

Forecasting the Future: Key Trends for the Next Generation of UN Peace Operations

Insights from a global research community to inform policy, planning and partnerships (April of 2025)



UN Photo/Isaac Billy

Background

There is an urgent need to reflect on how peace operations can remain effective in an increasingly complex world. With rising global tensions and limited resources, the UN must find ways to empower global collective action to maintain international peace and security and to uphold international law, principles and norms.

To support this, the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) asked its wide, global network of researchers three key questions to predict relevant trends informing the future of peace operations. The FBA has applied crowdsourced forecasting, which involves soliciting inputs from a multitude of experts and researchers to identify trends and perspectives to enable more informed decision making. More precisely, the survey was distributed to 82 researchers, all with thematically relevant expertise, and the results of the 29 responses are presented anonymously in this summary.¹ The views presented do not necessarily represent recommendations or views of the FBA, but summarize the independent, research-informed views of the invited researchers.

¹ The survey presented three open questions that the respondents were encouraged to answer based on their academic knowledge in a “top of mind”-manner to collect expert reflections and guidance. The responses have been analysed by the FBA using qualitative thematic analysis for the identification of themes and trends. Survey response rate is 35 percent.

Summary of Main Points

As conflicts evolve more rapidly and resources for peace operations further shrink due to shifts in the geopolitical landscape, the trends identified in this crowdsourced paper address the challenge of defining what future peace operations could or should look like in this increasingly volatile environment.

The main recommendation is that to uphold legitimacy, peace operations have to continue to deliver and demonstrate concrete results in a rapidly changing context. To do so, they need to be significantly adapted in terms of mandate, local ownership, leadership and contextual dynamics. This in order to not only solidify support for peace operations but also strengthen their very effectiveness and legitimacy.

Key Recommendations

To ensure an adaptive and effective implementation of future peace operations' models, allowing them to deliver tangible results in country contexts, it is recommended to:

- Prioritise contexts where conditions for successful peace operations exist, including political processes and/or agreements, as well as local support, ownership and cooperation.
- Design mandates to be limited and clear, have a set time frame and ensure host-government and population consent.
- Design mandates to be context-based and continuously adapted and updated to the changing environment they are working in.

To support UN Member States to build and sustain political support for peace operations, including host country engagements it is recommended to:

- Deliver effective peace operations that are able to achieve set out goals and deliver results, in this way, secure legitimacy.
- Design peace operations to empower local agents (nationally and regionally) and anchor initiatives with key stakeholders.
- Be accountable for successes and failures, as well as misconduct, and communicate this transparently.

To enable peace operations to uphold the UN Charter, key international laws, principles and norms, amid rising global tensions and constrained human and financial resources, it is recommended to:

- Identify and commit to a common vision for the future of peace operations that clarifies key expectations for interventions and facilitates deciding on principled action in the face of transgressions.
- Prioritise new ways of setting agendas and mobilising support for peace operations, e.g. through the platforms of the Secretary-General and the General Assembly (as an alternative to the Security Council) and engage Member States pragmatically, accepting what conflict management initiatives they are willing to support.
- Prioritise securing peace and reducing violence to create support for the principled basis of peace operations.

Summary

Question 1: What is the most impactful recommendation for ensuring an adaptive and effective implementation of future peace operation's models, allowing them to deliver tangible results in country contexts?

Primacy of political solutions and host-country consent are aspects that are frequently brought up in the experts' responses, to allow future missions deliver results in country contexts. Political processes that lead to some form of peace agreements or continued engagement for peace should preferably precede the involvement of peace operations. A wealth of evidence supports this conclusion and one of the experts' states that "without a political process, peacekeeping missions are unlikely to achieve meaningful results". This is also formulated as a recommendation to avoid "peace enforcement" missions during active civil war.

Establishing local support for the mission mandates implies securing host state consent. This involves working and building trust in a structured way with local governments and civilian population, even before deploying. Ideally, peace operations are a "shared responsibility between mission, host government and other actors/entities".

Flexible, context-specific and sufficiently resourced mandates of peace operations need to be locally anchored, clear to all involved parties with defined end states (timeframe), adaptable to changing dynamics and with room for sequencing of priorities (from security to peace building concerns). Mandates should be developed with participation of local stakeholders so that "the mandate makes sense to communities where missions are deployed, not only for/to the elites". After all, if key deliverables of peace operations relate to protection, safeguarding protection-deliverables need to be prioritised.

