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25 YEARS OF PROTECTING CIVILIANS THROUGH UN PEACEKEEPING

Taking Stock and Looking Forward.

This paper is the product of a partnership between the Policy, Evaluation and Training Division in the United Nations Department of Peace Operations and researchers affiliated with the Centre for International Peace and Security Studies at McGill University.

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ACRONYMS

A4P	Action for Peacekeeping
AU	African Union
AUPSO	African Union-led Peace Support Operation
CAN	Community Alert Network
CLA	Community Liaison Assistants
CPAS	Comprehensive Planning and Performance Assessment System
DPO	Department of Peace Operations
DPKO	Department of Peacekeeping Operations
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
HRDDP	Human Rights Due Diligence Policy
FARDC	Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo
FIB	Force Intervention Brigade
FPU	Formed Police Unit
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
IPO	Individual Police Officer
JPT	Joint Protection Teams
LPC	Local Peace Committee
M23	March 23 Movement
MINUSCA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic
MINSUMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MONUC	United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo
MONUSCO	United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo
OPSP	Office for the Peacekeeping Strategic Partnership
PCCs	Police Contributing Countries
POC	Protection of Civilians
SPM	Special Political Mission
SPT	Specialized Police Teams
SRSG	Special Representative of the Secretary-General
T/PCCs	Troop and Police Contributing Countries
TCCs	Troop Contributing Countries
UN	United Nations
UNAMID	United Nations-African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur
UNAMSIL	United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone

UNIFIL	United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon
UNITAMS	United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan
UNMISS	United Nations Mission in South Sudan
UNPOL	United Nations Police
UNPROFOR	United Nations Protection Force
UNSC	United Nations Security Council

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2024 marks twenty-five years since the UN Security Council added the protection of civilians (POC) in armed conflict to its agenda and authorized the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) with the first explicit mandate to protect civilians. Since 1999, significant normative progress has been achieved in developing the concept of POC in UN peacekeeping and operationalizing it in successive missions. However, today's geopolitical landscape and the evolving nature of armed conflict present new challenges, and have generated calls to reflect on the achievements, limitations, and future of peacekeeping. Meanwhile, civilians caught in armed conflict across the world continue to face grave threats to their life and dignity, and they look to the international community, and, more specifically, to the United Nations, for support in their protection.

There is broad consensus among UN Member States and other stakeholders that UN peacekeeping is a critical tool to protect civilians from conflict and violence. There is also a strong commitment to ensuring that UN peacekeeping remains fit for purpose amidst evolving political and conflict dynamics. This paper seeks to contribute to ongoing reflections on the future of peacekeeping, with a focus on the protection of civilians. It revisits key junctures in the evolution of the Security Council's POC agenda, takes stock of how UN peacekeeping missions have protected civilians, and addresses core questions and dilemmas that have emerged over the past twenty-five years, all while looking ahead to the future.

The imperative to protect civilians through UN peacekeeping operations emerged through a series of critical events. From its early roots in post-Cold War-era missions, to its formalization following the failures in Rwanda and Srebrenica, and its prioritization in the largest UN missions deployed today, POC has become a central tenet of the global peacekeeping enterprise. Key developments, from the introduction of robust mandates by the Security Council to innovations in the field that have helped missions engage more closely with communities, have been institutionalized in mandates, policy, guidance, doctrine and training, and refined through collective efforts to enhance accountability and effectiveness.

Over 25 years of experience, a defining feature of POC though UN peacekeeping has been the ability to provide direct physical protection to civilians through the deployment of uniformed personnel. Yet, a core comparative advantage of UN peacekeeping lies in its

comprehensive, integrated, and multi-tiered approach, which brings together military, police, and civilian personnel to address threats of violence against civilians and create a protective environment. The UN's impartiality, which is reinforced by its multinational composition and mandates from the Security Council, adds both credibility and legitimacy to these efforts.

This approach has a clear track record of success: even though UN peacekeeping missions operate in some of the most difficult conflict contexts, research shows that their presence correlates with a decrease in civilian casualties and targeting, a reduction in the geographic scope of conflict, and a reduction in local or subnational conflict – all with relatively limited resources, and at less cost than other comparable alternatives. Other peace operations, such as those involving regional or sub-regional organizations or ad hoc coalitions, can approximate the distinctive elements of protection through UN peacekeeping, but they cannot fully replicate them. Moreover, it was only through a long period of learning-by-doing, and significant investments both in the field and at Headquarters, that the UN has moved beyond protection as an idea, to protection as a realizable goal of peacekeeping.

Operationalizing POC in peacekeeping is an ongoing challenge. It has required adaptability to navigate difficult geopolitical and economic headwinds, address new and shifting conflict dynamics, and respond to the evolving needs and expectations of civilians, particularly in today's environment of harmful information. The contours and limits of the POC mandate has been tested by the UN's response to specific protection crises, as well as its relationship with other actors, from host state authorities to parallel forces, regional and sub-regional organizations, and local communities. Peacekeeping missions often operate in environments with ongoing conflict, where access is limited or where consent by the host state is compromised. Yet, experience has shown – and continues to show – that protecting civilians is still possible even amidst these difficult circumstances.

Partnerships have long been integral to protection through peacekeeping. The growing attention to responses to conflict involving regional and sub-regional organizations requires careful consideration of the implications for POC. Partnerships have in some cases challenged the UN's core principle of impartiality or implicated the Organization in violations against civilians. Regional organizations have also struggled to deliver in protecting civilians. This underscores the need for the protection of civilians to be prioritized in all partnerships, including in the context of the implementation of

Security Council Resolution 2719 on financing for African Union-led Peace Support Operations. Peacekeeping transitions also pose protection risks, as shifts in mission posture and presence can leave civilians vulnerable to renewed violence. This reinforces the need for careful and continuous planning amidst transition processes, in addition to strong support for peacekeeping operations from the Security Council and other peacekeeping stakeholders.

As the international community marks 25 years of POC in peacekeeping, the protection of civilians has become an indispensable component of most modern peacekeeping operations. Looking ahead, there are concrete opportunities for peacekeeping stakeholders to bolster the UN's role and capacity to protect civilians. These include the ongoing consideration of mandates, budgets, and policies through UN intergovernmental bodies. Additionally, reflections on the future as part of the UN Peacekeeping Ministerial, and as follow-up to the *Pact for the Future* as adopted by the General Assembly, could and should entail consideration of how to ensure that POC remains central to the UN's peace and security toolbox. The lessons of the past twenty-five years offer strong foundations. Through renewed commitment, innovation, and collaboration, the UN can continue to deliver on the imperative of protecting civilians in conflict.

The paper is the product of a partnership between the Policy, Evaluation and Training in the United Nations Department of Peace Operations and researchers affiliated with the Centre for International Peace and Security Studies at McGill University. As part of the paper's development, researchers consulted a range of academic and policy sources on the history and practice of POC, as well as the deliberations that took place in May 2024 during POC Week at UN Headquarters in New York. They also interviewed current and former UN officials who have been engaged in the creation of POC doctrine and its implementation in peacekeeping missions over the past 25 years.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1999, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) took the landmark step of placing the protection of civilians on its agenda. In the context of crisis situations in which civilians and civilian infrastructure were subject to direct attack, UNSC resolution 1265 called on all conflict parties to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law. And following high-profile instances in the 1990s where peacekeeping operations failed to prevent the widespread killing of civilians, resolution 1270 gave the UN mission in Sierra Leone an explicit Chapter VII mandate to protect civilians. Specifically, UNAMSIL was instructed, "within its capabilities and areas of deployment, to afford protection to civilians under imminent threat of physical violence".[1] These two resolutions were coupled with a request to the UN Secretary-General to present an annual report to the UNSC on conflict trends imperilling civilians and the steps undertaken by the international community to prevent and respond to violence against civilians.[2]

Twenty-five years after these agenda-setting decisions, peacekeeping has become a central tool in the Council's toolbox for the protection of civilians. A total of 16 UN peacekeeping operations have been explicitly mandated to protect civilians since 1999, five of which are operational today.[3] These missions have been deployed in a variety of conflict contexts and have encountered diverse threats against civilians they are mandated to protect.[4] Through moments of international turbulence, the POC mandate has endured and become part of the 'DNA' of UN peacekeeping. To support and deliver on POC mandates, the UN's peacekeeping architecture has also been adapted and strengthened. For the uniformed and civilian components of those operations, POC is not just one task among many, but the key objective of their efforts.

