

UN Peacekeeping is in Decline, What Does this Mean for Global Governance?

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Abstract

For more than thirty years, UN Peacekeeping Operations (PKOs) have been a primary tool of global governance. Studies have shown that large peacekeeping deployments lead to reductions in violence and armed conflict. Yet UN peacekeeping is in rapid decline. No new UN PKO has been authorized since 2014, missions have left Mali and Darfur (despite continued violence), and the number of peacekeepers has declined by about 50% in ten years. The existing scholarship's focus on peacekeeping limits our ability to understand what this means for conflict management and global governance. In this essay, we describe the role that UN peacekeeping has played in global governance, identify the theoretical and empirical gaps in our understanding of conflict management and global governance caused by scholarship's fixation on peacekeeping to the exclusion of other conflict-management approaches, and outline a research agenda for understanding how global governance and conflict management occur in an era of state competition and reduced UN capacity to support international peace and security.

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1 Introduction

United Nations (UN) Peacekeeping emerged in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War as one of the UN’s primary tools of global governance. At a basic level, global governance is about states’ collective governance of shared resources.¹ The UN was established “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war,” one of states’ most essential shared resources.² The civil wars that escalated in the aftermath of the Cold War threatened not only the people within those countries, but also posed broader regional and global security threats. United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (PKOs) quickly became the UN’s preferred tool for managing these intra-state conflicts and their spillover effects.³ The global governance actors that make up the UN—ranging from the Department of Peace Operations (DPO) to the UN Development Program—expanded in scope and scale from these growing conflict management efforts, as did the prominence of the UN’s overall role in international security governance.⁴

Scholars took note. A literature on UN peacekeeping began to emerge in the late 1990s to explain the UN’s new approach to managing civil wars, and its potential effects.⁵ Due to the UN’s growing prioritization of peacekeeping, and to the availability of data on peacekeeping troops, this literature grew quickly and peacekeeping began to dominate the scholarship on intervention in civil wars and UN conflict management. Over the next two decades, an increasingly nuanced literature on PKOs emerged, repeatedly showing that PKOs reduced

¹ Weiss (2016).

² UN (1945).

³ Boutros-Ghali (1992, 1995); Brahimi (2000).

⁴ Avant, Finnemore and Sell (2010); Gowan and Stedman (2018).

⁵ Walter and Snyder (1999); Walter (2002); Fortna (2004, 2008); Doyle and Sambanis (2000, 2006).

violence,⁶ leading to shorter wars,⁷ longer-lasting peace agreements,⁸ reduced battlefield⁹ and civilian casualties,¹⁰ and a lower likelihood of conflict diffusion.¹¹ Hegre et al.¹² conclude, based on sophisticated statistical simulations, that the world saw much less armed conflict from 2001-2013 than it would have without peacekeeping. They further conclude that, if the UN had invested more in peacekeeping in that period, the occurrence of major armed conflict would have been reduced even further, by as much as two-thirds.

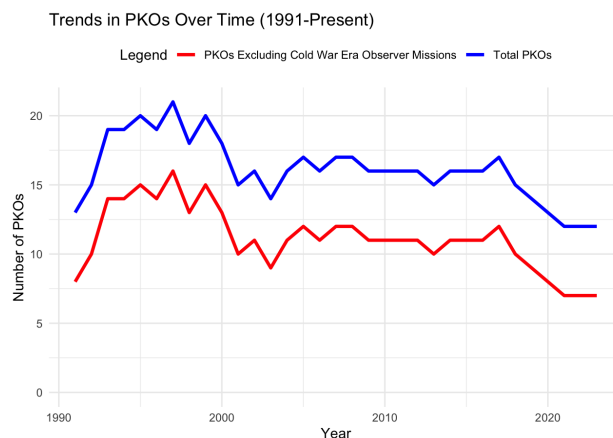


Figure 1: Number of UN PKOs active in each year

⁶ Walter, Howard and Fortna (2021).

⁷ Kathman and Benson (2019).

⁸ Fortna (2004); Hultman, Kathman and Shannon (2016).

⁹ Hultman, Kathman and Shannon (2014).

¹⁰ Hultman, Kathman and Shannon (2013).

¹¹ Beardsley (2011).

¹² Hegre, Hultman and Nygård (2019).

