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A Start, Not an End: Reflections on the Peace Operations Review Report

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1. Introduction

On 20 August 2026, the report of the Secretary-General on the review on the future of all forms of United Nations (UN) peace operations¹ (hereafter the “peace operations review report”) was issued after months of delays. It purported to offer a roadmap for resetting the full spectrum of peace operations for a new geopolitical era, but instead presented a defense of maintaining existing approaches, arguing that the primary challenges faced by peace operations in implementing their mandates are the lack of unified political and financial support from member states. Moreover, the recommendations and commitments lacked conviction, issued as they were at the end of the term of António Guterres, a Secretary-General who has been uniquely skeptical of the peace-making and peacekeeping work that has been the marquee activities of the Secretariat for most of its 80-year existence. Indeed, the report conspicuously offered no follow-up processes or timelines.

This lack of interest by the Secretary-General in the peace and security work of the UN extended to the review itself. During a briefing to the General Assembly on the report a

week after its issuance, the Secretary-General seemingly declined to take ownership of the report and openly admitted that it had been drafted by the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) and the Department of Peace Operations (DPO). These two departments were the product of the restructuring of the peace and security architecture at Headquarters during his first term. This restructuring had been intended to address the longstanding issues with the functioning of the Secretariat political (DPA) and peacekeeping (DPKO) departments, which were first established in 1992 and have been locked in internecine rivalry ever since.² However, the restructuring was primarily cosmetic and largely left the structures and reporting lines intact. If anything, the rivalry had only deepened, and only budget cuts could get the two departments to consolidate some of their functions, with the creation of the Peacebuilding and Peace Support Office and a shared Gender Unit in January 2026.

The report was issued in the midst of the selection process for the tenth UN Secretary-General. To date, during all of the informal interactive dialogues and the town hall meeting with candidates, all of the candidates have highlighted the important role of the UN in the maintenance of international peace and security. All have emphasized the

¹ United Nations, *Review on the Future of All Forms of United Nations Peace Operations: Report of the Secretary-General*.

² Salton, “The Hand That Holds the Pen”; Salton, ‘Peacebuilding, Peacekeeping, and the “Balance of Bureaucratic Power” in Kofi Annan’s Secretariat’.

role of the UN in mediation, particularly the good offices role of the Secretary-General. Several have called for a new approach to peace operations, emphasizing streamlined missions tailored to context and oriented around political solutions. In many ways, this emphasis on peacemaking and on tailored missions is a rejection of the status quo – and the very approaches reinforced in the Secretary-General’s report.

To support the development of a new approach to UN peace operations, this GGI Analysis presents context and additional observations to support consideration of the peace operations review report by member states and the next Secretary-General.

2. Background

The peace operations review was undertaken in response to the request of the General Assembly, contained in the September 2024 Pact for the Future, for the Secretary-General

to undertake a review on the future of all forms of United Nations peace operations, taking into account lessons learned from previous and ongoing reform processes, and provide strategic and action-oriented recommendations for the consideration of Member States on how the United Nations toolbox can be adapted to meet evolving needs, to allow

for more agile, tailored responses to existing, emerging and future challenges[.]³

Originally, Secretary-General Guterres had recommended in his 2023 policy brief on *A New Agenda for Peace* that member states “undertake a reflection on the limits and future of peacekeeping in the light of the evolving nature of conflict with a view to enabling more nimble, adaptable and effective mission models while devising transition and exit strategies, where appropriate”.⁴ Member states, however, felt that the responsibility for initiating this reflection rested with the Secretary-General, and thus turned the request around.

In the intervening two years, peace operations have experienced tremendous upheaval, including severe funding constraints. Just two months before the issuance of the report, the General Assembly approved a total of \$5.1 billion for peacekeeping operations for the 2026/27 fiscal year, the lowest level in twenty years and a significant decline from the high-water mark of approximately \$8.3 billion in 2015/16. The actual amounts available to peace operations for mandate implementation were even lower than the approved level given the à la carte approach to paying peacekeeping assessments by the second Trump administration. The fact that the United States paid less than half of what it

³ United Nations General Assembly, ‘Resolution 79/1. Pact for the Future’.

