

# UN Peacekeeping

The 75th anniversary of UN peacekeeping is cause for celebration. Research shows that UN troops can effectively curtail violence in wars between and within states. Yet, peacekeeping has always been shaped by the geopolitical landscape, and the renewed great power competition coupled with antiliberal tendencies worldwide are a formidable challenge for the organization.

By Corinne Bara

In 2023, the world celebrates the 75th anniversary of UN peacekeeping. It was in the Arab-Israeli war in 1948 that the UN first tested the seemingly outlandish idea of sending soldiers not to wage war, but to keep the peace. The UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) was to help Israel and its neighboring Arab states maintain a ceasefire. The iconic image of blue helmets has since come to symbolize the UN's work amidst the chaos of war. Since 1948, more than two million men and women have served in 71 UN missions, and more than 4,300 peacekeepers from 130 countries have been killed in the service of peace.

Over the past decade, a broad consensus has emerged that peacekeeping works. This consensus marks a shift from earlier assessments. When blue helmets were powerless in the face of massacres in Rwanda and Srebrenica in the mid-1990s, it appeared that deploying lightly armed soldiers amidst belligerents determined to kill was idealistic. The assessment changed when researchers began asking whether (even flawed) peacekeeping was better than no peacekeeping at all. They concluded that it is. As UN peacekeeping goes through a crisis in a divided world – there has been no new military mission since 2014 – it is more important than ever to reflect on 75 years of experience to understand how peacekeeping saves lives, and what challenges it faces.



*UN peacekeepers of MONUSCO near Goma in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo in August 2013  
Thomas Mukoya/Reuters*

## Peacekeeping Effectiveness

UN peacekeeping operations aim to help in the transition from war to peace. They differ from military interventions (like NATO's operations in Bosnia and Libya) in that they do not take sides and deploy with the consent of the main conflict parties. Traditional missions, like UNTSO or the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP), monitor ceasefires and maintain buffer zones between belligerents. Modern multi-dimensional missions are more ambitious. On top of violence reduction, they work to

create conditions for sustainable peace by transforming the political, economic, and social institutions of a society. To handle these diverse tasks, armed troops are joined by police and civilian staff. In fact, the latest of several UN missions in Haiti (MINUJUSTH) had no troops at all, but more than 1,000 police to strengthen and reform Haitian law enforcement.

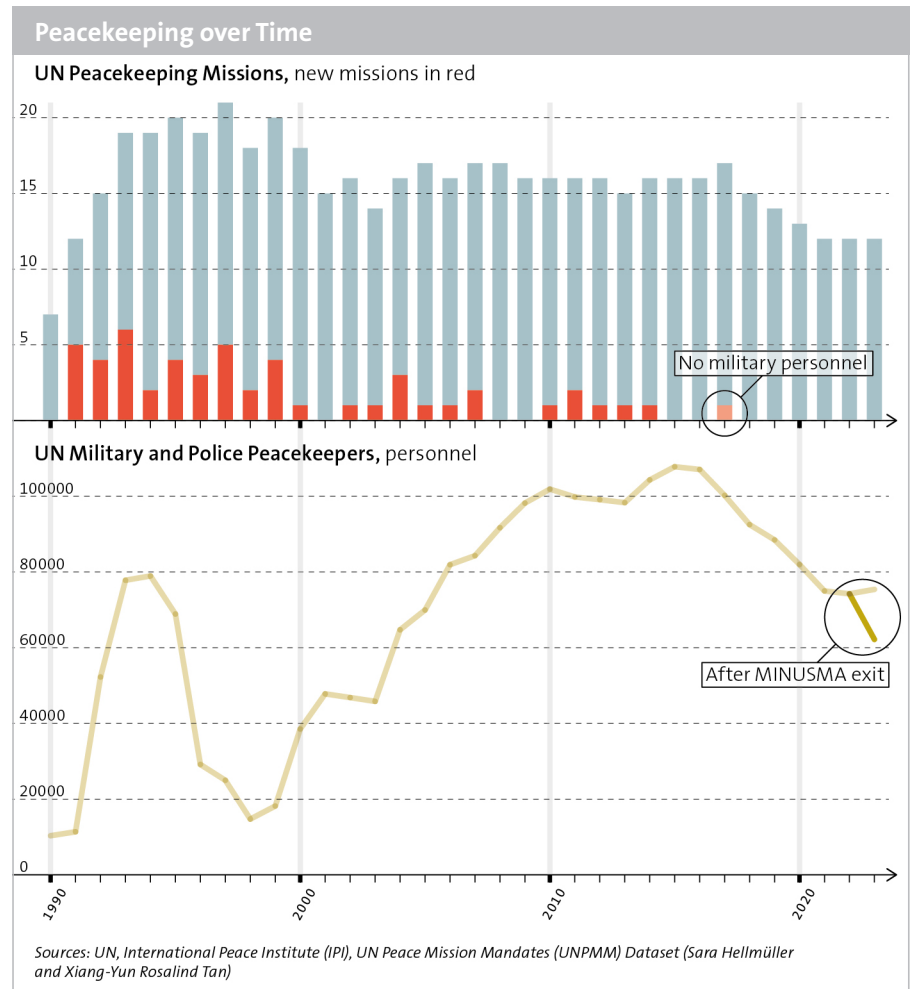
How do researchers evaluate whether peacekeeping is effective, considering its diverse goals? They compare conflicts with