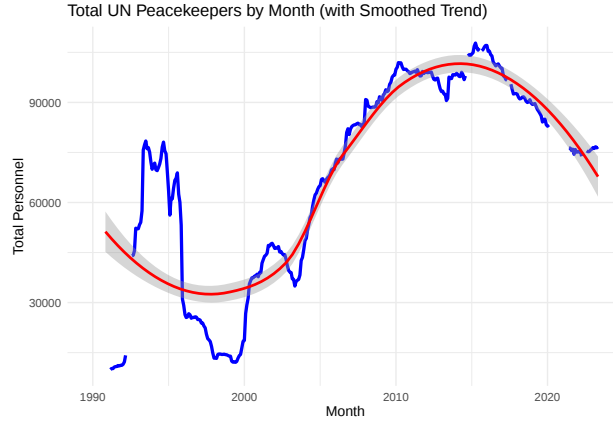


Figure 2: Total number of UN peacekeepers

But peacekeeping is in rapid decline. The last new UN PKO was mandated in Central African Republic in 2014, in spite of growing violence and civil war in the period since then.¹³ Figure 1 shows how many PKOs were active, by year, from 1991-2023 from the Peace Mission Mandate Data.¹⁴ The blue line shows all PKOs, and the red line removes five small observer missions that were deployed during the Cold War, and that remain today.¹⁵ At the peak in the mid 1990s, there were more than 20 PKOs deployed. There are now only 11. When Cold War era observer missions are removed, the scale of the decline is even larger, going from 15 missions in the 1990s to seven in 2023 (and six currently because of the departure of the mission in Mali). There are now substantially fewer UN peacekeepers deployed around the world than there were in 2016, a trend that will continue as the last blue helmets leave the UN’s largest mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

Figure 2 shows the total number of UN peacekeepers deployed, by month, from 1990 to 2023 from the most recent update of the United Nations Peacekeeping Personnel Data

¹³ The Uppsala Conflict Data Project/Peace Research Institute Oslo Armed Conflict Dataset shows that the number of armed conflicts, high-intensity wars, and annual fatalities has all increased since 2014 (Davies et al., 2025).

¹⁴ Hellmüller, Tan and Bara (2024).

¹⁵ These missions are removed because they function much differently from contemporary peacekeeping missions.

Project.¹⁶ The blue line indicates the actual number, and the red line is a smoothed loess line showing the trend. There is a clear and rapid decline beginning around 2016. Table 1 gives an indication of how this trend is continuing, with an almost 60% reduction in civilian personnel and an almost 50% reduction in uniformed peacekeepers or police.¹⁷

Year	Number of PKOs	Uniformed Personnel	Change since 2016	Civilian Personnel	Change since 2016
2016	16	100,376	0.0%	18,416	0.0%
2017	15	91,414	−8.9%	14,924	−18.9%
2018	14	88,633	−11.7%	14,277	−22.5%
2019	13	82,036	−18.2%	9470	−48.6%
2020	13	80,574	−19.7%	13,910	−24.5%
2021	12	73,522	−26.8%	13,245	−28.1%
2022	12	73,974	−26.3%	13,243	−28.1%
2023	12	63,119	−37.1%	13,184	−28.4%
2024	11	62,542	−37.7%	9713	−47.3%
2025	11	52,486	−47.7%	7500	−59.3%

Table 1: Trends in UN Peacekeeping Operations and Personnel (2016–2025)

The growing fragmentation of UN member states, particularly the five permanent members of the Security Council (i.e., China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States), has prevented the organization from mandating new missions, precipitating this decline.¹⁸ The withdrawal of US funding from UN peacekeeping only puts existing missions under greater strain and further reduces the likelihood of future deployments.¹⁹ At the same time, norms around UN intervention are shifting and host governments have been increasingly willing to withdraw their consent for the deployment of PKOs and exert more control over UN efforts operating on their territory.²⁰ Changes in host state consent have

¹⁶ Kathman (2013).

¹⁷ Data in this table are derived from the UN Department of Peace Operations’ Peacekeeping Fact Sheets, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/data>.

¹⁸ Gowan (2024, 2025*b*).

¹⁹ Gowan (2025*a*).

²⁰ Campbell and Matanock (2024).

led to the withdrawal of missions in Darfur and Mali and the mission in the DRC is in the process of withdrawing.²¹

Peacekeeping’s rapid decline means that the model of UN-led conflict management that emerged in the 1990s is dissipating. The post-cold war standard civil war “treatment regime,” institutionalized within the UN and focused on the “use of mediation to end conflicts and the deployment of peacekeeping forces to implement the resulting settlements” is now much less standard.²² There are not now, nor are there likely to be anytime soon, UN PKOs deployed to the most violent conflicts in the world, including in Sudan, Ukraine, Gaza, Yemen, Ethiopia, and Libya.