⁴ United Nations, *Policy Brief 9: A New Agenda for Peace (A/77/CRP.1/Add.8)*.

owed, favoring MONUSCO, UNIFIL, and the UN Support Office for Haiti, necessitated the repatriation of 25 percent of uniformed personnel from peacekeeping missions during the 2025/26 financial period to avoid bankruptcy; similar measures will likely be required during the current period.

Another development has been the continuation of the decade-long trend of retrenchment in UN peace operations. Since the adoption of the Pact for the Future, the mandates of four additional missions have either been terminated or scheduled to at the request of either the Security Council or host governments, despite continued fragility, conflict, and violence, in Iraq (2025), Yemen/Hudaydah (2026), Somalia (2026), and Lebanon (2026). Regional forces, ad hoc coalitions, bilateral deployments, and private military companies have increasingly met the demand for international responses to crises in the absence of the deployment of new UN peace operations.

3. The legacy of previous reviews

There have been several reviews of peace operations conducted since the end of the Cold War; these include internal reflections such as the 1995 *Supplement to An Agenda for*

Peace, which offered a sober reflection of the limits of peacekeeping operations following high-profile failures in Rwanda, Bosnia, and Somalia. The *Supplement* enumerated the three principles of impartiality, consent of the parties, and non-use of force except in self-defence, saying that

the last few years have confirmed that respect for certain basic principles of peacekeeping are essential to its success. Three particularly important principles are the consent of the parties, impartiality and the non-use of force except in self-defence. Analysis of recent successes and failures shows that in all the successes those principles were respected and in most of the less successful operations one or other of them was not.⁵

But there have also been several high-profile independent reviews looking at the overall UN approach to peace operations. The 2000 report of the Panel on UN Peace Operations (the Brahimi report) argued that peacekeeping operations require larger and better-equipped forces to be able to be a credible deterrent, and that missions mandated to protect civilians must be adequately resourced to do so.⁶ The 2008 Report of the African Union-UN panel on modalities for support to African Union peacekeeping operations (the Prodi report) recommended a division of responsibilities between the UN

⁵ United Nations, *Supplement to An Agenda for Peace: Position Paper of the Secretary-General on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the United Nations*.

⁶ United Nations, *Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations (A/55/305-S/2000/809)*.

and the African Union (AU) and that AU missions should be given access to UN assessed contributions on a case-by-case basis.⁷ The report of the 2011 senior advisory group on civilian capacity in the aftermath of conflict (the CivCap report) highlighted both gaps and duplications in capacities within the UN system; it recommended that peace operations make better use of peacebuilding expertise within and outside the UN system on the basis of comparative advantage.⁸

The most recent such review was the 2015 report of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (the HIPPO report); in many ways it incorporated and updated the findings and recommendations of the earlier reviews. The HIPPO report recommended four key shifts: that politics must drive the design and implementation of peace operations, that the full spectrum of UN peace operations must be used more flexibly to respond to changing needs on the ground, that global-regional peace and security partnerships must be strengthened, and that the UN Secretariat must become more field-focused and UN peace operations must be more people-centered.⁹

The shifts called for in the HIPPO report largely remain unrealized, though they re-

main relevant today. One challenge was timing; the report came at the end of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's term, limiting the time available for implementation. But a second challenge was the fact that many of the recommendations questioned core elements of how the Secretariat understood peace operations, including the robust militarized approach to protection of civilians in peacekeeping operations as well as the division of responsibility between DPA and DPKO, which were the de facto lead departments for special political missions and peacekeeping operations, respectively. These issues were not addressed in the re-configuration of DPA and DPKO into DPPA and DPO during Guterres's first term.

The peace operations review report largely expands upon analysis and recommendations contained in the *New Agenda for Peace*, and both documents respond in large part to the themes of the HIPPO report, but framed in a manner that avoids challenging the preferred approaches of DPPA and DPO. As a result, there are many contradictions inherent in the analysis and recommendations contained in the peace operations review report.

⁷ United Nations, *Report of the African Union-United Nations Panel on Modalities for Support to African Union Peacekeeping Operations* (A/63/666-S/2008/813).

⁸ United Nations, *Civilian Capacity in the Aftermath of Conflict: Independent Report of the Senior Advisory Group* (A/65/747-S/2011/85).

⁹ United Nations, *Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on Uniting Our Strengths for Peace: Politics, Partnership and People* (A/70/95-S/2015/446).