Furthermore, mandates should be designed to explicitly allow for flexibility and adaptability, including preconditions for transition and "red lines". For example, researchers recommend that we move towards "context-specific, modular peace operations" that can adapt depending on the changing conflict dynamics. Such adaptations should preferably come about with input from systematic and external (academic) evaluation and analysis to ensure continuous mandate and mission relevance (e.g. at least once a year).

One of the long-standing problems of effective implementation is that mandates are often renewed largely unchanged even while conditions on the ground change considerably. Therefore, one of the most impactful possible reforms could be to strengthen the debates around mandate renewals. One option would be to introduce a step in which the Security Council seeks an independent assessment of the effectiveness of mandate implementation on a regular basis.

The UN and regional organizations may achieve greater mission effectiveness when mandates align more closely with available resources. This might, in light of current restrained will and resources of UN Member States and TCCs, imply having to prioritise more limited mandates. In fact, complex mandates are not only difficult to implement, but also generally less effective. Shorter and concrete mandates "enable UN personnel to have a clearer view of what the priorities are and work towards them directly".

Finally, the importance of gender responsive missions that operate with a gender lens/mainstream gender in an intersectional and inclusive manner was highlighted. Similarly, greater cultural awareness and training of mission personnel were stressed, to not only do not harm but also actively contribute to mission legitimacy and effectiveness.

Partnerships and leadership for enhanced collaboration is also emphasised as key for mission effectiveness. It is highlighted that the UN is not able to do it all, and that partnerships with regional organizations and/or multinational coalitions will be essential. This requires an “evidence-based and frank debate on individual organizations (UN, regional and sub-regional organizations, ad-hoc coalitions, other partners) strengths and capacities”. Furthermore, it involves being anchored in clearly stated norms and red lines for which. leadership and strategic communicative skills are central. An effective leadership needs to be able to decisively act to nurture multi-level “coalitions of peace” at grass-root, state, regional and international levels to:

... navigate the complexity of war-to-peace transitions by extending opportunities for monitoring and early-warning and creating feedback loops between missions and grassroots actors to identify opportunities to adapt to changing circumstances.

Question 2: What would be the most effective way for UN Member States to build and sustain political support for peace operations, including host country engagement, in order to ensure the legitimacy and effectiveness of peace operations?

Realistic mandates and expectations are highlighted as key to the UN´s credibility. If the UN accepts “that it might need to reduce its ambitions and expectations for a period, without renouncing on its main objectives”, it is more likely to achieve credible results. Here the match between mandates and financial, logistical and human resources is important for both the legitimacy and effectiveness of peacekeeping operations:

Arguably the strongest threat to both legitimacy and effectiveness has been the problem of authorising peace operations with large mandates that are too ambitious given the scale of the problems and the resources available. So, the single most effective strategy would be to reduce the ambition of mandates, prioritise tasks, and ensure that mandates tasks can reasonably be achieved given the resources at hand.

Inclusive and locally anchored peace operations is another theme that was stressed by multiple respondents. Missions need to facilitate dialogues on different levels, where women, youth, elderly, minority groups and elite political actors are included. Peace operations should also work to empower “local actors as decision-makers rather than passive recipients” and clearly state what the UN can be expected to achieve. Initiatives and reforms should be implemented in a context-appropriate and sensitive way in order to minimise backlash and resentment.

Political support for peace operations is best built through real practical partnership dialogues with the host country and affected populations, avoiding the imposition of external values. Joint steering committees and inclusive consultations aligned with local realities are essential. Engagements must be structured on clear TOR, real need assessments and defined mission end dates. Operation should start smart and small allowing for flexible scaling up or down based on evolving conditions to maintain legitimacy and effectiveness.

Accountability and legitimacy through results and transparent communication are some of the most pressing recommendations that are brought up by the researchers. In order to build and regain legitimacy and support for current and future UN PKOs among member states, missions need to demonstrate even the smaller successes and impacts of peace operations on the ground. In other words, results matter for political support. Beyond successes and failures, the UN can also lead by example in transparently reporting when expected results have not been achieved. Legitimacy and support for PKOs can be further

strengthened when serious misconduct such as human rights abuses, sexual abuse and exploitation and dereliction of duty is addressed resourcefully and in a transparent manner.

Peacekeeping missions must ensure proper conduct, with no sexual exploitation and abuse. This threatens missions' credibility and legitimacy and trust, can increase the local rape of women by local men (because it changes the sex and relationships market), and obviously harms survivors.

Question 3: Amid rising global tensions and constrained human and financial resources, what is the most crucial step to be taken, to uphold the UN Charter, key international laws, principles and norms, enabling effective peace operations?