peacekeeping to similar conflicts without. The question they answer is not whether there is a gap between missions' aspirations and the outcome, but whether conflicts that received an operation are better off than if they had not gotten one. This is not easy. First, "better off" can mean reduced violence, shorter wars, longer peace, or improved livelihoods, to name just a few criteria that influence the assessment. Second, truly comparable cases with and without peacekeeping are hard to find given that peacekeepers tend to go where they are most needed. The third difficulty is disentangling the effect of peacekeeping from other initiatives such as mediation, development assistance, or sanctions happening at the same time. To grapple with these challenges, the scholarship on peacekeeping leverages advances in data science and cutting-edge statistical modeling, combined with field research in war zones.

Collectively, this research shows that UN peace operations can reduce violence in wars. If missions can field enough troops, fewer soldiers of the conflict parties die on the battlefield, and fewer civilians are killed in the crossfire or as a result of intentional targeting. Peacekeepers can also prevent violence from spreading within and across countries. Importantly, there is evidence that wars end sooner with peacekeeping, and once they have ended, they are much less likely to restart in the future when a peacekeeping mission is or has been active.

Peacekeepers, and this is the key message of this research, save lives. But how? Though blue helmets do engage in battle, this is usually in defense – of themselves and of civilians under threat. Peacekeeping does not work through military superiority. Instead, the presence of peacekeepers acts as a deterrent and imposes costs on would-be aggressors. Peacekeepers' monitoring and reporting activities reduce the feasibility of surprise attacks and curtail the spread of misinformation that could escalate conflicts. Military maneuvers become more difficult when peacekeepers interfere. Additionally, violent acts are more likely to become public under the watch of peacekeepers and can result in reputational damages, which in turn can lead to a loss of support from crucial allies.

This does not always work equally well. The positive findings on peacekeeping are average effects across very different missions. Moreover, while violence reduction most directly alleviates human suffering, UN missions have larger ambitions. A political



solution, respect for human rights, fair elections, good governance, gender equality – these are just a few of the many objectives of modern peace missions. The aim is clear: A just and equal society is less likely to see violence and war in the long run. To what extent peacekeepers contribute to such societies is comparatively less researched. There has also been a backlash within the UN system itself against such “Christmas tree mandates” – mandates adorned with countless well-intentioned tasks. With the now-famous remark that “Christmas is over”, UN Secretary-General António Guterres urged the adoption of more realistic goals that maximize the impact of available resources.

Peacekeeping can also entail negative consequences. Some arise from genuine failure and misconduct, while others are hard to avoid but lack malicious intentions. The first category includes sexual abuse and exploitation by peacekeepers of the very people they have vowed to protect. Incidents

number in the thousands and affect multiple missions. The second category includes phenomena like peacekeeping economies, i.e., local distortions of the economy as missions create a demand for labor and resources that declines quickly when they depart. Lastly, there are negative consequences that are essentially side effects of successes in one area. As peacekeepers effectively limit the space for maneuver of some armed actors, these actors may change tactic. They may shift to violence that is less easily detected or sanctioned by peacekeepers, or instigate and support violence by other groups if it serves their purpose.

**Peacekeeping in a Changing World**

Peacekeeping has always been what states make of it. During the Cold War, the five permanent members (P5) of the UN Security Council (UNSC), who can veto operations, seldom agreed on peacekeeping. The few missions launched had traditional interposition and monitoring roles. In the immediate post-Cold War period, the UN

launched more missions than ever (see graph on p. 2), but despite being sent to some of the most brutal wars, most lacked the mandate or strength to prevent atrocities. The new millennium saw the emergence of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) norm and the war on terror, resulting in more ambitious missions, at times with strong military postures. Examples are the stabilization missions in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) and Mali (MINUSMA), which can use military force proactively to battle aggressors before they attack the mission or harm civilians.