4. Stabilization and the principles of peacekeeping

The manner in which these contradictions appear comes through most strongly in how the report treats the three principles of peacekeeping. The peace operations review report reaffirms the basic principles, framing them as definitional to peacekeeping operations, but fails to grapple with the resulting gap between doctrine on paper and doctrine in practice. It conspicuously avoids using the word “stabilization” and fails to interrogate the contradictions that have emerged through the embrace of stabilization mandates.

Over the past two decades, liberal peacebuilding has given way to militarized stabilization in multidimensional peacekeeping operations, driven largely by the western Security Council members who had become skeptical about nation-building after the experiences of Afghanistan and Iraq but who also wanted peacekeeping operations to adopt increasingly robust approaches to the protection of civilians.¹⁰ This shift, however, has been met by disquiet from many stakeholders, including other members of the Security Council, traditional troop- and police-

contributing countries, and members of the Secretariat,¹¹ given the apparent departure of stabilization missions from the basic principles of peacekeeping.

The term stabilization has appeared in the names of several peacekeeping operations but has never been clearly defined by the UN; there are, however, several common characteristics. The underlying premise of stabilization is that a strong state – in the Weberian conception of a polity with the monopoly on violence within its jurisdiction – is the most effective guarantor of security and that, to this end, the UN should support the extension of state authority and the building of state capacity.¹² Stabilization missions are therefore distinguished by several characteristics, including “deployment into situations where there is ‘no peace to keep’; focus on ‘robust’ protection of civilians; [and] authorizing UN troops to use offensive force to ‘neutralize’ specific armed actors and/or stabilize a situation”.¹³

The ambiguity over the term “stabilization” has frequently been used by proponents of more robust missions to argue that these missions still fall within peacekeeping doctrine and are not enforcement. Indeed, the peace operations review report asserts that enforcement “remains beyond the scope of United Nations peace operations” despite

¹⁰ Karlsrud, ‘From Liberal Peacebuilding to Stabilization and Counterterrorism’; Karlsrud, ‘For the Greater Good?’.

¹¹ Andersen, ‘The HIPPO in the Room’.

¹² Day and Hunt, ‘UN Stabilisation Operations and the Problem of Non-Linear Change’; Hunt and Curran, ‘Stabilization at the Expense of Peacebuilding in UN Peacekeeping Operations’.

¹³ Andersen, ‘The HIPPO in the Room’.

the language in the mandates of missions such as MONUSCO (“In support of the authorities of the DRC, ...carry out targeted offensive operations through the Intervention Brigade”¹⁴), MINUSMA (“to anticipate, deter and counter threats and to take robust and active steps...engaging in direct operations pursuant only to serious and credible threats”¹⁵), and MINUSCA (“by anticipating, deterring, and stopping all armed groups, signatories of the Peace Agreement and non-signatories, and local militias from inflicting violence on the populations”¹⁶).

In these missions, Council members worried about the doctrinal drift and attempted to put up guardrails by inserting language on the basic principles into the associated Security Council resolutions. These references, however, have had little practical effect in shaping mandate implementation. In fact, over time, their inclusion in the mandates of missions deployed in support of the host state and encouraged to use force against non-state armed groups has provided proponents of robust peacekeeping a fig leaf for claiming that such activities are in line with those principles.

4.1 Impartiality

The peace operations review report emphasizes that “The strongest asset of the United Nations is its impartiality. It must be fiercely

and vigorously exercised – in brokering peace agreements, in pursuing political solutions and throughout the work of peace operations” (para. 23 (d)). But stabilization missions are not impartial. They are very clearly deployed in support of a specific party to a conflict: the host state authorities.

In the very next paragraph (para. 23(e)), the peace operations review report states that “Peacekeepers must be respected and protected, and those who harm peacekeepers must be held accountable; effective measures must be put in place for this purpose.” The report highlights the importance of ensuring the security of peacekeepers and, to this end, underlines the importance of capacity building and access to new technologies. It also calls for member states to prosecute perpetrators of crimes against peacekeepers (para. 59(d)) and respect the privileges and immunities of peace operations and their personnel (para. 59(e)). This ignores the fundamental problem, which is that when peacekeepers are deployed to support the extension of host state authority, build the capacity of host state security forces, and use force against opposition armed groups, they have effectively become a party to the conflict and are seen as such.

UN peacekeepers are usually covered by the 1994 Convention on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel, are treated

¹⁴ United Nations Security Council, ‘Resolution 2098’.