Researchers highlight the need for upholding the norms and principles of the UN Charter as a compass for peace operations. Researchers suggest that the UN can have a role in identifying shared commitments and build on accumulated international experiences. It was also suggested that the UN Secretariat “communicate its commitment and visions for the future” of peace operations and in this way support the UN Department of Peace Operations’ vision for modular peace operations. By strategically setting “key expectations and standards” for when and how the UN should and should not intervene, common ground for effective peace operations can be built.

In the light of intense global tensions and constrained resources, the UN should reaffirm its founding purpose. Upholding dialogue, foster cooperation, and protect fundamental human rights. [...] The core imperative is to deliver security, restore trust and safeguard essential rights without imposing extraneous models. In an era of contested norms, can peace operations reclaim their strength by returning to first principles?

For Member States to match a normative discourse in the multilateral arena with national and bilateral policy will also contribute to common ground and effective and principled peace operations. For example, one researcher points to inconsistencies in how international law is evoked in relation to different conflict settings, as undermining the legitimacy of the UN Charter.

Strategic communication around norm- and law-breaking behaviour by UN leadership and Member States is also important for upholding the Charter and other international norms and principles. One of the most important strategic areas for this type of communication relates to demonstrating the respect of human rights. Aligning with this is the urgency of calling out transgressions, including where countries have failed to meet their responsibilities, explicitly differentiating:

... between ‘pragmatic’ and ‘principled’ action; that is, to be clear and transparent regarding when and what actions adhere to international frameworks, best practices and based on evidence/research, as opposed to where international actions falls short (or takes shortcuts) for different reasons (lack of consensus, political will, resources or other). This can apply to e.g. where/when a mission is authorised and deployed or not.

Another point highlighted is that there is a need to maintain and use existing mechanisms for sanctioning transgressions and to increase diplomatic efforts. In this way, the UN needs:

to continue to serve as an international watchdog and whistleblower for states and organisations breaking international commitments, international law and principles. To bring up such breaches to international attention via strategic communication and to condemn them publicly. In the current global climate naming and shaming has less of an effect than previously, but it is still important to maintain the principle by which perpetrators do not enjoy complete impunity.

Several experts emphasise **that maintaining a clear focus on the core objective of securing peace** is essential for upholding the principles and norms that underpin effective peace operations. There is enough evidence today to support the conclusion that peacekeeping “works”. To secure peace, it is suggested to focus on “achievable missions”, including traditional peacekeeping missions, potentially prioritising those in conflicts not involving the UNSC or emphasising civilian protection and humanitarian assistance mandates/tasks that have the most consensus. It is also suggested to increase regional capacity for cooperative efforts, preferably with a broader approach beyond military resources, and adapting norms and principles to meet new threats, as done in relation to mis/disinformation and drones.

UN reforms that support greater room for action is also suggested as important for strengthening the principled ground upon which peace operation effectiveness relies. It is highlighted that the UN should work to restructure itself and reaffirm its purpose and vision. One way of doing this is by making efforts to engage Member States that are reluctant to support peace operations, understand the sources of their hesitation and identify what forms of conflict management they are still willing to back. At the same time UN officials should actively engage Member States that remain supportive and take their preferences seriously, as well as identifying the range of conditions and approaches that key member states are still prepared to endorse, and make plans or adjustments based on that.

Another way of allowing the UN greater influence to implement its Charter and related norms is to leverage the mandates of the UN Secretary-General and/or the General Assembly to set the agenda, in a similar fashion that they did during the Cold War, instead of relying on the Security Council. These two entities can be mutually supportive and closely coordinated in calling out the violations, while encouraging Member States to meet their Charter commitments and broad human rights obligations. If these two do not stand for the Charter, principles and norms, then nobody does or will. Therefore, and ultimately “[r]eform is a key factor to keep the organisation alive”.

Concluding comments

While this paper reaffirms that UN peace operations are at a critical juncture, facing a range of persistent and emerging challenges, it also highlights a notable degree of alignment and depth of engagement, which underscores a shared commitment to improving international responses to conflict, and more specifically the steps needed to make these operations more effective and better aligned with current and future demands.

More precisely, and particularly in the current challenging global landscapes and with increasing geopolitical tensions, the analysis indicates that some of the main steps to be taken include: ensuring peace operations that deliver and have clear, agile and context-based mandates; securing greater transparency and accountability concerning, for example, previous misconduct; and finally, having a clearer and common vision of the future of peace operations anchored in the UN Charter.

This paper offers an input for constructive dialogue and informed decision-making that can help guide peace operations toward a more sustainable and impactful future.