

The Future of UN Peace Operations: Lessons from Security Sector Governance and Reform

DCAF Contribution to the Review on the Future of All Forms of UN Peace Operations¹

1. Rethinking Peace Operations in a Changing Context

Today's fragile settings face an especially dangerous convergence of risks: a historic surge in armed conflict, the diversification of violence - including tech-enabled threats, transnational organized crime, and gender-based violence - and the erosion of resilience where governance gaps persist.² While violence can occur in any context, its intensity and complexity are increasing in fragile environments, underscoring the urgent need for tailored, context-sensitive prevention and response strategies. Peace operations have demonstrated effectiveness in lowering civilian harm, shortening the duration of conflicts, and supporting the durability of peace agreements.³

To remain effective in this evolving landscape, peace operations must adapt by becoming more agile and prevention-driven — focused not only on immediate security concerns but also on addressing the underlying governance challenges that fuel violence and instability.

Focusing on What Matters Most for Peace Operations

As peace operations evolve in response to political pressures and operational constraints, there is growing momentum toward lighter, more modular deployments. This shift promises greater flexibility and lower political cost but also presents serious risks. **Without the right safeguards, more modular approaches can turn into cherry-picking: politically convenient tasks get prioritized, while more sensitive governance reforms are quietly sidelined.**

This challenge is particularly evident in areas requiring sensitive governance-focused reforms — such as tackling corruption, strengthening the good governance of the security sector, and

¹ This paper was submitted in response to the United Nations Secretariat's call for submissions on the Future of All Forms of UN Peace Operations. For further information, please contact: Vincenza Scherrer, Head of Policy Engagement at DCAF – the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance. The author is grateful to DCAF colleagues Taynja Abdel Baghy, Anne Bennett, and Inka Lilja for their helpful comments.

² OECD, *States of Fragility 2025* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2025).

³ UN News, 'Does UN Peacekeeping Work? Here's What the Data Says' (10 December 2022).
<https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/12/1131552>

addressing the governance dimensions of transnational organised crime.⁴ For instance, despite its central role in managing transitions and sustaining peace, **security sector governance and reform (SSG/R) is too often treated as a narrow technical task rather than a core strategic priority.** In reality, it is a critical enabler of peace—essential for preventing conflict and its re-occurrence, delivering protection mandates, and ensuring peace operations leave behind legitimate, resilient security institutions that uphold the rule of law. The long-term success of peace operations hinges on whether national security institutions can assume their responsibilities effectively, accountably, and with public trust.

To address complex and interlinked drivers of instability, **peace operations must sharpen their political analysis and strategies and clearly prioritize actions that yield meaningful impact.** This will enhance mission effectiveness and strengthen efforts to address root causes of violence.

Multidimensionality Remains Essential — But Missions Must Be Agile and Partnership-Oriented

The complex and interconnected challenges faced by peace operations demand multidimensional approaches. Conflict-affected contexts require coordinated efforts across political, security, justice, human rights, and development domains to effectively contribute to stabilization and foster sustainable peace. Thus, multidimensionality should continue to be a defining feature of future peace operations.

However, **multidimensionality does not necessarily have to mean large-scale, resource-heavy missions.** Rather than bulk, what is needed is thematic breadth combined with agility. Leaner teams—composed of specialists across different domains—can provide strategic advice to political leadership, identify reform opportunities, and coordinate international engagement. Rather than attempting to address all needs directly, missions should focus on good offices, strategic convening, aligning efforts, and supporting partnerships. **Where there are gaps, missions could scale up as needed or outsource tasks to partners.** This approach allows missions to remain agile and responsive to evolving contexts while containing political and financial costs.