What does the rapid decline of UN peacekeeping mean for our theoretical and empirical understanding of UN-led conflict management and the broader role of the UN and other global governance organizations in facilitating international peace and security? We argue that the decline of peacekeeping is contributing to a fundamental transformation in global governance more broadly, and in the UN’s provision of collective security in particular.²³

In this essay, we first describe the role that UN peacekeeping has played in global governance and identify the theoretical and empirical gaps in our understanding of conflict management and global governance caused by scholarship’s fixation on peacekeeping to the exclusion of other conflict-management approaches. We then outline a research agenda for understanding how global governance and conflict management occur in an era of increased state competition and reduced UN capacity to support international peace and security.

²¹ Gowan (2024).

²² Gowan and Stedman (2018).

²³ For a discussion of the range of global governance actors—from intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) to states to International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) and multinational corporations—see Avant, Finnemore and Sell (2010); Kahler (2016, 2024).

2 UN Conflict Management and Global Governance

The United Nations, arguably the primary organ of global governance, was established in the aftermath of the Second World War to protect future generations from the scourge of violence. During the Cold War, the UN served this function primarily by facilitating cooperation among its member states, who were gradually polarized into two camps—aligned with the United States or Russia—and those that refused to be aligned with the two dominant players in the Cold War. Cold War era global governance was broadly focused on facilitating cooperation among states.

After the Cold War ended in 1989, the UN stepped into a more active and interventionist role in global governance.²⁴ The end of the Cold War contributed to the outbreak of civil wars across the globe that had been stymied partly by great power competition. Even though it was not directly mentioned in the UN Charter, UN peacekeeping quickly emerged as the primary solution to these escalating intra-state conflicts.²⁵ In his 1992 *Agenda for Peace* and its supplement, UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali argued that UN peacekeeping, combined with a comprehensive peace process and support for post-conflict peacebuilding, would enable war-torn countries to build equitable post-conflict peace.²⁶

The rise of UN peacekeeping meant the growth of the size and budget of the UN.²⁷ It also changed the role that the UN was playing within its member states. During the Cold War, the UN was highly focused on non-interference in the domestic affairs of its member states.²⁸ Post-Cold War Peacekeeping was much more interventionist. In several cases, the UN PKO *became* the government, leading the Transitional Administrations in Kosovo, Timor-Leste,

²⁴ Mingst and Karns (2019).

²⁵ Koops et al. (2015).

²⁶ Boutros-Ghali (1992, 1995).

²⁷ DHF (2024).

²⁸ Mingst and Karns (2019)

and Eastern Slavonia, if only temporarily.²⁹ While the UN’s transitional administration model was short lived, the intrusive and expansive nature of UN peacekeeping was not. UN PKOs sought not only to facilitate the implementation of peace agreements by addressing the security dilemma with an interposition of forces. The UN’s increasingly “multidimensional” missions collaborated with development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding actors to rebuild war-torn states and societies so that they would not fall back into war. They largely did so with the consent of the host-government, whose capacity they supplemented and on whose territory they operated.³⁰

The growth in peacekeeping was, thus, not just good news for the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, but it facilitated the broader growth among UN agencies that operated directly with or alongside UN peacekeepers.³¹ In other words, the growth in UN peacekeeping not only enabled the UN to continue to play a central global governance role in international peace and security in the post Cold War era. It also facilitated the growth in the size and function of global governance organizations. For example, the creation of the new UN Peacebuilding Architecture in 2005 was based on the assumption that while peacekeepers could help stop conflict, the UN and its member states needed to deploy additional peacebuilding efforts to sustain post-conflict peace.³² The UN’s focus on intra-state conflict between 1990 and 2016 coincided with an rapid increase in Official Development Assistance (ODA) to these contexts, funding in part the growing peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and post-conflict reconstruction work of UN entities, further cementing the central role of these global governance institutions in sustaining peace.³³

The prominence of peacekeeping as a tool of conflict management has generated a large

²⁹ DiFelice (2007)

³⁰ Campbell and Matanock (2024).

³¹ Braithwaite et al. (2024).

³² Secretary-General (2005).