Since then, UN peacekeeping has come full circle. Great power rivalry is again limiting the UNSC’s ability to maintain international peace and security. Relations between Russia and the West rapidly deteriorated with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and reached a low with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Besides Russia, China and rising regional powers are increasingly assertive and push back against mandates that deal with human rights, gender issues, civil society, and other initiatives seen as intruding into host state sovereignty and promoting Western liberal values.

With Russian veto power in the UNSC, agreement on new missions is difficult, though the Council tends to prolong the mandate of existing missions. As a result, no new peacekeeping operation with armed troops has been launched since 2014, and while the UN in its heydays had over 100,000 people on the ground worldwide, this number has dropped to levels not seen in almost 20 years (see graphic on p. 2). It is

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bound to drop further with the upcoming exit of the 13,000-strong MINUSMA, one of the UN’s largest missions. MINUSMA has been expelled by the Malian government, partly because the UN denounced the military junta for massacres in collaboration with Russian Wagner mercenaries.

Besides geopolitical power shifts, illiberal tendencies in governments worldwide have put pressure on the UN’s peacekeeping budget. This includes the “Western block” of the P5. For instance, the Trump administration markedly reduced US financial contributions to peacekeeping. A more persistent issue is an unevenly divided personnel burden. Today, the “global South”

Swiss Peacekeeping Deployments		
Org.	Mission <sup>1</sup>	Personnel
UN	UNTSO, Middle East	1 Head of Mission 12 military (observers, staff officers)
UN	MINUSMA, Mali	5 military (staff officers, demining and intelligence experts) 1 police <sup>2</sup>
UN	MONUSCO, Democratic Republic of Congo	5 military (demining specialists) 2 police
UN	UNMISS, South Sudan	4 military 1 police
UN	UNMOGIP, Kashmir	2 military (observers)
UN	MINURSO, Western Sahara	1 military (observer)
NATO	KFOR, Kosovo	181 military, armed
EU	EUFOR-ALTHEA, Bosnia-Herzegovina	26 military, armed
	Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission, Korea (North-South)	5 military (including the Head of Mission)
Data as of September 2023, exact numbers fluctuate.		
1 Includes only peacekeeping missions with uniformed personnel. Switzerland also participates in special political and purely civilian peacebuilding missions, i.e., EUCAP Sahel in Mali with 2 police trainers, and UNITAMS in Sudan with 2 demining specialists. UNVMC in Colombia will receive 1 police officer in the next months.		
2 With up to 6 police officers, MINUSMA was the mission with the largest Swiss police contingent until early 2023.		
Sources: Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport (DDPS) (military); Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA (police)		

contributes most troops to peacekeeping, and top contributors such as Bangladesh, Ethiopia, India, Pakistan, or Rwanda suffer most casualties. But while the personnel of these nations are indispensable in sustaining UN peacekeeping, many have a contentious human rights record themselves. Attracting sufficient police for UN operations is another challenge. Police have been shown to be very effective in limiting violence, but unlike troops, they are always needed at home, also during peacetime.

Finally, the UN must balance the three core principles of peacekeeping – consent of the main conflict parties, impartiality, and the use of force only in self-defense or defense of the mandate – with the evolving nature of conflicts. Today’s conflicts are different from when these principles were adopted. Consent by the main parties, for instance, presupposes that the parties are clearly defined and open to talks as the basis of their permission for peacekeeping. The fragmented landscape of modern conflicts, involving a myriad of armed groups with varying agendas, has complicated the appli-

cation of this principle. As a result, consent today often comes down to host state consent. This has led to concerns that the UN is state-centric, bolsters illiberal regimes, and soft-pedals on human rights violations by governments for fear of losing consent – a fear not unfounded given the recent expulsion of MINUSMA from Mali.

Operating with consent, however, is not simply an idealistic stance, but crucial for peacekeepers’ safety and ability to do their jobs. Without consent, armed actors will obstruct, intimidate, and, at worst, use violence against peacekeepers. The same holds for the other two principles. Excessive use of force or lack of impartiality by UN peacekeepers are not problematic because they break with principles established 75 years ago – they are a problem because it puts peacekeepers, and the people they are sent to protect, at risk.