Despite these advances, today's international context presents a set of deeply challenging issues for protection through peacekeeping. Addressing the Security Council 25 years after the first POC mandate, the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Mirjana Spoljaric, emphasized that while there were 20 ongoing conflicts reported in 1999, the number had surged to over 120 in 2024, with catastrophic effects on civilian populations.[5] The Secretary-General's latest report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict indicates an alarming 72 percent rise in civilian deaths in the last year alone.[6] Conflicts have also become more protracted and more complex, featuring multiple belligerent parties, often with external backing. More broadly, intensifying geopolitical tensions have eroded

consensus within and beyond the UNSC. Frequent violations of the rules and norms governing armed conflict, as well as of the Council's own resolutions, are undermining the foundations of the international community's commitment to protection.

Meanwhile, the UN's three largest peacekeeping operations, MONUSCO, MINUSCA, and UNMISS, have faced, and continue to face, challenges in implementing their mandates. The 2023 departure MINUSMA, the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali, following the government's request for it to leave, and the disengagement of MONUSCO from areas of the DRC, both occurred in contexts where the threat to civilians remained high. Popular discontent and anti-UN protests in some contexts, in part fueled by external actors, have further complicated the ability of peacekeeping missions to operate effectively. Violence against civilians in other countries where peace operations prematurely departed has been escalating, most notably in Sudan.

This year marks a critical moment to reflect on peacekeeping as a tool to protect civilians and consider how POC can remain a central objective in new or adapted models of conflict prevention, management, and resolution. As UN Member States and the UN Secretariat engage in reflection on the future of peace operations, it is crucial to take stock of why protection became a key imperative of the Security Council's work and how peacekeeping helps to protect civilians. In so doing, this paper also revisits the core debates that have accompanied 25 years of efforts to protect civilians through peacekeeping and highlights key questions about the future of the POC mandate in a turbulent world.

2. CRITICAL JUNCTURES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF POC IN PEACEKEEPING

The protection of civilians in UN peacekeeping has evolved significantly through a series of pivotal moments, each of which have refined and strengthened the broader POC agenda and mandate. These key junctures have shaped how peacekeeping missions approach POC. They have also served to underscore the successes and challenges in protecting civilians from conflict and violence.

2.1 The origins of the protection imperative

While Cold War-era peacekeeping primarily focused on maintaining peace between conflict parties, UN missions in this period did engage in various activities that contributed to the protection of civilians. By supporting ceasefires, and preventing renewed violence, these missions helped to

protect populations. More broadly, they created opportunities for diplomatic initiatives that could eventually bring about peace and reduce human suffering.

There were also isolated instances of peacekeepers directly protecting civilians, most notably in the UN Operation in the Congo (1960–1964), where, during the Katanga crisis, mission leadership instructed UN troops to assemble civilians in designated areas and invoked the principle of self-defence to protect people from violence.[7] Decades later, in Lebanon, UNIFIL troops positioned themselves between hostile forces and civilians during the 1982 crisis.[8] These instances were rare and did not occur with Security Council authorization to protect civilians under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Where Council mandates did expand was in relation to efforts to safeguard corridors for humanitarian assistance, including by escorting humanitarian convoys.

The protection of civilians as an *objective* of peacekeeping, and as an explicit agenda for the Security Council, emerged in the aftermath of the devastating experiences of genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica, where failures to protect populations tarnished the reputation of the United Nations and its Member States. In addition to the absence of explicit POC mandates and related doctrine, subsequent assessments pointed to weaknesses in command and control, intelligence and information sharing, and ill-fated tactical choices, all of which contributed to failures to protect civilians. They also revealed deeper, systemic issues stemming from the nature of Security Council mandates, the lack of requisite resources, and, in the case of Rwanda, Member States' own momentous decisions to withdraw military contingents, leaving civilians perilously exposed.[9]

The tragedies in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia underscored the moral imperative for the UN to protect civilians, including by using force. They also highlighted the need for explicit and robust POC mandates, and capable, rapidly deployable forces with the right mindset. A set UNSC members acknowledged these gaps and advocated successfully for POC to be a core consideration for the Council in the maintenance of international peace and security, and as an explicit part of peacekeeping mandates. This effort coincided with developments to address heightened violence against women and children in armed conflict, including conflict-related sexual violence, as threats to international peace and security. In his address in September 1999 at the opening of the UN General Assembly (UNGA), former Secretary-General Kofi Annan called on Member States to forge unity around action to meet protection crises, and to "ensure

that the Security Council, the body charged with authorizing force under international law, is able to rise to the challenge".[10]

This was related to a larger effort by Secretary-General Annan to advance a more holistic concept of protection. Its genesis can be traced back to his 1998 *Situation in Africa* report, in which Annan identified the protection of civilians in conflict as a "humanitarian imperative," and called for the UNSC to muster the political will to act decisively where it could have impact and invest resources to address both the deep causes and immediate implications of intra-state wars.[11] His broad and multi-layered understanding of protection, which foresaw the involvement of various civilian and military actors, included a number of activities that would later be integral to POC in peacekeeping doctrine, such as monitoring and reporting on violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, engaging with national authorities on those violations, and building or strengthening security institutions and the rule of law.[12]

2.2 The first decade of POC practice (1999-2009)

During the first decade of POC, UN peacekeepers in ten different peacekeeping missions were authorized by the UNSC to protect civilians.[13] However, the implementation of mandates varied significantly across missions, leading to a diverse set of lessons learned through direct experiences. In some instances, robust actions were taken to safeguard civilians, while in others, protection efforts fell short of what was expected of the UN.

An early, concrete test occurred in 2003, during the Ituri crisis in the DRC, where reports of grave human rights violations, including systematic conflict-related sexual violence, and the threat of escalating ethnic conflict evoked memories of the genocide in Rwanda. While the existing mission on the ground, MONUC, had a POC mandate, it was not configured to forcefully respond. To remedy this, the Council authorized *Operation Artemis,* a European Union-led military operation, which was able to lay the groundwork for a more sustained and extensive campaign by MONUC in eastern DRC. This bolstered confidence in the UN mission and significantly reduced attacks on civilians. MONUC employed a carrot-and-stick approach, where peacekeepers persuaded militia groups to disarm, and resorted to force when necessary. Between early 2005 and late 2006, UN forces in the DRC engaged in some of the most assertive enforcement action in the UN's history to protect civilians and pacify the country's eastern region so that elections could be held.[14]

This approach contrasted starkly with the 2008 case of Kiwanja in the DRC, where civilians were not adequately protected by the UN. This case, and other developments in the DRC, Sudan (more below), and elsewhere prompted the Security Council to sharpen its focus on the protection of civilians.[15] In 2008, under Resolution 1856, MONUC became the first mission with a mandate that prioritized protection above all other mandated tasks, and explicitly authorized the use of force to ensure the protection of civilians, "…from *any* of the parties engaged in the conflict."[16] The following year, in a thematic resolution on POC, the UNSC emphasized that all peacekeeping missions should prioritize POC in their resource allocation.[17] It was also in the context of MONUC, specifically the joint operations with the FARDC in 2009, during which grave human rights violations were committed by UN-supported troops, that the Secretary-General's office oversaw the development of a Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDPP). The HRDDP requires UN support to non-UN security forces to be conditioned on compliance with international human rights, humanitarian and refugee law, further reinforcing the POC imperative.[18]

Towards the end of this first decade, the UN's efforts to protect civilians in Darfur, Sudan, involved the first ever deployment of a hybrid UN-African Union (AU) mission. In the context of widespread violence against civilians and international outcry about the risk of genocide beginning in 2003, a small AU-led mission had deployed. However, the Government of Sudan had rejected the proposal for the existing UN peacekeeping mission in the country to expand to Darfur. After a great deal of negotiations, in 2007, the UN-AU Hybrid Operation in Darfur, UNAMID, was authorized, a compromise that helped overcome the Government of Sudan's resistance to the deployment of a UN peacekeeping mission in Darfur. The mission became one of the UN's largest and most complex, operating with a mandate to protect civilians in a context without a meaningful peace process and genuine host state consent. These dynamics significantly hindered UNAMID, even as its presence and engagement, including with Darfuri women and civil society, reduced violence against civilians.