³³ OECD (2020); UN Advisory Group of Experts (2015).

academic literature on peacekeeping. Several early studies demonstrated that the presence of peacekeeping missions contributed to longer-lasting agreements and a reduced risk of renewed conflict.³⁴ Another wave of scholarship moved beyond viewing peacekeeping as dichotomous (present or not), and used increasingly refined data on the specific number, type, and location of peacekeeping troops to examine how nuances of their deployment affected conflict outcomes.³⁵ The overall conclusion from most of these studies is that more, better equipped, peacekeepers lead to reductions in violence.³⁶

In sum, the growth of UN peacekeeping and the UN’s broader conflict management efforts helped to define the UN post-Cold War global governance. But the literature’s attribution of violence reduction solely to peacekeepers—overlooking the thousands of other multilateral, governmental, and non-governmental actors operating with and alongside UN peacekeepers—has important implications for these claims and for their future relevance.³⁷ Particularly in light of peacekeeping’s rapid decline, acknowledging the potential role of these other global governance actors in past and future conflict management will help us to understand how global governance institutions have managed conflict through less-coercive means and how this might evolve in the future.

3 What the Focus on Peacekeeping Obscures

The preoccupation of the existing conflict management literature with peacekeepers and their coercive capacities inhibits our understanding of the effects of the UN’s and other global governance actors’ non-coercive capacities. This, in turn, limits our ability to understand the

³⁴ Prominent examples include Walter (2002); Fortna (2004, 2008); Doyle and Sambanis (2000, 2006)

³⁵ e.g. Hultman, Kathman and Shannon (2013, 2014, 2019); Bove and Ruggeri (2019); Bove, Ruffa and Ruggeri (2020); Dworschak and Cil (2022)

³⁶ Walter, Howard and Fortna (2021)

³⁷ For discussion of the range of these actors and their interdependence, see Braithwaite et al. (2024) and Campbell (2018).

empirical and theoretical implications of the dramatic decline in peacekeeping. Theoretically, the focus on peacekeeping in isolation has placed the primary importance on the security components of conflict management efforts, overlooking the contribution of less-coercive measures. Empirically, the fact that we do not have data on the range of other conflict management actors or their relationship to peacekeepers means that, even if they theorized the non-coercive measures, scholars have not been able to estimate their effects.

The peacekeeping scholarship theorizes that UN peacekeeping forces enable armed actors to choose cooperation over conflict by addressing the security dilemma and, thus, enabling armed actors to credibly commit to implementing a peace agreement.³⁸ In line with this logic, one armed group fears disarming when the other group has not disarmed, making disarmament of either group highly unlikely. Peacekeeping troops address this dilemma by creating a security barrier between the armed groups, enabling them to disarm, demobilize, and commit to implementing a peace agreement.³⁹ Peacekeepers' demonstration of force, then, deters the continued use of violence, particularly with larger, more visible peacekeeping forces.⁴⁰

The focus of the peacekeeping scholarship on the coercive capacity of peacekeepers overlooks the non-coercive capacities of PKOs and other global governance actors working with the PKO to build peace.⁴¹ The early peacekeeping literature aimed to capture this broader group of civilian- and hybrid-led (civilian/military) conflict-management efforts with the concept of "multidimensionality," but still used the number of peacekeepers as the primary measure of PKO robustness.⁴² These multidimensional tasks ranged from security-focused

³⁸ Jervis (1978); Walter (2002).

³⁹ Other scholarship on peacekeeping during conflict follows this logic, arguing that peacekeepers protect civilians by positioning themselves between civilians and combatants who have not yet disarmed (Walter, 2002; Fortna, 2004; Hultman, Kathman and Shannon, 2019).

⁴⁰ Howard (2019).

⁴¹ For a full examination of the peacebuilding capacity of UN Peace Operations, see Campbell and Di Salvatore (2024).

⁴² DPKO (2003); Doyle and Sambanis (2006).

tasks, such as supporting the demobilization and reintegration of armed combatants and the retraining of military and police, to those that were more focused on governance and the rule of law, such as helping to organize democratic elections and advising the government on judicial reforms.⁴³ In reality, these broad conflict management activities are often carried out by the civilian staff of PKOs, Special Political Missions (SPMs), or other UN agencies and their governmental and non-governmental partners.⁴⁴

By focusing primarily on the coercive capacity of UN peacekeepers, the existing scholarship inhibits us from understanding how this range of global governance actors might contribute to peace via non-coercive means.⁴⁵ For example, they might incentivize cooperation among warring parties, including through the implementation of post-conflict reconstruction and redistributive reforms or the future promise of aid and foreign direct investment.⁴⁶ Understanding the effects of the UN's non-coercive conflict management capacity takes on an increased urgency in light of the marked decline in UN peacekeeping.