¹⁵ United Nations Security Council, ‘Resolution 2295’.

¹⁶ United Nations Security Council, ‘Resolution 2499’.

as non-combatants, and are given the same protection as civilians under international humanitarian law.¹⁷ But when they are engaged as combatants, they become legitimate targets under international law. After the creation of the Force Intervention Brigade, the Secretariat acknowledged that, “by virtue of the tasks foreseen for the Intervention Brigade, it would appear that MONUSCO may end up being a party to armed hostilities in the DRC, thus triggering the application of international humanitarian law.”¹⁸ But the fact that MONUSCO became a legitimate target once the Force Intervention Brigade was established was apparently not well understood by Security Council members at the time resolution 2098 was adopted.¹⁹ There is little evidence that awareness has grown in the intervening years.

Instead of acknowledging the linkage between the loss of impartiality and attacks on peacekeepers, the peace operations review report glosses over the fact that peacekeepers engaged as combatants in certain missions may no longer be entitled to protections under the laws of armed conflict by welcoming resolution 2823 (2026) on the identification, investigation and prosecution of perpetrators of attacks against UN

personnel serving in peacekeeping operations. And rather than engaging in an honest reflection on how doctrinal drift has undermined the safety and security of peacekeepers, it essentially treats the issue as a matter to be addressed exclusively through technical measures, a mindset unhelpfully reinforced by the 2017 review on improving the security of peacekeepers (the Santos Cruz report) and the 2021 review of the responses of UN peacekeeping operations to improvised explosive devices (the van Roosen report). These are reflected in the peace operations review report through recommendations related to the adoption of new technologies (paras. 56 and 57) and improvement of medical support to peacekeepers (para. 58).

It should also be noted that the UN need not be directly engaged in combat operations to be considered a party to a conflict under international humanitarian law.²⁰ The provision of material support by the UN to host country security forces or non-UN forces may also render the UN a party to a conflict.²¹ This has obvious implications for safety and security in contexts where the UN

¹⁷ United Nations Secretariat, *Observance by United Nations Forces of International Humanitarian Law: Secretary-General's Bulletin*.

¹⁸ O'Brien, 'Statement by Ms. Patricia O'Brien, Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs, The Legal Counsel'.

¹⁹ Sheeran and Case, *The Intervention Brigade: Legal Issues for the UN in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*.

²⁰ Ferraro, 'The Applicability and Application of International Humanitarian Law to Multinational Forces'.

²¹ Khalil, 'When Is an Attack on UN Peacekeepers a War Crime and When Is It Not?'.

is responsible for delivering a support package to a non-UN force,²² whether under Security Council resolution 2719 or under an ad hoc arrangement.

4.2 Consent of the parties

Something conspicuously absent from the report is a reference to the trend of democratic backsliding. Multidimensional peacekeeping operations and integrated peacebuilding offices emerged after the end of the Cold War to help implement comprehensive peace agreements and address the myriad drivers of conflict. In 1992, Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali set out the conceptual framework for these in his landmark report, titled *An Agenda for Peace*, in which he introduced the concept of peacebuilding to the UN. Today, however, liberal peacebuilding is seen as discredited by many scholars and practitioners,²³ and host states are increasingly threatened by the tenets of liberal peace – democracy, human rights, and the rule of law – and instead seek authoritarian approaches to conflict management as an alternative. Such approaches entail

the prevention, de-escalation or termination of organised armed rebellion ... through methods that eschew genuine negotiations

among parties to the conflict, reject international mediation and constraints on the use of force, disregard calls to address underlying structural causes of conflict, and instead rely on instruments of state coercion and hierarchical structures of power.²⁴

UN peacekeeping was never intended to promote illiberal outcomes, let alone authoritarian approaches to conflict management. There is growing evidence, however, that UN peacekeeping operations have inadvertently bolstered host state authorities in ways that enable authoritarian behavior.²⁵ And the shift from peacebuilding to stabilization has effectively transformed peacekeeping operations into tools of regime preservation and authoritarian conflict management.²⁶ Much of this has been enabled by the fact that the three major member state stakeholders in peace operations – members of the Security Council, host states, and troop-contributing countries – are becoming increasingly authoritarian and statist in their views and preferences.