2.3 Doctrine and guidance

The first decade of POC practice in peacekeeping underscored the need for clear doctrinal and operational guidance to effectively meet the protection imperative. A 2009 study by OCHA and the then-Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) highlighted the lack of such guidance on POC, revealing that UN personnel often held widely varying interpretations of the mandate, even within the same mission context.[19] At the time, protection of civilians as a core objective, distinct from international

humanitarian law (IHL) protections, was not widely understood or incorporated into most military doctrine and training, leaving troop- and police-contributing countries (T/PCCs) without a common point of reference. That same year, the UNGA Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations (C34) recognized, for the first time, that POC was a common task assigned to peacekeepers and called on the Secretariat to systematize the UN's experiences in POC mandate implementation.

In response, DPKO released its first Concept on POC and developed other guidance materials.[20] Echoing Annan's broader vision of protection, the 2010 *Operational Concept on the Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations* reflected an expansive understanding of POC that included measures beyond the use of force. It articulated a three-tiered conception of POC, which has held fairly consistently ever since. The three tiers include: 1) protection through dialogue and engagement (through national and local conflict resolution and mediation, the use of good offices, reporting and advocacy); 2) provision of physical protection (through protective presence, inter-positioning, and the threat or use of force); and 3) establishment of a protective environment (for example, through capacity building and support for the rule of law). DPKO's Concept also articulated four phases of protection: prevention, pre-emption, response, and consolidation. [21]

The three-tiered model was accompanied by an expansion of protection roles for mission personnel. While military contingents were considered crucial and military doctrine was developed to prioritize protection,[22] it was made explicit that POC was a whole-of-mission responsibility, involving civilian and police personnel as well. The protection of civilians henceforth became a requirement for all peacekeepers, military and non-military.[23] This conception of POC has remained stable over time and enjoys wide consensus among key peacekeeping stakeholders.

Beyond the creation of doctrine and guidance, DPKO also recognized the need for dedicated capacity both at UN headquarters and within POC-mandated peacekeeping missions. In early 2012, DPKO established a small Protection of Civilians Team within its best practices section at the Secretariat in New York. In the field, dedicated sections and posts, including Senior Protection of Civilians Advisers, were created to support integrated POC mandate implementation, and to ensure POC concerns were mainstreamed and prioritized within missions. Specifically, the Senior Protection of Civilians Adviser was tasked with coordinating the operationalization of the POC mandate, including by advising mission

leadership, establishing structures for planning and coordination, and supporting the development of a mission-wide POC strategy.

2.4 Field-level innovation and tools

Parallel to the development of doctrine and guidance, significant field-level innovations emerged from the first decade of POC practice, driven by the need to better understand threats against civilians and strengthen engagement between peacekeepers and local communities. Many of these tools and approaches were pioneered in the DRC.[24] For instance, MONUC established Joint Protection Teams (JPTs) composed of military, police, and civilian personnel who were tasked with visiting high-risk areas to assess threats to civilians and developing and implementing responses. To bridge the gap between peacekeepers and the local population, MONUC employed Community Liaison Assistants (CLAs): national staff hired to support communication between the mission and local communities and help peacekeepers understand the vulnerabilities faced by civilians. Later, these were complemented by Community Alert Networks (CANs) that could improve the mission's early warning capacities. Meanwhile, the POC Team at headquarters institutionalized many of these innovations, integrating them into policies and guidance applicable to all missions.

Building on these foundational initiatives in the first decade, peacekeeping missions increasingly invested in local conflict management processes as part of an evolving approach to political engagement. These Tier 1 efforts often involved engaging local communities, particularly women's and civil society groups, to address violence stemming from locally rooted grievances and mediating disputes that were overlooked in national-level political processes. In the Central African Republic, for example, MINUSCA facilitated the establishment of Local Peace Committees (LPCs), which played a critical role in fostering intercommunal dialogue, monitoring security, and providing early conflict warnings. Such localized political efforts often took place in contexts where political processes at the national level had stalled or collapsed.

Several POC-related innovations at field level have been led by UN police (UNPOL). Over the past two decades, individual police officers, formed police units (FPUs), and specialized police teams have made important contributions across all three tiers of POC, in ways that often differ from military components. In some instances, police have worked in joint task forces with military units, while in other contexts, such as IDP camps, they are the only uniformed components present. This presence has helped to build the population's confidence in security

actors, whether that be UN or national personnel. In addition, the community-oriented policing model employed by UNPOL has enhanced the relationship and interaction between the mission and local populations, helping to make local civilians equal partners in the goal of ensuring their security.[25]

Over time, these field-level innovations and others have fostered a more "people-centered" approach to protection in peacekeeping, aligning with the subsequent recommendations of the *High-level Independent Panel on United Nations Peace Operations*.[26] They also broadened the scope (and purpose) of what missions understood as their political mandates, which had been traditionally focused on engagement with elites in the capitals. Heads of Field Offices, along with Civil and Political Affairs Officers within those offices, have played a critical role in reducing levels of violence against civilians through these initiatives at local levels. Additionally, community-based approaches have given special consideration to transitioning protection initiatives to local community ownership, helping to ensure the sustainability and continuity of protection-related efforts beyond the presence of the mission.

2.5 Testing the boundaries of POC in 2013

Nearly fifteen years after the establishment of the first POC mandate, 2013 marked an important turning point with several pivotal events that tested the mandate's limits and underscored the complexities of modern peacekeeping as a tool for POC.

The first test emerged in March, with the decision by the UNSC to authorize targeted offensive operations in the DRC. Resolution 2098 called for the creation of a "force intervention brigade" (FIB), comprised of troops from South Africa, Tanzania and Malawi, in response to the Council's "deep concern" regarding the threat posed by the March 23 Movement (M23).[27] The FIB was therefore mandated to undertake military action to "neutralize armed groups" and reduce the threat they posed – both to state authority and civilian security. These objectives were to be executed through "targeted" and "robust" offensive operations, which leveraged long-range artillery, special forces, snipers, and drones.[28]

While the FIB brought an additional layer of force, all uniformed contingents in MONUSCO were expected to implement the same mandate, emphasizing a unified command structure under the slogan "one mandate, one mission, one force."[29] And although some lauded the FIB as a breakthrough in protection

through peacekeeping, the authority for robust protection had already been established over a decade earlier and there were precedents of UN military units actively employing force to protect civilians. The FIB did successfully defeat the M23 and address the threat the group posed to civilians, but the specific factors and convergence of interests that enabled this kind of action did not materialize in relation to other armed groups. Furthermore, concerns about the UN's impartiality, one of the three core principles of peacekeeping, were raised due to the mandate's language instructing MONUSCO to 'neutralize' a particular armed actor[30], the FIB's close alignment with the FARDC, and regional involvement in the FIB, all of which raised questions about whether this type of force would or should be replicated in other contexts.

Issues related to impartiality were also prominent in Mali, the second test of the POC mandate in 2013. Established in April 2013, MINUSMA aimed to stabilize the country after a military coup and a violent insurrection by separatists. Many saw the mission as blurring the lines between peacekeeping and peace enforcement, and expectations from the host government and some countries in the region were that MINUSMA would engage in offensive operations against armed non-state actors and violent extremist groups. The mission was never mandated to do so, or to "neutralize" any armed groups, but rather to "stabilize the key population centres, especially in the north of Mali and, in this context, to deter threats and take active steps to prevent the return of armed elements to those areas". MINUSMA nonetheless operated alongside French forces that were engaged in counterterrorism efforts and was co-located with them in some areas. This configuration risked MINUSMA being perceived as a party to the conflict and closely aligned with the French operation, thereby jeopardizing its impartiality. Relatedly, the mission faced severe operational difficulties, including attacks by armed groups and restricted access, ultimately becoming the deadliest peacekeeping mission in UN history until its withdrawal in 2023. This underscored the inherent risks and complexities of peacekeeping as a tool of protection in contexts with a significant presence of violent extremist groups and asymmetric threats.

A third test emerged in December 2013 with the outbreak of civil war in South Sudan, when tens of thousands of people, targeted due to their ethnic backgrounds and perceived political affiliations sought refuge at UNMISS bases. In response, UNMISS established "POC sites" in and around these bases, which at their peak in 2015 sheltered over 200,000 civilians, many of whom were women and children. The decision to open the gates and create large-scale "POC sites" was a powerful symbol of the UN's commitment to its mandate to

protect civilians, highlighting the importance of saving lives despite considerable security and political risks to the mission. By offering sanctuary to those fleeing violence, the UN reinforced the principle that it will respond when people come seeking protection and will safeguard vulnerable populations when national authorities are either unable or unwilling to do so.