The theoretical gap emerging from the scholarship's dominant focus on UN peacekeepers is directly related to an empirical gap, and two omissions in particular. First, existing scholarship's focus on the impact of the number, type, and location of peacekeeping troops pays insufficient attention to the wide range of UN actors that support UN conflict management activities, including those deployed alongside peacekeeping troops and those that operate in locations or countries where no peacekeeping troops are deployed.⁴⁷ These actors are integral parts of conflict management efforts, but the focus on the military components of peace operations means we do not know to what degree the observed effects of peacekeeping missions are driven by peacekeepers or by these other global governance actors.

⁴³ Di Salvatore et al. (2022); Campbell and Di Salvatore (2024).

⁴⁴ DPKO (2008); Smidt (2021); Blair, Di Salvatore and Smidt (2023)

⁴⁵ Avant, Finnemore and Sell (2010); Campbell (2018).

⁴⁶ Campbell and Di Salvatore (2024).

⁴⁷ See, for example Hultman, Kathman and Shannon (2013, 2014, 2016, 2019); Bove and Ruggeri (2019); Bove, Ruffa and Ruggeri (2020).

Second, existing peacekeeping scholarship generally compares cases of peacekeeping to cases without peacekeeping. As a result, periods without peacekeeping are the “0”s in statistical analyses. This means that scholarship on peacekeeping omits the effects of Special Political Missions (SPMs), which are UN Peace Operations (UNPO) deployed without peacekeepers but with many of the same non-coercive conflict management capacities as PKOs including good offices, mediation, and election monitoring. Historically, SPMs were often deployed following the completion of a peacekeeping operation (Maekawa, 2023), but they are increasingly deployed to areas with active armed conflict. Figure 3 shows the number of UN PKOs and SPMs active each year, drawn from the United Nations Peace Mission Mandate data.⁴⁸ It shows that SPMs have greatly expanded in recent years, even as the number of PKOs has declined. By focusing only on UN peacekeepers, existing scholarship has overlooked a central area of growth in UN conflict-management capacity and the non-coercive approaches that SPMs deploy.⁴⁹

Finally, the scholarship’s focus on the effects of peacekeepers has obscured the potentially central role of UN member states in these missions’ success. For peacekeeping missions to be deployed, there must be alignment among the permanent five members of the UNSC. The scholarship on UN member state influence on PKOs has largely focused on the role of the UN Security Council in mandating peace operations, without considering the role that Security Council members or other interested member states play during the implementation of a PKO.⁵⁰ Beyond approving Security Council mandates, we do not know the effect that preference alignment among UN member states has had on PKO success because it was endogenous to their deployment. If part of the success of PKOs is due to how UN Security Council members supported the successful implementation of these missions, then competi-

⁴⁸ Hellmüller, Tan and Bara (2024)

⁴⁹ A few scholars have begun to study the effects of SPMs, including Campbell and Di Salvatore (2024) and Maekawa (2023, 2025).

⁵⁰ Howard and Dayal (2018).

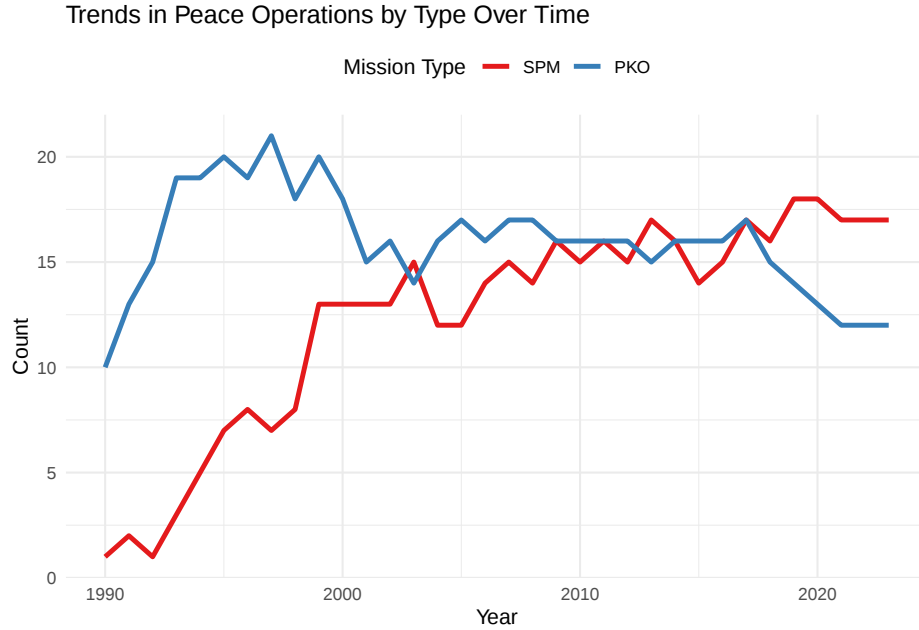


Figure 3: The number of UN PKOs and SPMs active in each year.

tion within the UN Security Council is likely to have far-reaching implications for the future conflict management capacity of the UN and other global governance actors.