Host state authorities “are more likely to see peacekeepers as a threat than insurgents, and in a better position to defy them”²⁷, and in fact we have seen host state authorities

²² Karlsrud, “‘Pragmatic Peacekeeping’ in Practice”.

²³ Autesserre, *Peaceland*; Paris, ‘The Future of UN Peace Operations’; de Coning, ‘Adaptive Peacebuilding’.

²⁴ Lewis et al., ‘Illiberal Peace?’.

²⁵ von Billerbeck et al., *United Nations Peacekeeping and the Politics of Authoritarianism*.

²⁶ Chen, *So Long, Farewell*.

²⁷ Piccolino and Karlsrud, ‘Withering Consent, but Mutual Dependency’.

obstruct the work of peace operations in violation of status of forces and status of mission agreements with impunity in nearly every recent multidimensional mission in order to influence the manner in which mandates are implemented. In the most extreme cases, host state security forces have used force against peacekeepers, and in several instances in recent years, they have requested the early exit of missions despite conditions of ongoing fragility, conflict, and violence. The peace operations review report acknowledges this diplomatically by stating that “there is a discrepancy between the expectations of host Governments and communities and the support that missions can provide...Such misalignments can result in deteriorated relations between missions and host Governments, at times manifesting in unacceptable obstructions of missions in implementing their mandates” (para. 12).

The report recognizes the need to repair the relationship between host state authorities and the UN, but the manner in which it approaches this privileges the interests of host state authorities over those of other parties to the conflict. It calls for “a stronger partnership with host states” (para. 23 (b)). It calls for the Security Council “to consistently seek the views and priorities of the host State or States, while considering the perspectives of other parties, where relevant” (para. 31 (a)). It also calls for the establishment of a compact on mutual

commitments between the Council, the Secretariat, and the host state; this would affirm host state consent with “the mission’s strategic purpose, key uniformed capabilities, equipment and technological enablers” (para. 31(b)).

The simple truth is that a compact on mutual commitments cannot guarantee the sincere cooperation of host state authorities, especially if they see the mission mandate and the broader political process as a threat to their hold on power. As described in the report, the compact would be the vehicle through which to obtain the consent of the host state for “the mission’s strategic purpose, key uniformed capabilities, equipment and technological enablers that are required for its success”. To pursue a compact in such a manner risks providing host state authorities with further leverage for instrumentalizing missions into tools of regime preservation.

The basic principle in question, however, is not consent of the host state alone, but rather consent of the parties to a conflict. As the *Supplement* noted, consent of the parties is necessary for both peacemaking and peacekeeping, and for the UN to behave in a manner perceived to be partial is to forfeit the consent of the parties. The basic idea – to make sure that the Security Council better understands the views and priorities of parties to the conflict in its decision-making

around mandates – is sound. But this process of thoughtful and meaningful consultation needs to take into account the views and priorities of not just the host state authorities, but also the other key stakeholders relevant to the specific context.

4.3 Use of force and the primacy of politics

Alignment with host state authorities is also reflected in how the report treats the use of force. It notes that “Peacekeepers can and must act robustly, where mandated, to protect civilians from imminent threats and mass atrocities, reduce threats from non-State armed groups and suppress significant threats to a political process” (para. 20). But this fails to reckon with the fact that, in many peacekeeping contexts, host state security forces are one of the primary perpetrators of violence against civilians. The prioritization of host state interests and this framing of the purpose of the use of force show that the Secretariat fundamentally views its peacekeeping operations – particularly those with protection of civilians mandates – as missions deployed to support host state authorities against non-state armed groups.

At the same time, the report emphasizes the importance of political solutions (para. 23(a)

and (c)) and devotes an entire subsection to making the case for the UN to use its good offices “to ensure that peace processes are better designed and peace agreements not only implementable and sustainable, but also more inclusive and norm-based” (para. 28). But the report fails to grapple with the fact that mandates that align the mission with the state – including extension of state authority, building state capacity, and use of force against armed groups opposed to the state – undermine peacemaking efforts by providing the state with a sufficient sense of security to reduce the incentives to seek political solutions with its opponents.²⁸

This was, in fact, a topic that earlier reviews were unafraid to confront. The *Supplement to An Agenda for Peace*, drawing from hard-learned lessons from Bosnia and Somalia, stressed that

The logic of peace-keeping flows from political and military premises that are quite distinct from those of enforcement; and the dynamics of the latter are incompatible with the political process that peace-keeping is intended to facilitate. To blur the distinction between the two can undermine the viability of the peace-keeping operation and endanger its personnel.²⁹

Twenty years later, the HIPPO report emphasized the importance of the primacy of politics because it had become concerned

²⁸ de Coning, ‘How Not to Do UN Peacekeeping’.