While the establishment of "POC sites" in South Sudan was crucial in protecting thousands of civilians, it also introduced significant challenges. Originally intended as temporary shelters, these sites evolved into long-term refuges, straining resources and exposing the difficulties of maintaining order and security within the sites while preventing external incursions. In 2021, UNMISS began reclassifying POC sites as internally displaced person (IDP) camps, transferring the responsibility for residents' safety to the host government and reallocating its resources to facilitating increased returns from the camps to other regions in the country.

The experiences of these three large, multidimensional UN missions and others mandated after 2013, namely MINUSCA in the Central African Republic, tested the boundaries of the POC mandate. POC mandates at the Security Council became increasingly specific over subsequent years, with myriad protection tasks being enumerated in the resolutions authorizing the renewal of these missions. This included tasks to provide specific protection for women and children, enhance local community engagement, strengthen early warning and response, and minimize harm to civilians in mission operations, among others. While this development has provided greater specificity in terms of expectations from the Security Council for the fulfillment of the POC mandate, it has also made mandates more prescriptive and reduced flexibility in their implementation.

2.6 Training, accountability, and performance evaluation

The first decade of POC in peacekeeping saw an increase in both the number of uniformed personnel and the range of T/PCCs engaged in missions. POC was not initially part of any national military doctrine or training prior to deploying to UN peacekeeping operations with POC mandates. DPKO addressed this challenge with the development and refinement of pre-deployment training materials with a strong focus on POC, which T/PCCs were able to draw on to create their own doctrines and training modules. [31]

The growing complexity of mandates, however, intensified the need for common standards of performance and their consistent application, to deliver on the expectations associated with POC for uniformed components. In addition,

there were cases where missions fell short in protecting civilians, prompting missions and UN Headquarters to initiate investigations into some of these circumstances.[32] These investigations resulted in changes to address performance shortcomings.

An important step forward in improving performance was the creation of the Office for the Peacekeeping Strategic Partnership (OPSP) by the UNGA in 2013.[33] The Office is mandated to review peacekeeping missions to identify gaps and systemic issues impacting the delivery of mandates, including POC, as well as to highlight good practices and lessons learned that could be applied across peacekeeping. During visits to missions, OPSP assesses military and police units and, in missions with POC mandates, issues that may affect their ability to protect civilians. As part of its ongoing reviews and recommendations, OPSP has sought to create greater consistency across T/PCCs in the interpretation of the rules of engagement for uniformed personnel in peacekeeping missions and has played an important role in addressing units' specific and systemic shortfalls.

The 2015 Leaders' Summit on Peacekeeping served as a further catalyst for strengthening performance for the protection of civilians. In addition to securing pledges from Member States to contribute troops and police to UN missions, the Summit foregrounded accountability for personnel in peace operations, through the dissemination of common professional standards and more systematic and data-driven performance assessments of uniformed units. The progression from common training standards to the *evaluation* of military and police units was unprecedented for the UN.

An essential part of that evaluation has been performance on protection, particularly in terms of the readiness to respond to violence against civilians. One effect of these measures is the recognition among T/PCCs that the selection of units for missions is influenced by POC performance, which in turn creates incentives to improve the performance, posture, and mindset of units and their commanders. These measures have been enhanced by the Secretary-General's *Action for Peacekeeping* (A4P) initiative, which includes as one of its priorities building the right capabilities and mindsets for effective peacekeeping and were consolidated in the *Integrated Peacekeeping Performance and Accountability Framework*.[34]

The development of POC doctrine and training, the accumulated experience of multiple deployments, and efforts towards stronger performance and accountability have all had a transformative impact: there is a set of TCCs from around the world that have

internalized POC as a core element of their military culture. Similarly, FPUs and IPOs from many PCCs are increasingly trained specifically on POC doctrine in UN peacekeeping. Some of these T/PCCs have demonstrated that a lack of national experience with armed conflict is not a barrier to using force robustly to protect civilians. Others have challenged the common assumption that uniformed components deployed where a T/PCC has no concrete national interest are unlikely to be proactive in the service of a protection mandate. In fact, many of the most effective units come from T/PCCs with no direct political stake in the countries or regions where missions are deployed. Twenty-five years on from UNSC Resolution 1270, POC is widely viewed as the central rationale for deployment and is part of the day-to-day operations of many T/PCCs.

3. THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF PROTECTION IN PEACEKEEPING

At the core of this evolution is the recognition that peacekeeping is a distinctive tool for protection. In the context of reflections on the future of peace operations, it is important to identify which aspects of POC through UN peacekeeping are currently comparative advantages for the UN, but could potentially be undertaken by others, and what elements are unique to UN peacekeeping.

3.1 The capacity for direct, physical protection

The first distinctive element of protection through UN peacekeeping is the capacity of peacekeepers to offer direct, physical protection to civilians. Armed uniformed personnel are the only actors that can threaten or use force to confront those who are armed to deter them from actions that harm civilians.

At the same time, there are limits to that threat or use of force. The imperative at the heart of POC in peacekeeping is to protect civilians under threat of physical violence "within the mission's capabilities and areas of deployment."[35] It does not seek to substitute for a state's primary responsibility for the safety and well-being of its population, nor does it entail a blanket responsibility to protect all civilians everywhere. The POC mandate signals to mission personnel that if they can address manifest threats to civilians in proximity, or where clear warning signs are present, there is an expectation and obligation that they do so.

While the capacity for physical protection distinguishes UN peacekeeping from other protection actors within and beyond the UN system, it could be carried out by other security forces, whether national, sub-

regional, regional, or international. Delivering on the objective of protecting civilians by regional or other international forces, however, would require the development of clear doctrine to clarify the meaning and scope of a POC mandate; an integrated field-level structure geared toward protection goals; military or police units with the right readiness and mindset to protect civilians; and a system for accountability, evaluation and lessons learned. Through a long process of learning-by-doing, the UN has moved beyond protection as an idea, to protection as a realizable goal of peacekeeping. But it took time and adaptation to create an architecture and culture for protection.

3.2 A multi-tiered and integrated approach to protection

Although physical protection, or Tier 2, is frequently emphasized in policy debates on protection through peacekeeping, the interlocking nature of the three tiers provides POC in UN peacekeeping with an added layer of distinctiveness. A mission's uniformed components contribute not only towards security goals, but also to political objectives, through their dialogue and engagement with communities, government officials and armed actors, as well as to broader peacebuilding, through their work on security sector reform, for example. Moreover, the security umbrella created by military personnel can enhance access and leverage for other components of a mission, as well as protection actors beyond the mission. In many contexts, the presence of uniformed peacekeepers facilitates the delivery of humanitarian aid and basic services to populations in remote locations. Simultaneously, the structure of UN peacekeeping missions provides the civilian leadership, most notably through the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG), greater authority and leverage for engagement with national authorities than UN officials have in non-mission settings.

POC doctrine and guidance also establishes a crucial role for non-military personnel in protection across all three tiers, through their involvement in conflict resolution, good offices and support to local peace initiatives; their work on gender-responsive protection, child protection, and the prevention of conflict-related sexual violence; and their broader efforts to promote human rights, advance full, equal, and meaningful participation of women in political and peacebuilding processes, strengthen the rule of law, and reform state institutions. With respect to Tier 2, civilian personnel in UN missions are trained and expected to contribute to physical protection by engaging directly with local communities to identify and mitigate threats, often through community-led early warning and response systems that can then

mobilize local and national resources for immediate protection. They also provide protection through their presence, by dissuading armed actors from perpetrating violence against civilians, and can facilitate evacuation and safe passage.

Challenging the assumption that only armed peacekeepers can effectively protect civilians, recent research on unarmed approaches to protection of civilians confirms this potential of non-military actors to create safe spaces and protect vulnerable populations, including by empowering local communities to take an active role in their own protection. Several of these techniques have been employed in peacekeeping missions as part of the comprehensive and integrated approach to POC for more than a decade.[36] Moreover, it is important to recall that the presence of observers, whether military observers, police, or civilian peacekeepers, and the deterrent effects of their observation and reporting, have long been part of the UN's approach to conflict management.