4 What is Next for Global Governance and Intra-state Conflict?

UN conflict management in general, and UN peacekeeping in particular, helped to establish the post-Cold War era of global governance in the security domain.⁵¹ The UN’s conflict management efforts included comprehensive and multidimensional peacekeeping, peacebuilding, and peacemaking efforts that sought to use the UN and its member state’s resources to compel and incentivize warring parties to make and sustain peace. The decline of peacekeeping portends the escalation of violence in contexts where peacekeepers are currently deployed, and in non-peacekeeping contexts violence continues or is likely to break out. But

⁵¹ Mingst and Karns (2019); Koops et al. (2015).

it also threatens to fundamentally reshape the UN's role in global security governance. To understand the UN's role in mitigating future intra-state violence, we have to understand the influence of its non-peacekeeping conflict management tools. The singular focus of the existing conflict management scholarship on UN peacekeeping troops leaves us ill equipped to understand the effects of the UN's non-coercive conflict management capacities in the past and the future, or how growth in these capacities might alter the UN's role in global governance of the security domain.

As UN peacekeeping has declined, conflict management by SPMs and the UN's service delivery agencies, represented by the United Nations Country Team (UNCT) on the ground, have grown. The UNCT is currently active in 130 countries, including closely collaborating with all PKOs and SPMs, and operating in many contexts in which there is no PKO or SPM. The UNCT carries out the breadth of the UN's conflict management activities that involve some type of service delivery, including for example post-conflict reconstruction and election monitoring as well as a wide range of humanitarian and development activities. The role of the UNCT in conflict management is only likely to increase, both because they are often the only UN presence in several conflict-affected countries and because even the rise in deployment of SPMs is uncertain to continue (the most recent SPM was authorized in 2020). Given these shifts in UN actors and activities in conflict-affected countries, it is necessary for a new research agenda that moves beyond the current and long-running focus on PKOs to also examine the nature and efficacy of these additional forms of UN conflict management.

In addition to the UNCT, there are thousands of non-governmental, private sector, multilateral, and governmental organizations that create vast networks of aid actors in any conflict-affected country.⁵² We need to understand how these aid networks shape the effects of UN conflict management efforts. After all, many global governance scholars consider this

⁵² Braithwaite et al. (2024).

breadth of actors to be the best representation of global governance.⁵³ To understand how the decline of peacekeeping is shaping the UN's role in global governance, we need to account for the hundreds of other actors who work with, operate alongside, or substitute for UN conflict management efforts.

Finally, the decline of peacekeeping presents the need and opportunity to understand how the preference alignment of UN member states may have directly shaped the effectiveness of PKOs, and how the increasing competition among UN member states may affect future UN conflict-management efforts, as well as conflict management by other global governance actors, such as regional organizations. Scholarship has assumed that the establishment of a Security Council mandate ensures the sustained commitment of interested states.⁵⁴ But the Security Council does not include all potentially interested states nor does it ensure that even Security Council members will continue to use their political and economic resources to incentivize armed groups to cooperate. New research should examine how the behaviors of Security Council members contributed to the success of PKOs, other than by mandating these operations, and how member states both use and circumvent the UN to pursue their own aims in war-torn countries.

UN-led peacekeeping has an impressive, if imperfect, record in conflict management and global governance over the last several decades, contributing to a less violent world. The rapid decline in UN peacekeeping will likely mean increases in armed conflict and violence, trends that are already occurring. Peacekeeping's decline does not mean the end of global governance and conflict management. It does mean that scholars need to look beyond peacekeeping and engage to understand how conflict management and global governance work in an increasingly fragmented and polarized world.⁵⁵

⁵³ Barnett and Duvall (2004); Avant, Finnemore and Sell (2010); Kahler (2009, 2016, 2024).

⁵⁴ Allen and Yuen (2014)

⁵⁵ Kahler (2018).

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