Manage Realistic Expectations on Peace Operations' Resources

It is equally important to acknowledge the limits of what peace operations can realistically achieve with current capacities. In areas such as SSG/R, mandates are often ambitious, yet the resources required to deliver on them are lacking. While mission components—such as police, military, and justice—bring valuable technical know-how, they frequently lack the strategic

⁴ For instance, while transnational organized crime (TOC) is frequently identified as a priority in mission settings, it is often relegated to technical responses, typically delegated to police components or subsumed under broader counterterrorism frameworks. See: Summer Walker and Catharina Nickel, 'Transnational Organized Crime and Peacekeeping', in *The Future of United Nations Peace Operations: Compendium of Short Issue Papers and Policy Recommendations for the UN Peacekeeping Ministerial 2025 in Berlin* (Brussels/Berlin: Global Alliance for Peace Operations, 2025), 57–59. Likewise, corruption, another critical factor undermining peace, often receives fragmented or insufficient strategic attention. See: Roland Paris, 'The Past, Present, and Uncertain Future of Collective Conflict Management: Peacekeeping and Beyond', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 17, no. 3 (27 May 2023): 235–57, cited in Sabrina White, Yi Kang Choo, Denitsa Zhelyazkova, and Patrick Brobbey, *Sabotaging Peace: Corruption as a Threat to International Peace and Security* (Transparency International – Defence and Security, April 2025).

capabilities needed for high-level policy advice, institutional reform planning, and managing complex change processes.⁵

For instance, a review of the UN Police found that technical experts deployed in post-conflict settings are often expected to function as effective mentors and institution builders without adequate preparation or mandate.⁶ Similarly, most military personnel assigned to offices like the Office of Military Affairs or under force commanders are seconded officers focused primarily on operational planning and force generation - not defense sector reform. The HIPPO report highlighted this shortfall, noting that despite increasing mandates related to defense reform, the UN lacks sufficient technical capacity to fulfill these roles effectively.⁷

Additionally, **the fiscal dimension is often overlooked in countries supported by UN peace operations.**⁸ Donor funding is frequently insufficient for key priorities that sustain peace. Ambitious reforms can strain national budgets when institutions are designed without realistic revenue plans. For this reason, peace operations priorities, including on SSG/R, must be appropriately integrated into Common Country Analysis and Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks.⁹ Strengthened partnerships with International Financial Institutions (IFIs) are also essential to help national authorities plan and mobilize resources.

Acknowledging these constraints is critical to setting realistic expectations, ensuring mandates are matched to available expertise, and ultimately improving the impact and sustainability of peace operations. **Mandates should clearly specify areas where the UN is expected to invest directly and where it should focus on building partnerships to leverage complementary capacities and resources.**

2. How Peace Operations Can Adapt

To remain relevant and effective, peace operations must:

a. Avoid Fragmentation by Prioritizing Scalable Approaches

Modular approaches such as those outlined in The Future of Peacekeeping Independent Study commissioned by the UN Department of Peace Operations can enhance mission agility.¹⁰ However, cross-cutting priorities like SSG/R, human rights, and protection of civilians must not be siloed, fragmented or deprioritized. **Political, governance, and protection functions must remain integral parts of the mission even in specialized or light configurations.**

⁵ Vincenza Scherrer, The Future of UN Peacekeeping: Reflections on Strengthening the Role of Peacekeeping in Sustaining Peace from a Security Sector Reform Perspective, 2020, available at: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/future-of-peacekeeping>

⁶ United Nations, External Review of the Functions, Structure and Capacity of the UN Police Division (New York: United Nations, 2016).

⁷ United Nations, Uniting Our Strengths for Peace: Politics, Partnership and People – Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on United Nations Peace Operations (New York: United Nations, 2015), p.40.

⁸ Ibid., p.49.

⁹ The Common Country Analysis does not systematically allow for a comprehensive engagement with SSG/R risk factors. See: Vincenza Scherrer, “Securing Governance, Preventing Violence”, UN Policy Paper, forthcoming.

¹⁰ El-Ghassim Wane, Paul D. Williams, and Ai Kihara-Hunt, The Future of Peacekeeping: New Models and Related Capabilities (New York: United Nations, 2024).