In sum, though it may be tempting to assume that uniformed components are responsible for Tier 2, and civilian components for Tiers 1 and 3, military, police, and civilian actors within a mission are active across all tiers of POC. To maximize impact, fulfillment of the protection mandate requires close integration among the different components of a peacekeeping mission. This, too, is what differentiates protection through UN peacekeeping from other actors: it is not just the actions of mission personnel that define POC, but the *way* in which they carry them out. In today's UN peacekeeping missions, uniformed and civilian components integrate their efforts across a full range of activities, from the analysis of threats to civilians, to the development of POC strategies, to the planning, execution, and monitoring of specific tasks. UN civilian personnel who have worked in mission settings for many years also tend to have extensive local knowledge and networks that are invaluable for uniformed personnel who may rotate every six or twelve months. This is even more true for national mission personnel, such as CLAs.

The comprehensive and integrated approach to POC is a significant comparative advantage for UN peacekeeping. Other international military actors engaged in peace or stabilization operations often do not have the same level of civilian expertise or capacity that could be integrated into their protection approaches. These capacities are in short supply in the foreign or civil service structures of most countries. Nor do most other actors have mechanisms to generate and employ civilian expertise for multi-year deployments, or to employ significant numbers of national staff. While other organizations could develop

similar POC capabilities in theory, the reality is that this would require not only significant resources and a deep understanding of what POC mandates entail, but also a significant amount of trial and error—an arduous process that the UN has navigated over 25 years of POC experience. Moving forward, non-UN actors could embrace multi-tiered conceptions of protection and robust models of civilian-military integration. However, the successful implementation of such an approach would necessitate a considerable investment in the recruitment, training, and management of both civilian and uniformed personnel, along with a commitment to learning from the challenges faced by those who have gone before.

3.3 Impartiality through multilateralism

UN peacekeeping is widely seen as a model of effective multilateralism, enabling international cooperation on peace and security with direct contributions from a wide range of Member States, while respecting the sovereignty of host countries. POC through UN peacekeeping is an extension of this model. POC-mandated missions are authorized by the UNSC, the body entrusted with the maintenance of international peace and security in the UN Charter.

Peacekeeping mandates are thus designed to be impartial with respect to conflicting interests, ensuring that no single state's agenda dominates the mission. This impartiality is crucial to maintaining the focus on POC, preventing political or national interests from overshadowing the mission's protective role. Mandates are regularly revised and renewed in consultation with the host state, UNSC members, and other UN Member States, facilitating ongoing dialogue on how best to support states in fulfilling their primary protection responsibilities. The multinational composition of UN peacekeeping missions, involving personnel from a broad spectrum of countries from all regions, further reinforces impartiality and the UN's core values.

As one of the core principles of UN peacekeeping operations, impartiality is therefore a key element of what makes POC through peacekeeping not only distinctive, but unique. The Secretary-General has described impartiality as the UN's "strongest asset," emphasizing its importance for mission effectiveness.[37] Impartiality builds credibility and trust with local populations, which is vital for effective protection of civilians. Without trust, civilians may be hesitant to share information or seek assistance, weakening the mission's protective capacity.

Other peace operations, such as those involving regional or sub-regional

organizations or ad hoc coalitions, can, to varying degrees, approximate the impartiality that is so foundational to UN peacekeeping. But they cannot fully replicate it. Their proximity to the conflict often means that their interests may compromise, or be perceived as compromising, their ability to act impartially. Sub-regional actors and ad hoc coalitions are often composed of troops from host and neighbouring countries with vested interests or particular relationships with civilian populations, which may influence their efforts to implement a protection mandate. While over the first 25 years of POC in UN peacekeeping the principle of impartiality has been strained in ways that require reflection, it remains central to the fulfillment of the POC mandate.

4. PROTECTION THROUGH PEACEKEEPING: CHALLENGES AND ENDURING QUESTIONS

These distinctive features of protection through UN peacekeeping should be front and center as Member States, the UN Secretariat, regional organizations, civil society, and other stakeholders discuss the future of peace operations. Yet, as UN peacekeeping has evolved to respond to ever more complex conflict situations, and to changes in the broader geopolitical environment, its effectiveness and legitimacy have been called into question. So too has the imperative to protect civilians. As we reflect on 25 years of POC in UN peacekeeping, it is worth revisiting some of the key questions that have featured in deliberations to address ongoing challenges and shape the future direction of missions with POC mandates.

4.1 Are peacekeeping operations effective at protecting civilians?

Instances from the past 25 years in which civilians have been killed or injured in contexts where UN peacekeeping missions have been deployed, have regularly raised the question of whether these missions can succeed in protecting civilians. Despite some of the negative perceptions generated by some cases, research clearly demonstrates that peacekeeping is an effective tool for the protection of civilians.

UN peacekeepers operate in some of the most difficult conflict contexts, often covering expansive geographic areas in austere environments with relatively limited resources. And yet their presence correlates with a decrease in civilian casualties and targeting, a reduction in the geographic scope of conflict, and a reduction in local or subnational conflict. These positive effects result from advocating with parties, monitoring, patrolling, and ensuring protection by preventing violence and civilian harm, but also, in

some cases, through action that separates combatants and reduces battlefield activities that trigger civilian targeting.[38] Research examining the first decade of POC mandates shows that missions' capacity to protect civilians is strengthened with the number of peacekeepers present, as larger forces not only enhance the effects of these protective activities but also signal the UN's resolve, both within the target state and internationally.[39] More recent analysis of multiple missions indicates that it is not so much the overall quantity of peacekeepers that matters for protection, but rather the troop to population ratio in a given area and the way in which perpetrators of violence are confronted by peacekeepers. The protection impact is greatest when the type of force used by peacekeepers is tailored to the type of threat posed by belligerents and responds to perpetrators' motivations for attacking civilians.[40]

Most often, the primary contribution of peacekeepers is the creation of a security umbrella through their sustained presence, which deters violent action, rather than through the actual use of force in the service of physical protection. A shift to a more proactive mindset, greater mobility, and quicker reaction forces, first developed in the context of MONUSCO, has helped to meet the challenge of delivering on protection in contexts of wide geographical scope for the mission.[41]

Over the past decade, peace operations have also pursued protection through projection, by deploying rapidly to areas with little presence and in response to early warnings of imminent threat. But there is more work to be done to find the right balance between presence and projection, and the right mix of civilian, police and military assets to support more mobile operations, including temporary deployments and long-range patrols. In some missions, too many of these patrols and temporary operating bases are military only, which tends to reduce their effectiveness and protective impact. Depending on a range of factors (including, for example, the ability to speak local languages), military units are less able to engage communities without civilian colleagues accompanying them or being co-located at their bases.

One important caveat on the positive track-record in POC is that the effects of peacekeeping are not equally distributed: a peacekeeping presence primarily enhances protection against abuses by non-state armed groups. However, peacekeeping has not yet managed to fully answer the question of how to respond to violence perpetrated by host-state forces.[42] These uneven results have been reinforced by research that highlights how peacekeeping missions' requirement of host-state consent frequently places peacekeeping missions in a difficult relationship with that state's government and can

therefore reduce the willingness to confront situations of state-sponsored violence.[43] Experience shows that efforts to prevent violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by host-state forces can in some cases succeed; but once violence unfolds, peacekeepers' options for response are limited. However, even if the use of force against the host state might not be a viable option, this does not obviate either responses within the other tiers of POC or other forms of action from the UNSC.

While we know that protection through UN peacekeeping works, definitively 'proving' its degree of effectiveness is constrained by several factors, as with any such complex endeavour. The first is the difficulty in establishing whether protection outcomes are the sole or direct product of peacekeeping activities; there are simply too many other variables at play in the fluid conflict environments in which missions operate. Second, there is significant diversity in the nature and scope of protection goals and activities across missions, which limits the possibility of making general statements about when and why POC is effective, or of generating universal indicators of success. Simply put, POC in South Sudan is not the same as POC in Mali. Third, the expectations associated with POC are frequently unrealistic in the discourse at both a local and international level. Specific incidents where civilians are killed or injured will colour perceptions of a broader, positive track record over time.

Notwithstanding these problems with measuring success, both UN and independent sources have demonstrated that we *can* assess and understand the *impact* of POC in peacekeeping. This can be achieved by focusing less on general outcomes and more on whether missions are tangibly achieving the objectives of their mandate, and by developing mission-specific indicators and evaluation systems that are anchored in and responsive to the local context.

