

Leveraging Ad Hoc Coalitions for More Effective UN Peace Operations

Short input paper for the ‘Review on the Future of all Forms of UN Peace Operations’

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The field of international conflict management is changing rapidly..¹ Major power conflict, US budget cuts to the UN system and a lack of diplomatic progress in some of the world’s most catastrophic conflict areas all contribute to the [sphere of malaise](#) in many multilateral organizations, including the UN. While it is hard to predict the future direction of international conflict management, it is increasingly apparent that ad hoc coalitions will take a (more) prominent place. The demand for swift crisis responses has increased dramatically and ad hoc coalitions have more than once proven to be viable tools for willing actors to offer rapid and targeted responses. Despite their clear advantages, relying too heavily on ad hoc coalitions and failing to incorporate them in a broader conflict management strategy comes with serious risks. As the UN rethinks the direction of its peace operations, it should include a vision of integrating these coalitions with established UN and regional mechanisms for maintaining effective and legitimate conflict management.

Promises and pitfalls of ad hoc coalitions

[Ad hoc coalitions](#) are not new, but they are increasingly popular. They are often seen as rapid, targeted and flexible mechanisms that offer an alternative to the often slow and bureaucratic initiatives by multilateral organizations such as the UN. They provide states with solutions that have lower creation, operation and exit burdens compared to traditional, multilateral modes of crisis management, particularly when rapid action is required. They enable likeminded states to come together outside the frameworks of multilateral organizations, such as the UN, the AU or the EU, to achieve shared political objectives when these organizations’ decision-making procedures are too rigid or in stasis due to geopolitical or regional rivalries.

However, ad hoc coalitions at best only provide quick-fix solutions. They are often of little value unless integrated into longer-term strategies. While they can be very useful in situations of sequential deployments, the reality is that they are most of the time only weakly anchored in a larger political-diplomatic strategy, either because of time pressure or because of competing views among its members about how to address a conflict. Cases like the Multinational Security Support Mission in Haiti furthermore show that also ad hoc coalitions require solid financial and bureaucratic backing to live up to their promise of being rapid response tools. In addition, ad hoc coalitions tend to draw resources away from established institutions like the UN and the AU, with substitution and [deinstitutionalization](#) as a long-term result, i.e. in the form of a gradual degradation of bureaucratic capacity and capabilities.

Relying too heavily on ad hoc coalitions furthermore risks eroding institutional memory. The UN has developed a strong capacity for organizational learning, enabling the development of a comprehensive set of norms, prescriptions and guidelines for UN peace operations, in close cooperation with member states and civil society. Similar observations about a gradually emerging learning culture have been made for other regional organizations and alliances involved in international conflict management, most notably the AU, the EU and NATO. For ad hoc coalitions, this is not the case. Lessons are rarely noted down, and even more rarely taken into account when the next operation is being fielded.

¹ This contribution is drawing from Karlsrud, John and Reykers, Yf (2025). Integrating Ad Hoc Coalitions in International Conflict Management, *International Affairs* (Online First) and an input paper written for the Berlin Peacekeeping Ministerial in May 2025.

Overreliance on ad hoc coalitions can also weaken established accountability structures, with implications for political oversight and adherence to international humanitarian law and human rights norms. Ad hoc coalitions often have very thin accountability measures in place – in fact, it happens that they are chosen exactly because of their lack of a clear accountability structure. UN peace operations, to the contrary, are embedded in a complex web of accountability relationships, despite that they have often been challenged on their lack of [accountability](#) vis-à-vis various stakeholders. First, they are tasked and report to the UN Security Council. Second, they depend on an often difficult, but close relationship with the host state. Third, troop and police contributors, as well as donors, global and regional powers and international and local civil society all have a say and are engaged in various manners. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, local populations also demand their voice to be heard and the operations to be responsive to their security and governance needs.

Scenarios of Ad Hoc Coalition Integration

As part of a 5-year research project, we have conducted a [comprehensive mapping of ad hoc coalitions](#) in international conflict management since the 1950s. We identify four different scenarios of their use in international conflict management:

Type of ad hoc coalitions	Description	Examples
Stand-Alone Deployment	Deployed in absence of regional/UN initiatives.	MSS in Haiti, Task Force Sentinel (Gulf)
Sequential Deployment	Temporary force until a UN/regional mission takes over.	AMIB to ONUB in Burundi, INTERFET to UNTAET in Timor-Leste
Parallel Deployment	Operates alongside UN/regional missions. Can vary from loose to full integration.	MINUSMA & Barkhane (Mali), G5S Joint Force, ISAF & Operation Enduring Freedom
Fully Integrated Operations	Embedded into multilateral strategy with shared governance.	Potential re-hatting of MSS Haiti into UN peace operation

Recommendations

To maximize effectiveness and mitigate risks, it is important for the UN and (sub)regional organizations to find ways to integrate with ad hoc coalitions. We therefore recommend the UN in its rethinking of the direction of UN peace operations to:

- Institutionalize partnerships with ad hoc coalitions by coordinating mandates and operations following a clear vision on divisions of labor, with ad hoc coalitions ideally serving as early response mechanisms.
- Develop modular support systems by making available institutional expertise and accountability mechanisms to ad hoc coalitions.
- Promote strategic embedding by ensuring integration in broader political-diplomatic plans.

For donors and participating states, we recommend to:

- Prioritize coordination by clarifying mandates (and divisions of labor) in multi-actor settings.
- Condition funding on accountability by linking financial support to human rights compliance based on regular reporting.
- Incentivize knowledge sharing by fostering the development of inter-institutional platforms for learning exchange.