²⁹ United Nations, *Supplement to An Agenda for Peace: Position Paper of the Secretary-General on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the United Nations*.

that, in peacekeeping operations, the emphasis on robust approaches to physical protection of civilians had given rise to a primacy of the military in mission approaches, at the expense of political solutions.³⁰ The peace operations review report acknowledges that “in several contexts, external intervention and influence has led to sustained fighting, reduced incentives for peace and undermined peacemaking efforts” (para. 3); it simply lacks the self-awareness of the fact that stabilization has rendered many UN peace operations into such external interventions.

The report assigns the responsibility for (explicit) peace enforcement to non-UN forces authorized by the Security Council. The peace operations review report notes that the UN is increasingly likely to operate alongside other peace and security actors, including non-UN forces authorized by the Security Council. The report emphasizes that enforcement action by such forces should be accompanied by inclusive political strategies (para. 66(e)) and that “the Organization should be ready to support such operations by facilitating a comprehensive approach encompassing political solutions, efforts to address conflict drivers and technical support” (para. 65). But host states often seek non-UN alternatives specifically

because they are not interested in either political solutions or the use of peacebuilding to address root causes of conflict and risk factors for violence.³¹

Non-UN forces frequently lack the capacity to sustain extended expeditionary deployments and have required UN support in areas ranging from planning and force generation to logistics and medical support.³² Indeed, throughout his term, Guterres has worked to position the UN as a service provider to non-UN forces, including in support of the G5 Sahel Joint Force, the Gang Suppression Force in Haiti, and in the implementation of Security Council resolution 2719. However, when the UN has been relegated to a supporting role as a service provider to a non-UN force, the UN is no longer in control of the political or the military strategy. The peace operations review report presents an overly optimistic view of what the UN can achieve in a supporting role, and it fails to acknowledge that support to non-UN forces delivered through standalone offices reinforces the primacy of the military, undermines the impartiality necessary for the UN to credibly support political strategies, and makes the UN complicit in any violations of international humanitarian or human rights law by the non-UN force.

³⁰ Arnault, ‘A Background to the Report of the High-Level Panel on Peace Operations’.

³¹ Williams, ‘Multilateral Counterinsurgency in East Africa’.

³² United Nations, *Report of the Joint African Union-United Nations Review of Available Mechanisms to Finance and Support African Union Peace Support Operations Authorized by the United Nations Security Council*.

5. Hijacking the spectrum of peace operations

One of the unimplemented shifts called for in 2015 in the HIPPO report is the move towards a tailored, flexible approach drawing upon the full spectrum of peace operations. It argued that “Terms such as ‘special political missions’ and ‘peacekeeping operations’ are ingrained in mindsets and the bureaucracy of the United Nations [and] constrain the Organization’s ability to respond more flexibly to the needs on the ground” and that “the sharp distinctions between peacekeeping operations and special political missions should give way to a continuum of responses and smoother transitions between different phases of missions.”³³

The peace operations review report makes a show of acknowledging this particular HIPPO recommendation (paras. 16-19), but in a way that not only subverts the original concept, but also reinforces the very problem that the HIPPO was trying to address. Instead of using the concept of the full spectrum to remove the unhelpful distinctions between peacekeeping operations and special political missions, it instead presents the full spectrum as a choice between

these two options (alongside non-UN peace enforcement operations).

The current division between peacekeeping operations and special political missions originated in operational requirements and budgetary arrangements. When the UN was originally established, it had a single programme budget (the “regular budget”) to cover the full range of activities undertaken by the Secretariat. But beginning with the UN Emergency Force in 1956, the UN created special accounts separate from the regular budget for large peacekeeping missions due to the scale and complexity of their activities compared to the rest of the activities of the Secretariat. Smaller-scale missions continued to be funded through the regular budget. By the end of the Cold War, the term “special political mission” became the term used for these political, peace, and security activities funded through the regular budget.