The *Comprehensive Planning and Performance Assessment System* (CPAS) has assisted missions in developing their own analysis of the main drivers of conflict in their country of operation, as well as the key dynamics and behaviours (both local and national) that POC strategies and activities are seeking to influence. Performance assessments are then based on data collected against various protection indicators[44], and can be used to inform decision-making, planning, communications with various stakeholders, and internal and external reporting. These advances in thinking about how to assess POC's impact are important achievements that should be carried forward into future configurations of peace operations.

4.2 Is protection by peacekeepers possible where there is no peace to keep?

For more than a decade, UN peacekeeping missions with POC mandates have been deployed in settings with high levels of violence, with numerous armed actors vying for local or national control, and with complex regional dynamics, including cross-border conflict spillover. Even where deployments have followed the conclusion of comprehensive peace agreements, as was standard in peacekeeping's history, the implementation of such agreements has been uneven at best. In today's more volatile environments, peacekeepers face logistical, operational, and security challenges that can severely restrict their ability to operate freely and effectively, thereby impeding implementation of the POC mandate.

Despite these challenges, a growing body of research shows that UN peacekeeping missions can still mitigate violence and contribute to protection at the local level. [45] Peacekeepers, despite their small numbers in vast areas, have demonstrated that they can make a difference. They do so by maintaining control in areas of a country where there would otherwise be a power vacuum, mediating local disputes that might threaten to derail a larger peace effort, and counteracting actors trying to disrupt peace, encouraging their commitment to centrally-agreed peace and ceasefire agreements. To more fully understand the difference peacekeeping can make to protection, we can look to instances where peacekeepers have been withdrawn without the introduction of new mechanisms that address the protection crises that persist.

Additionally, UN peacekeepers play a crucial role in building trust within and among communities, and between communities and host state authorities. By engaging with local leaders and the civilian population, uniformed and civilian personnel foster dialogue and cooperation essential for long-term stability. This engagement helps to bridge gaps between conflicting parties and creates an environment where local peace processes can take root. These efforts not only address immediate needs for dispute resolution but also strengthen community resilience, making civilians less susceptible to the negative effects of conflict dynamics.

4.3 Can peacekeepers protect when host-state consent is compromised?

Consent is a core principle of UN peacekeeping, distinguishing it from other international actions like humanitarian interventions. The principle refers to the agreement and willingness of the main conflict parties, particularly the host state, to allow the deployment and operation of a

peacekeeping mission, enabling it to implement its mandate effectively. Host-state consent and ongoing cooperation are thus crucial for effective protection.

Compromised consent, characterized by reduced cooperation or active obstruction by the host state, does significantly challenge protection efforts.[46] Restrictions on freedom of movement, for example, can severely hinder patrols, essential supply delivery and human rights monitoring, undermining the protection mandate. Concerns about maintaining host-state consent and cooperation can also create dilemmas for missions and affect how mandates are executed. In some contexts, this can potentially lead to a posture of appeasement. UN officials may hesitate to address government abuses against civilians or violations of Status of Forces Agreements to avoid straining relations and (further) losing access. In addition to these challenges, and in today's context of geopolitical competition, host states (and other actors) may resist or undermine UN efforts, especially when they can draw on other types of support from external actors. This can, in some cases, create tensions between political and protection objectives, which are explored further below.

However, recent research suggests that the effects of compromised consent are not uniform.[47] Even with reduced levels of cooperation, POC is still possible. For example, local-level engagement, such as mediation, dialogue, and support to community-led initiatives, can foster stability and protect civilians independently of broader national-level political processes. In the case of South Sudan, despite instances of obstruction by the host government, UNMISS has facilitated local peace agreements and supported community dialogue in several regions. UNAMID also had a positive protective effect, including through dialogue and engagement, despite a challenging relationship with the Government of Sudan.

While these activities may provoke reactions from host state authorities, the possibility of positive impact underscores the need for peacekeeping missions to navigate consent-related complexities with caution and flexibility. By continuing to engage at the local level and employing creative strategies for protection, missions can have a meaningful protective impact in contexts of reduced cooperation from host governments. Missions have also established various mechanisms at national levels to help ensure ongoing cooperation and resolve access and other operational issues critical to the protection of civilians.

4.4 Is the protection of civilians compatible with the primacy of politics?

The *High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations* emphasized the

primacy of politics in peacekeeping, noting that “lasting peace is not achieved nor sustained by military and technical engagements, but through political solutions.”[48] While this remains the “north star” guiding contemporary UN peacekeeping, the heads of POC mandated missions also operate with the expectation that they will prioritize protection objectives.

In some instances, there can appear to be tensions between the primacy of politics and POC, for example when advancement of a mission’s immediate political goals makes civilian and uniformed mission personnel reluctant to confront national or local authorities over actions that threaten or harm civilians. Despite mandates that prioritize POC, some practice still reflects the view that protection is a positive by-product of political processes, rather than a crucial objective of, and contributor to, those processes.

However, politics and protection need not collide. The three-tiered approach to POC clearly prioritizes political engagement at every level. Furthermore, there has been increasing recognition that political engagement needs to be pursued at both national and sub-national levels, including through heads of fields offices and civil affairs personnel, among others. When national-level political processes stall, peacekeeping has evolved to adapt and work at sub-national levels, which can also bolster protection outcomes.

Twenty-five years of POC mandates demonstrate that an integrated approach to protection through UN peacekeeping is key to addressing any potential tensions. Unity of purpose among civilian, police, and military actors is not only what makes protection through peacekeeping distinctive, but also helps to facilitate both the protection of civilians and advancing political solutions. Often, this integration works better at the sector level or field office than it does at mission headquarters; it remains a challenge in practice and requires strong, skillful leadership.

Ultimately, the concern that protection work might impede or undermine political objectives is shortsighted: there is a risk that missions will work to a political outcome that does not hold, or that downplaying protection concerns will bring neither peace nor protection. Successfully prioritizing POC in peacekeeping missions requires acknowledging that protection is not a separate endeavor but should be seen as a core element of the mission's overall political strategy. By ensuring that protection objectives are embedded within political frameworks, and vice versa, peacekeeping missions can reinforce the idea that effective political solutions inherently encompass the protection of civilians. POC and the

primacy of politics are not only compatible: their alignment is essential for achieving sustainable peace.

4.5 What role do partnerships play in protection?

The expectation was never that UN peacekeepers should shoulder the sole burden of protection. From the initial POC mandate in Sierra Leone, the responsibilities of the host state were highlighted, and other actors were prescribed a role. Consequently, partnerships at the local, national, regional, and international levels have long been integral to protecting civilians and have featured in previous missions such as those in the DRC, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, and Darfur. There have also been instances of sequential partnerships that have supported the establishment of a protective environment in advance of the deployment of a UN peacekeeping mission. "Partnership peacekeeping" has therefore become the norm rather than the exception in contemporary approaches to conflict management and resolution.[49]

One notable characteristic of our current era is the increasing number of situations that feature collaboration with non-UN missions, many of which are regional. This shift aligns with the Secretary-General's vision in the *New Agenda for Peace*, which calls for strong partnerships between regional organizations and the UN.[50] Security Council Resolution 2719, adopted in December 2023, aims to deepen the UN's relationship with one regional organization, the African Union, by creating a framework for the Council to facilitate sustainable financing of AU-led Peace Support Operations (PSOs). Importantly, the resolution establishes POC as one of the key terms for AU PSOs to access UN assessed contributions.[51]

Part of the allure of partnerships lies in the perceived ability of regional or bilateral actors to provide more flexible and rapid military responses to address insecurity and consolidate state control. Recent research shows, for example, that when UN and non-UN missions are deployed contemporaneously, their mechanisms can reinforce each other.[52] In collaboration with a non-UN mission, UN troops can reduce more violence with fewer blue helmets. In other words, partnership peacekeeping can save lives.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge some of the protection dilemmas that can accompany parallel deployments or other kinds of partnerships. These mission configurations can create challenges in terms of local perceptions and trust-building, as the local population may not distinguish between different uniformed actors and their roles. Returning to the UN's guiding principle of impartiality,

there is also the risk that support for regional or sub-regional actors will implicate the UN in supporting governments to fight opponents threating their hold on power.[53]

In the last decade, non-UN missions and forces deployed in their own territories (such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force) have primarily focused on peace enforcement and counterterrorism. These missions typically deploy only military personnel and lack the multi-layered and integrated approach of UN missions. As the Secretary-General warns in his *New Agenda for Peace,* overly-securitized responses – particularly in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency – can be problematic and even counter-productive over the long term, as they risk "reinforcing the very dynamics they seek to overcome." Military tools must therefore be underpinned by a more comprehensive approach that includes "development and political strategies to intelligently tackle structural drivers of conflict."[54]

There are added protection risks related to partnerships. In some instances where the UN has provided support, regional and sub-regional security forces have been accused of committing grave human rights abuses during operations, including extrajudicial executions, unlawful killings, rape, and sexual abuse.[55]These serious violations have taken place even in contexts where the UN has endeavored to implement the HRDDP. The potential reputational risks for the UN, including perceived complicity in civilian harm, are compounded by weaknesses in reporting and transparency. In part because of these developments, POC efforts of such missions and forces have been focused more on mitigating harm caused by their own operations rather than protecting civilians from the threats posed by other actors.