**Switzerland and (UN) Peacekeeping**  
For Switzerland, the 75th anniversary of UN peacekeeping coincides with the country’s first-ever membership in the UNSC. Incidentally, the very first UN mission 75 years ago, UNTSO, is also the

first to be led by a Swiss officer – Major General Patrick Gauchat, who has held the position since 2021.

Going by numbers alone, Switzerland is not a big player in UN peacekeeping. It currently has about 35 military and police experts in six different UN-led peacekeeping missions (see box on p. 3). They are all unarmed – blue berets rather than blue helmets. Switzerland's biggest troop contributions are actually in the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) and in an EU-led operation in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Unlike the Swiss UN experts on mission, the contingents in Kosovo and Bosnia are armed for self-protection.

Switzerland is not the only nation with small contributions to UN peacekeeping. Researchers have identified so-called “token contributions” (few persons per mission) as a distinct form of participation in UN peacekeeping when larger contingents are not possible or desirable. In the case of Switzerland, the constraint is primarily legal – the Swiss Military Code prohibits the deployment of armed troops unless the Federal Assembly approves it. In 1994, an attempt to change that (the so-called “Blue Helmet Law”) was rejected by the Swiss people in a popular vote. Within these constraints, Switzerland aims to make its contributions count by providing niche expertise, for instance in humanitarian demining, with experienced staff officers, or with expertise in Security Sector Reform (SSR).

Neutrality per se is not an obstacle for participation in UN peacekeeping. Other neutral (or formerly neutral) states like Finland, Ireland, Austria, or Sweden have participated with armed contingents. For Switzerland, armed peacekeepers would be compatible with the law of neutrality exactly because UN missions are based on the three principles of consent, impartiality, and the non-use of force. In fact, these principles mirror the fundamental tenets of Swiss neutrality and defence policy remarkably well.

Switzerland is currently working on enhancing its role in UN peacekeeping. In 2020, the Federal Council tasked the Defence and Foreign Ministries with implementing several measures towards this end. Switzerland has since pledged three company-sized units for potential future UN deployments. This pledge is non-binding, and the decision to deploy would require parliamentary approval, as is always the case when a deployment involves more than a hundred troops or lasts more than three weeks. A revision of the Swiss Military Code that would give the Federal Council the discretion to authorize up to 10 armed personnel as specialists in UN missions without parliamentary approval has been postponed to 2026 due to the war in Ukraine.

Switzerland has also devised a practical approach to contribute to the UN's goal of increasing women's participation in peacekeeping. A new career pathway permits the Armed Forces to recruit women, including those without prior military service experience, into peacekeeping. If eligible, they complete a 12-week military training course prior to being deployed to Kosovo. Since 2020, 50 women have made use of this option and joined the Armed Forces after serving in KFOR.

### Outlook

Over the course of 75 years, UN blue helmets and blue berets have become an internationally recognized symbol of the pledge to protect people from war and violence beyond country borders. Despite the formidable challenges that UN peacekeeping currently faces, it is unlikely to disappear.

Firstly, the UN still has more people on the ground than all other peacekeeping actors combined. Secondly, it has weathered crises before, as the drastic dip in personnel after failures in the 1990s shows (see graph on p. 2). Even at the height of the Cold War, the superpowers found consensus for some operations, like the UN Interim Force (UNIFIL) in 1978 to confirm Israeli with-

drawal from Lebanon. Today's divided UNSC likewise still manages to agree on important issues. In 2023, it unanimously adopted resolutions condemning the Taliban's discrimination against women, extending cross-border humanitarian aid to Syria, and denouncing antisemitism for the first time in its history.

In the short term, the UN is adapting to serve its role in restoring and keeping peace, for instance by prioritizing political missions. These are small missions that contribute to political solutions and civilian peacebuilding. They require less personnel, are less intrusive as well as cheaper, and thus easier to get agreement on. The UN is also emphasizing the importance of partnership peacekeeping with regional organizations (such as the African Union) or ad-hoc coalitions of states. While partnership peacekeeping usually means deploying UN and non-UN missions together or after each other and not simply delegating peacekeeping to others, delegation may be the reality in the years to come. However, missions by regional organizations and ad-hoc coalitions tend to be military-focused, while the strength of the UN has been its multidimensional approach to peace support.

To sum up, while new strategies and partnerships are necessary to address threats to peace and security in today's challenging environment, the unique multidimensional and principled approach to peacekeeping the UN stands for remains essential. In this sense, UN peacekeeping cannot simply be replaced and outsourced.

For more on Mediation and Peace Promotion, see [CSS core theme page](#).

**Corinne Bara** is Senior Researcher at the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zürich.