Over time, other considerations began to be layered into the conventional understanding of peacekeeping operations and special political missions, creating political and bureaucratic incentives to push for missions to be established as one type or the other for reasons unrelated to the operational requirements of a mission. One such consideration is the lead department approach, in

³³ United Nations, *Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on Uniting Our Strengths for Peace: Politics, Partnership and People* (A/70/95–S/2015/446).

which the Secretary-General gives responsibility for leading the UN response to a particular crisis to a particular department, whether DPPA or DPO. Although there is no intergovernmental decision formalizing the division of responsibility, under current practice DPPA is the lead department for all special political missions and DPO is the lead department for all peacekeeping operations. As lead department status comes with additional prestige and – most importantly – resources, each department has a strong incentive to be designated the lead department and for their preferred approach to be seen as the most appropriate response.³⁴

What had originated as a different approach to reflecting resource requirements is now a fault line that demarcates two entirely different regimes with different approaches to planning, mandating, budgeting, financing, staffing, management, and reporting to Headquarters for missions implementing an overlapping set of mandates and deployed in similar contexts. Today, DPO planning processes are specialized for planning, deploying, and supporting multidimensional protection of civilians missions, to the exclusion of any other model. DPPA, on the other hand, is better able to tailor new special political missions to specific requirements. However, its lack of dedicated planning capacity or expertise in operations

or mission support creates a practical limit to the scale and complexity of the missions it is able to plan and support.

Special political missions are handicapped by *de jure* limitations on how they can be backstopped and what resources are available to support their start-up and transition. DPPA further handicaps special political missions through its insistence on distinguishing them from peacekeeping operations through the application of a *de facto* litmus test in which capabilities often associated with peacekeeping operations are deliberately excluded from special political missions even where they may be relevant to mandate implementation. These capabilities include funding for programmatic activities and quick-impact projects, structures such as joint operations centres and joint mission analysis centres, and the presence of military personnel other than guard units.

The division between peacekeeping and special political missions is also reinforced in doctrine. The peace operations review report presents the basic principles as being applicable only to peacekeeping, and it describes the protection of civilians mandate also as a peacekeeping-specific activity. In fact, the principles of impartiality, consent of the parties, and non-use of force except in self-defence should be guiding principles

³⁴ In fact, there is a third department with stakes in the turf war; the Department of Operational Support (DOS) is the lead department

for standalone support offices delivering support packages to non-UN forces, as in the case of Somalia and Haiti.

for all UN peace operations deployed to support viable political processes and solutions. And the protection of civilians encompasses more than just the provision of physical protection. UN doctrine on protection of civilians defines three tiers; beyond physical protection (tier 2), the UN can also protect civilians through dialogue and engagement (tier 1) and through establishment of a protective environment (tier 3).³⁵ The types of activities within tiers 1 and 3 are well within the normal range of activities performed by field-based special political missions.

The peace operations review report does in fact present a possible way forward through what the Secretary-General calls networked peace operations (paras. 36-40), in which programmatic tasks in a mission mandate and the associated resources would be delegated to partners best placed to implement them. This is not a new proposal; it was originally proposed in 2012 by the Senior Advisory Group on civilian capacity in the aftermath of conflict,³⁶ and suggestions on how it could be implemented have been floated in recent years.³⁷ But the report does not present a roadmap for taking this approach forward, saying only that “The Secretariat will devise modalities to ensure that results will be transparently reported through missions for clear accountability to

Member States” (para. 40(a)), with no clear timeframe. The report also limits this arrangement to partners within the UN system. At a time when application of Security Council resolution 2719 seems an ever more distant prospect, networked approaches may provide a way to operationalize meaningful partnerships with regional organizations and other partners on the basis of comparative advantage.

6. Additional reflections

6.1 Internal vs independent reviews

A key difference between the HIPPO review and processes such as the UN80 initiative and the peace operations review is that the HIPPO was independent. Its members – who were respected individuals with a wealth of knowledge and experience working in and with UN peace operations – were not beholden to the UN bureaucracy. They were therefore free to speak their minds and they made a range of recommendations that would be difficult to imagine appearing in a report of the Secretary-General. The peace operations review, however, was the opposite. It was an internal process led by departments where internal criticism is

³⁵ United Nations Department of Peace Operations, ‘The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping (2023.05)’.

³⁶ United Nations, *Civilian Capacity in the Aftermath of Conflict: Independent Report of the Senior Advisory Group (A/65/747-S/2011/85)*.