Scalable approaches are essential. A limited SSG/R advisory capacity should be retained in missions (even smaller ones) to equip senior leadership to engage meaningfully on security sector governance priorities. These strategies can then be taken forward either by the UN or by external partners, in a modular and complementary way. Because security institutions are complex and context-specific, generalist staff profiles are often not sufficient to support reform. Instead, missions need access to targeted expertise (e.g. on issues such as human resources management or budgeting) through for instance UN rosters, specialized organisations, or bilateral partnerships, that can be deployed as needed.

b. Prioritize Violence Prevention and National Risk Analysis

Though peace operations are guided by the “primacy of politics,” political strategies often focus narrowly on securing agreements, without necessarily addressing root causes of conflict.¹¹ Experience shows these drivers frequently remain unresolved at the point of mission transition. Moreover, a DCAF review of SSG/R mandates highlighted that these mandates are rarely explicitly linked to drivers of conflict.¹² They are often framed as technical, missing the opportunity to address structural risks or advance political solutions.

Peace operations must go beyond managing symptoms. Rigorous analysis of conflict and violence drivers—including security sector dysfunction—is essential. Mandates that link SSG/R to security-related risk factors for violence and the underlying drivers of conflict can contribute to a more effective approach to addressing prevention needs. National prevention strategies—designed around such risk factors—offer a promising entry point. They could help guide mandate design, inform adaptation, and shape exit strategies while reinforcing links to the Peacebuilding Commission and the Peacebuilding Support Office.

c. Address the Politics of Reform

UN peace operations—including regional offices like UNOWAS and UNOCA and small, agile special envoy missions—have a unique comparative advantage in supporting peace-positive security sector governance. Through their mandates on preventive diplomacy, mediation, and good offices, Special Representatives of the Secretary-General (SRSGs) and Special Envoys, possess both the authority and legitimacy to engage political actors on sensitive SSG/R issues. Yet this potential is too often underutilized. Consequently, in the absence of sustained high-level political engagement on security governance arrangements, efforts tend to default to narrow train-and-equip approaches that may align with host government preferences but fall short of addressing meaningful reforms.¹³

To shift this dynamic, SSG/R must be systematically leveraged as a tool to advance political solutions to conflict, particularly in contexts where embedding SSG/R within political

¹¹ Vincenza Scherrer and Jenna Russo ‘Embedding Sustainability in Peacekeeping: Insights from Security Sector Governance and Reform’, in *The Future of United Nations Peace Operations: Compendium of Short Issue Papers and Policy Recommendations for the UN Peacekeeping Ministerial 2025 in Berlin* (Brussels/Berlin: Global Alliance for Peace Operations, 2025), 49–51.

¹² Vincenza Scherrer, Will McDermott, Taynja Abdel Baghy and Samuel Buol, *Review of SSR Language in the Mandates of UN Peace Operations* (Geneva: DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, 2025).

¹³ Scherrer et al., *Review of SSR Language in the Mandates of UN Peace Operations* (Geneva: DCAF, 2025).

processes can promote a more equitable distribution of power and resources. Mandates should explicitly recognize the role of SSG/R in supporting political and peace processes, and peace operations should invest in the leadership and tools needed to equip SRSs and Special Envoys to use their good offices strategically. For good offices to be effective and impactful, they must be guided by thorough political economy analysis of security dynamics, and supported by a senior SSG/R advisor who can leverage the full spectrum of expertise and resources available within the UN system and beyond.¹⁴

d. Lead with Governance from the Outset

To ensure peace operations remain a vital tool for sustaining peace, people-centered approaches must be at their core. **This means engaging meaningfully with the governance dimensions of security support—those that reduce the risk of violence, improve trust, and ensure that security institutions are accountable, inclusive, and responsive to all segments of society.** Too often, governance dimensions of SSG/R are sidelined in the early phases of peace operations, with attention skewed toward immediate stabilization. As a result, sustainability becomes an afterthought, addressed too late to meaningfully shape long-term outcomes. This is particularly problematic during transitions because that is when the absence of robust governance structures becomes most apparent. One key pattern observed in such contexts is a sharp rise in military expenditure, often at the expense of social services and inclusive development.¹⁵