Therefore, while partnerships no doubt will remain important today and in future models for managing and resolving conflict, peacekeeping stakeholders need to assess and mitigate potential risks to civilians and ensure that such partnerships contribute to POC objectives.

4.6 When is it safe for peacekeepers to leave?

A final recurring question regarding POC in peacekeeping is about the timing of drawdown, transition, and exit. The departure of UN peacekeepers poses significant challenges for sustaining protection efforts and safeguarding civilians in the absence of effective national security forces and other institutions that ensure protection. Peacekeeping missions provide a critical security umbrella for humanitarian, human rights, and other protection actors, offering logistical support, security capacities, coordination, and, crucially, a buffer

against armed actors. Their withdrawal, however, can create a security vacuum, as seen most recently in South Kivu, DRC, where peacekeepers' departure left a fragile security environment vulnerable to remobilization by armed actors and heightened tensions. Under-resourced and overstretched national forces have struggled to fill the gap.

Both the UNSC and UNGA have explicitly requested that POC is prioritized in UN peacekeeping transitions and drawdowns and have highlighted the need for any post-peacekeeping UN presence to be reconfigured to provide protection support.[56] For peacekeepers to leave safely, their exit must be guided by clear benchmarks, including the demonstrated capacity of national security forces and governance institutions. Yet, as in South Kivu, even after decades of deployment and reform efforts, these capacities are nascent. Without comprehensive planning, substantial capacity-building and more effective governance before a drawdown, the risk of instability and renewed violence looms, leaving civilians exposed to threats.

The consequences of premature withdrawal can be stark. In Mali, MINUSMA's abrupt departure exposed civilians to increased threats and contributed to the eventual collapse of the fragile Algiers Accord. Similarly, in Sudan, the withdrawal of the UNAMID in 2020 was followed by a resurgence of violent conflict. The Special Political Mission that succeeded UNAMID, UNITAMS, was not equipped to protect civilians in such a context and was ultimately expelled in 2023 as violence escalated.

Ensuring a safe and sustainable exit for peacekeepers requires not only robust planning and capacity-building by the mission and UN Headquarters, but also continued international engagement to prevent a relapse into violence. The Security Council's engagement is imperative, as it is ultimately the Council's decision to transition or withdraw a peacekeeping mission in a given context. As we reflect on 25 years of POC, these considerations are essential for guiding the future of peacekeeping and protection efforts more broadly.

5. CONCLUSION: LOOKING FORWARD AFTER 25 YEARS OF POC IN PEACKEEPING

UN Peacekeeping is often treated as a specific conflict management tool, rather than as a key contributor to the larger strategic objective of protecting civilians from conflict and violence. The 25th anniversary of the POC agenda and mandate offers an opportunity to foreground and reflect on that contribution, and to catalyze efforts to ensure that, even in the face of an

unpredictable geopolitical and security landscape, UN peacekeeping continues to serve as a prominent tool in the multilateral system's toolbox for protection.

Those efforts demand adaptability and innovation. But we have been here before. After all, nowhere in the UN Charter is peacekeeping set out as a practice. Creative and cooperative diplomacy generated this multilateral achievement, which has been refined through a global peacekeeping partnership with over 75 years of experience. Those same ingredients are now required to shape the future of peace operations.

Looking ahead, there are concrete opportunities for peacekeeping stakeholders to bolster the role of UN peace operations in protecting civilians. This includes the ongoing consideration of peacekeeping mandates, budgets, and policies through UN intergovernmental bodies like the UNSC and UNGA, where the prioritization of POC remains important. Additionally, reflections on the future of UN peacekeeping in a forthcoming study to be published for the 2025 UN Peacekeeping Ministerial will provide a range of models and options to consider, contributing to a broader consideration of the global peacekeeping enterprise at a critical moment for the tool. The *Pact for the Future*, adopted by the UNGA on 22 September, also provides an important opening for discussions on the protection of civilians and peacekeeping, through its action to adapt peace operations (Action 21).

Peacekeeping stakeholders could harness these reflections to assess how to both strengthen and adapt POC through the full spectrum of current and potential peace operations. Several questions could guide this assessment:

- What is required to ensure that protecting civilians underpins the approach of *all* UN missions?
- In POC-mandated missions, how can we further strengthen comprehensive and integrated action across the three tiers of the POC concept?
- What roles could different kinds of UN missions play in protecting civilians, and what would be required to enable these roles?
- How would the POC concept need to evolve to consider different types of UN missions with a range of mandates and capabilities?
- Where alternative actors or models of peace operations outside of the UN are considered, how can the protection of civilians be integrated, and

prioritized, where necessary, in the strategies and practices of these actors, while also ensuring accountability for protection outcomes?

In considering these questions and others, an important finding of the *Report of the Independent Inquiry into the actions of the United Nations during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda*, bears underscoring. In its report, the Inquiry established by the UNGA found that, "Whether or not an obligation to protect civilians is explicit in the mandate of a peacekeeping operation, the Rwanda genocide shows that the United Nations must be prepared to respond to the perception and the expectation of protection created by its very presence." This finding has implications for any UN presence in a conflict setting and requires POC considerations to be fully integrated in assessment and planning of future operations.

Additionally, any alternative models to UN peacekeeping will benefit from the good practice and lessons learned from the UN's significant experience in implementing POC mandates. As this paper has illustrated, the decision to place civilians, and their protection, at the heart of UN peacekeeping necessitated transformation. It required that uniformed and civilian personnel, as well as staff in the UN Secretariat, think and act in fundamentally different ways. Adjusting to this new imperative took time and energy on multiple fronts, from doctrine to operational guidance, training, evaluation, and communications, and was backed by the investment of significant resources by numerous actors. Operationalizing POC in UN peacekeeping has also necessitated innovation to meet new conflict contexts, the changing strategies and tactics of armed actors, and the evolving expectations of civilians, particularly in an environment of mis-and-disinformation.

Ultimately, the key question for the next 25 years is whether UN Member States and other peacekeeping stakeholders will build on and draw from this legacy and commit to ensuring that protection remains a central goal of peace operations.

