric conflicts, where rumors and misinformation spread quickly, the lack of direct dialogue can fuel distrust and tension. Some missions have responded by recruiting local interpreters or establishing community outreach teams, but these efforts remain uneven. Long-term investments in language training, hiring of local staff, and development of public information campaigns tailored to local audiences are essential. Peacekeeping missions that prioritize transparent and culturally sensitive communication foster an environment where mutual respect and cooperation can grow, even amidst the chaos of asymmetric conflict.

Building trust also means addressing the expectations and needs of local populations beyond immediate security. In many war-torn societies, civilians see peacekeepers not only as protectors but also as providers of basic services, particularly in the absence of functioning governments. When missions are unable to meet these

expectations—due to limited mandates or resources—disillusionment often follows. Communities may accuse missions of passivity, favoritism, or complicity in ongoing violence. Managing expectations through clear messaging and consistent engagement is therefore crucial. Peacekeepers must communicate what they can realistically achieve and be transparent about their limitations. At the same time, missions should coordinate with humanitarian and development actors to ensure a broader support network is present. When peacekeeping becomes part of an integrated effort to restore normalcy—through education, health, or infrastructure support—it enhances its legitimacy and fosters a sense of shared purpose with the communities it aims to protect.

Community engagement is also vital to conflict resolution and reconciliation efforts. Peacekeepers who facilitate dialogue between warring factions at the grassroots level often play a pivotal role in rebuilding social cohesion. By creating safe spaces for communication and encouraging inclusive representation, they help bridge divides that fuel conflict. These efforts are especially important in asymmetric settings, where communities may be fragmented along ethnic, political, or religious lines. Peacekeeping missions that invest in community peace committees, local mediation mechanisms, and participatory governance initiatives often succeed in creating a foundation for longer-term peacebuilding. However, such initiatives require time, consistency, and the trust of local populations. Missions that rotate personnel frequently or rely heavily on military components may struggle to sustain this level of community involvement. Therefore, peacekeeping operations must balance security enforcement with investments in local-level peacebuilding to truly address the root causes of conflict in asymmetric environments.

Gender inclusion is another critical aspect of building community legitimacy. In many conflict zones, women bear the brunt of violence and displacement but are also key agents of peace. Peacekeeping missions that actively engage women in their planning and outreach efforts tend to achieve broader support and deeper insights into community dynamics. Female peacekeepers often have access to spaces and perspectives that male counterparts cannot reach, especially in conservative societies. Moreover, involving local women's groups in conflict resolution, protection programs, and early warning systems enhances the comprehensiveness and sustainability of peacebuilding efforts. Unfortunately, many missions still lack sufficient gender expertise or do not prioritize female participation at all levels of operation. Promoting gender-sensitive approaches, both within missions and through partnerships with local women's networks, strengthens community engagement and increases the legitimacy and effectiveness of peacekeeping in complex, asymmetric conflicts.

CONCLUSION

The comparative case study approach to analyzing the effectiveness of UN peacekeeping missions in preventing the recurrence of conflict highlights the complexities of peacebuilding and the critical role of international intervention. While some cases, such as those in East Timor and Sierra Leone, demonstrate the success of UN missions in maintaining peace and facilitating long-term stability, others, like in Somalia and South Sudan, show the limitations of peacekeeping efforts in environments marked by internal divisions, lack of political will, or insufficient resources. The effectiveness of peacekeeping missions depends on several key factors, including the nature of the conflict, the mandate and resources of the mission, and the commitment of local and international actors to sustainable peace. Missions with clear mandates, robust military and civilian components, and strong local partnerships tend to show better results in preventing relapse into conflict.

Furthermore, peacekeepers' ability to adapt to the evolving political and security landscape is critical in maintaining peace in the long term.

However, the UN's peacekeeping efforts often face criticism for their limited ability to address the root causes of conflict, such as poverty, governance issues, and ethnic tensions. The case studies examined suggest that while UN peacekeeping can help manage conflict and create a conducive environment for peace processes, it is not a panacea. The prevention of the recurrence of conflict requires a holistic approach, integrating peacekeeping with diplomatic, development, and reconciliation efforts. Ultimately, the success of UN peacekeeping missions in preventing conflict recurrence is not solely dependent on the peacekeepers themselves but on the broader commitment to peace and stability from both local stakeholders and the international community. Continued innovation, learning from past missions, and a focus on long-term, inclusive peacebuilding are essential for improving the effectiveness of future peacekeeping operations.

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