To mitigate this, SSG/R efforts must be anchored in governance from the outset. **Peace operations and UN country teams should jointly develop integrated and regularly updated SSG/R support plans that prioritize accountability, effectiveness, and inclusion.** Public financial management tools such as security expenditure reviews, gender-responsive budgeting, and audit mechanisms should be incorporated into reform strategies. These efforts require strengthened system-wide coordination, consistent with the commitments in Security Council Resolution 2151, to ensure coherence between mission support and long-term development goals.

e. Integrate SSG/R into Protection of Civilians Mandates

Peace operations are temporary by design. As missions draw down or reconfigure, protection responsibilities inevitably shift back to national actors. **This reality underscores the need to build national institutions that are not only capable of providing security but also seen as legitimate by the population.** Without deliberate efforts to strengthen the good governance of the security sector, peace operations risk handing over protection mandates to institutions that are unprepared, or sometimes unwilling, to uphold them. SSG/R is therefore a critical component of any sustainable protection strategy.

¹⁴ Lisa Denney and Alina Rocha Menocal, 'We Must Think and Work Politically' in Good Governance in National Security: Nine Policy Briefs on Building Stronger Institutions that Deliver Genuine Security to All – (New York, NY: United Nations, 2025).

¹⁵ For example, in 2023 the government of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) more than doubled its military spending as tensions with neighbouring countries rose. This coincided with the planned drawdown of MONUSCO, and reflected Kinshasa's view that it needed to rapidly scale up its forces. However, such a sharp increase in security expenditure—particularly if undertaken without accountability and transparency—can strain the economy and divert resources from essential public services. See Nan Tian, Diego Lopes da Silva, Xiao Liang, and Lorenzo Scarazzato, Trends in World Military Expenditure 2023, SIPRI factsheet, April 2024.

To this end, the Security Council should ensure that Protection of Civilians mandates consistently include explicit provisions for SSG/R support. Missions should be tasked to support reforms that embed public trust and community engagement as central pillars of protection, including by strengthening oversight bodies, improving internal disciplinary mechanisms, and fostering inclusive dialogue between security providers and the communities they serve. These reforms are essential to ensure that national institutions are prepared to assume protection responsibilities in ways that are both effective and legitimate.

f. Advance Gender-Responsive Peacekeeping and Reform

Women's participation is crucial for effective peacekeeping. Research consistently shows that diversity is an institutional asset: a broad range of backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives strengthens decision-making, problem-solving, and the legitimacy of peace operations. Yet despite these clear advantages, women remain underrepresented in both leadership and tactical roles.¹⁶ Equally important, when peace operations support SSG/R, they must themselves model the same values and practices they seek to promote.

At a minimum, gender responsiveness in peacekeeping calls for the meaningful participation of women at all levels. Gender parity in staffing, while important, is not enough. Missions must model inclusive practices and actively promote gender-responsive reform. This means that missions: 1) are responsive to the needs of women and girls in their operational activities using an intersectional approach; 2) protect people of all genders; 3) conduct assessments of how mission activities affect different populations; and 4) ensure that practices and policies do not perpetuate inequality but instead promote gender equality. It also includes integrating gender perspectives into planning and leadership structures, and measuring the impact of gender-informed policies on operational outcomes and community trust.

¹⁶ Sabrina Karim, Sarah Rowse, Inka Lilja, Zinab Attai, Kathleen Fallon, *The Future of Peacekeeping Needs Everyone: A Path Forward for Women's Meaningful Participation in Peace Operations* (Geneva: DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, 2025).