END NOTES

[1] *United Nations Security Council*, Resolution 1270 (1999), S/RES/1270 (1999), p.3.
[2] *United Nations Security Council*, Resolution 1296 (2000), S/RES/1296 (2000).
[3] DR Congo (MONUSCO), Central African Republic (MINUSCA), South Sudan (UNMISS), Lebanon (UNIFIL) and Abyei (UNISFA).
[4] As of 2024, 93% of peacekeepers are deployed to missions with POC mandates.
[5] ICRC, "ICRC President: People caught in armed conflict need action, not words" 21 May 2024. Available at https://www.icrc.org/en/document/icrc-president-people-caught-in-armed-conflict-need-actions-not-words
[6] United Nations, Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, Report of the Secretary-General, S/2024/385 (2024), p. 2.
[7] Kseniya Oksamytna, *Advocacy and Change in International Organizations: Communication, Protection, and Reconstruction in UN Peacekeeping* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), p.108.
[8] Trevor Findlay, *The Use of Force in UN Peace Operations* (New York: Oxford University Press,2002), p.117.
[9] See United Nations, *Report of the Secretary-General pursuant to General Assembly resolution 53/35: The fall of Srebrenica*, A/54/549 (1999); and United Nations Security Council, *Report of the Independent Inquiry into the actions of the United Nations during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda,* S/1999/1257 (1999).
[10] United Nations, Press Release, *Secretary-General Presents His Annual Report to the General Assembly,* SG/SM/7136; GA/9596 (1999).
[11] United Nations, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Africa*, S/1998/318 (1998).
[12] UN DOC, S/2001/331, para 6.
[13] Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL); Lebanon (UNIFIL); DR Congo (MONUC); Liberia (UNMIL); Ivory Coast (UNOCI); Haiti (MINUSTAH); Burundi (ONUB); Sudan (UNMIS and UNAMID); and Chad/CAR (MINURCAT)
[14] Emily Paddon, "Peacekeeping in the Congo: Implementation of the Protection of Civilians Norm," in *Implementation in World Politics: How Norms Change Practice*, edited by Alexander Betts and Phil Orchard (Oxford University Press, 2014) pp. 160–179.
[15] See, for example, S/RES/1674 (2006) and *Cross Cutting Report, No. 2: Security Council Report on PoC* (2008).
[16] *United Nations Security Council,* Resolution 1856 (2008), S/RES/1856 (2008).
[17] *United Nations Security Council,* Resolution 1894 (2009), S/RES/1894 (2009).
[18] The policy was finalized and communicated to Member States in 2013. See *Human rights due diligence policy on the United Nations support to non-United Nations security forces,* A/67/775-S/2013/110 (2013).
[19] Victoria Holt and Glyn Taylor, *Protecting Civilians in the Context of UN Peacekeeping Operations: Successes, Setbacks and Remaining Challenges* (New York: United Nations, 2009)
[20] These included: the 2011 *Framework for Drafting Comprehensive Protection of Civilians Strategies* and the 2011 *Pre-deployment Training Standards on Protection of Civilians*.
[21] UN Departments of Peacekeeping Operations and Field Support, *DPKO/DFS Operational Concept on the Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations*. United Nations, 2010, p.4.
[22] For example, the 2012 *UN Infantry Battalion Manual* included a chapter on Protection of Civilians. See also, the 2015 *Implementing Guidelines for Military Components of UN Peacekeeping Missions on Protection of Civilians* and the 2017 *Guidelines on Use of Force by Military Components in UN Peacekeeping Operations*.
[23] UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, *The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping Handbook*. New York: United Nations, 2020.
[24] Emily Paddon Rhoads. *Taking sides in peacekeeping: impartiality and the future of the United Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p.6.
[25] Charles T. Hunt, "To Serve and Protect: The Role of UN Police in Protecting Civilians", IPI Observatory, 20 September 2019. Available at https://theglobalobservatory.org/2019/09/to-serve-and-protect-the-role-of-un-police-protecting-civilians/.
[26] United Nations, *Uniting our Strengths for Peace—Politics, Partnership and People: Report of*

the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations, 2015.
[27] *United Nations Security Council,* Resolution 2098 (2013), S/RES/2098 (2013).
[28] *Ibid.*
[29] Statement of SRSG Martin Kobler to the Security Council, "Building on the momentum", 14 March 2014.
[30] No subsequent UN-authorized mission has used this language.
[31] These include the *Comprehensive Protection of Civilians Training Materials* (CPOC) and the *Tactical Level Protection of Civilians Training Modules*, as well as the *Core Pre-Deployment Training Materials* (CPTMs), which apply to military, police, and civilian components.
[32] These included the independent special investigation into the violence in Juba, South Sudan, in July 2016 and the UNMISS response, the independent special investigation into incidents of violence against civilians in the southeast of the Central African Republic (CAR) that occurred between May and August 2017, and MINUSCA's response, and the special investigation following the September 15, 2017 incident in Kamanyola, DRC, following the killing of 38 Burundian refugees in proximity to MONUSCO. See Evan Cinq-Mars, "Special Investigations into Peacekeeping Performance in Protecting Civilians: Enhancing Transparency and Accountability," *International Peace Institute Global Observatory,* 19 September 2019, available at: https://theglobalobservatory.org/2019/09/investigations-peacekeeping-performance-poc-transparency-accountability/
[33] *United Nations General Assembly,* GA/Res/67/287 (June 28,2013)
[34] See https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/action-for-peacekeeping-a4p.
[35] UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, *The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping Handbook*. New York: United Nations, 2020, p.3.
[36] Rachel Julian, "Civilians Creating Safe Space: The Role of Unarmed Civilian Peacekeeping in Protection of Civilians," *Civil Wars* (2024): 1-26
[37] United Nations, "A New Agenda for Peace", *Our Common Agenda,* Policy Brief 9, July 2023, p. 14. Available at https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/.
[38] Lisa Hultman, Jacob Kathman, and Megan Shannon, "United Nations Peacekeeping and Civilian Protection in Civil War," *American Journal of Political Science* 57.4 (2013), pp. 875–91; Lisa Hultman, Jacob Kathman, and Megan Shannon, "Beyond Keeping Peace: United Nations Effectiveness in the Midst of Fighting," *American Political Science Review* 108.9 (2014), pp. 737-753; and Hanne Fjelde, Lisa Hultman and Desirée Nilsson, "Protection Through Presence: UN Peacekeeping and the Costs of Targeting Civilians," *International Organization* 73.1 (2019), pp. 103-131.
[39] Lisa Hultman, Jacob Kathman, and Megan Shannon, "United Nations Peacekeeping and Civilian Protection in Civil War," *American Journal of Political Science* 57.4 (2013), pp. 875–91.
[40] Stian Kjeksrud, *Using Force to Protect Civilians: Successes and Failures of UN Peace Operations in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023). This study is based on a dataset of 200 military protection operations across 10 missions, between 1999 and 2017.
[41] "Protection With Less Presence", Civilians in Conflict, 2018. Available at https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/BaseClosurePrint_Web.pdf
[42] Hanne Fjelde, Lisa Hultman, and Desirée Nilsson. "Protection through presence: UN peacekeeping and the costs of targeting civilians." *International Organization* 73.1 (2019): 103-131.
[43] Emily Paddon Rhoads. *Taking Sides in Peacekeeping: Impartiality and the Future of the United Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
[44] Examples of indicators used in assessing the protection impact of different peacekeeping missions include: the number of civilians killed by armed actors in high-risk territories; the number of IDPs taking informed and voluntary decisions to return to an area as a result of information shared by a mission and its protection actors; the number of children recruited by armed groups and released; whether and when alerts from Community Alert Networks have received a response; and the number of square metres of surface and sub-surface area free from known threats of landmines.

[45] Allard Duursma, "Making disorder more manageable: The short-term effectiveness of local mediation in Darfur." *Journal of Peace Research* 58.3 (2021): 554-567; Allard Duursma, "Peacekeeping, Mediation, and the Conclusion of Local Ceasefires in Non-State Conflicts." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 67.7-8 (2023): 1405-1429.
[46] Julie Gregory and Lisa Sharland, *Host-Country Consent in UN Peacekeeping* (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, 2023)
[47] Allard Duursma, Sara Lindberg Bromley, and Aditi Gorur. "The Impact of Host-State Consent on the Protection of Civilians in UN Peacekeeping." *Civil Wars* 26.1 (2024): 16-40.
[48] United Nations, *Uniting our Strengths for Peace—Politics, Partnership and People: Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations,* 2015, p.11.
[49] Maurice Schumann and Corinne Bara, "A New Era: Power in Partnership Peacekeeping," *International Studies Quarterly*, 67.3 (2023).
[50] *A New Agenda for Peace,* p. 12.
[51] *United Nations Security Council,* Resolution 2719 (2023), S/RES/2719 (2023), OP 12.
[52] Maurice P Schumann, Corinne Bara, "A New Era: Power in Partnership Peacekeeping," *International Studies Quarterly*, 67,.3, (2023)
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[54] *A New Agenda for Peace,* p. 13.
[55] For violations in the context of AMISOM, see Human Rights Watch, *'The Power These Men Have Over Us': Sexual Exploitation by African Union Forces in Somalia,* 8 September 2014, available at https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/09/08/power-these-men-have-over-us/sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-african-union-forces. For cases involving the security forces of Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali, operating as the G5S-JF and supported through MINUSMA, see *Status Report: OHCHR Project supporting the G5 Sahel Joint Force with Implementation of the Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law Compliance Framework, 1 May 2018 – 31 March 2020*. Geneva/New York: Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.
[56]See *United Nations Security Council,* Resolution 2594 (2021), S/RES/2594 (2021), para. 5; and *Report of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations* (2024), A/78/19 (2024), paras. 127 and 130.

United Nations Peacekeeping

Policy, Evaluation and Training Division
Policy and Best Practices Service
Protection of Civilians Team
pbps-poc-unhq@un.org