³⁷ Chen and Coleman, ‘Reinvigorating UN Peacekeeping’.

suppressed in favor of narratives that reinforce departmental interests and priorities.³⁸

Independent and high-level panels are certainly not a panacea, and can also be a way of allowing the Secretariat to more easily distance itself from recommendations that it does not wish to follow through with.³⁹ But under the prevailing culture of the specific departments in question, a variety of factors – including career considerations, the hierarchical culture of the Secretariat, and the design of internal clearance and coordination mechanisms – limit the extent to which staff are able to advance recommendations that conflict with the interests and priorities of their department. On top of this is the fact that internal initiatives involving more than one entity, each with very different preferences, tend to result in least common denominator outcomes, which often manifest as maintenance of the status quo.⁴⁰

6.2 Agency of the Secretariat

The peace operations review report portrays the UN as an organization without agency, one that is entirely at the mercy of its member states. It attributes the challenges experienced by missions in implementing their mandates to the absence of unified political and financial support from member states

(paras. 8, 15, 30, 34). This is true, and the report rightly castigates member states who fail to do their part, including deadbeat financial contributors, troop contributors who maintain caveats, and obstructionist host governments. But peace operations must deliver wherever they are needed; they do not have the luxury of deploying only during permissive geopolitical eras. And it is difficult to think of more than a handful of cases over the 80-year history of the UN in which member states have provided unified political and financial support to UN peace and security efforts.

The report goes further, implying that responsibility for action on international peace and security rests almost entirely with member states. On peacemaking, it states that “the United Nations commits to a systematic offer of its good offices to help the parties to intra- or inter-State conflicts resolve their disputes through peaceful means. Member States are encouraged to make use of this offer” (para. 29(a)). On fact-finding, it states, “The Security Council should...engage more regularly in fact-finding in cases of disputes that may represent a threat to international peace and security” (para. 29(c)). This is in line with Guterres’s stance throughout his second term, during which he has consistently portrayed

³⁸ Christian, ‘Why International Organizations Don’t Learn’.

³⁹ von Einsiedel and Pichler Fong, *The Rise of High-Level Panels: Implications for the New UN Secretary-General*.

⁴⁰ Chen et al., *Managing Opportunities, Challenges, and Expectations for the New Agenda for Peace*.

himself as a powerless figure; in a recent interview, he claimed that “The secretary-general has no powers. The secretary-general has a voice and some convening capacity. Power is another thing and we don’t have that. But the voice will not be shut up.”⁴¹

But the Secretary-General is not a powerless bureaucrat who needs to be given permission to use his good offices or invited to dispatch a fact-finding mission to generate options for UN engagement. Secretaries-General such as Hammarskjöld, Thant, and Pérez de Cuéllar who proactively used the tools at their disposal were effective even in earlier periods of heightened geopolitical contestation. The fact that there have not been any new peacekeeping operations established during Guterres’s term is not simply a matter of Security Council disagreement, but also the simple fact that Guterres has not proactively dispatched fact-finding or assessment missions to develop options for potential missions for the Security Council to consider in the first place. Even when the Council specifically requested “a full range of options for the possible role that the United Nations can play” in the case of Haiti,⁴² he declined to propose a peacekeeping option.⁴³ Instead, Guterres has been content to allow other states and

actors to take the lead on both political and military strategies, and the framing of the Secretariat as powerless appears to be a way to justify the Secretary-General’s reluctance to engage proactively on peace and security matters.

7. Conclusion

When the General Assembly requested this review in September 2024, it wanted the Secretary-General to provide recommendations on how to adapt the UN toolbox “to meet evolving needs, to allow for more agile, tailored responses to existing, emerging and future challenges”.⁴⁴ This is not what was delivered, despite nearly two years of effort. Instead, the Secretary-General put the onus back on member states, stating that “A deeper, more united political commitment and clear strategic choices by Member States are necessary for peace operations to deliver results” (para. 15).

The General Assembly specifically requested that the review take into account lessons learned from previous reforms. In response, the peace operations review report name-checked the earlier Brahimi report and referenced the four shifts called for

⁴¹ Russell, ‘Superpowers Are Discovering Their Limits, Says UN Chief’.

⁴² United Nations Security Council, *Letter Dated 29 November 2024 from the President of the Security Council Addressed to the Secretary-General*.

⁴³ Forti, ‘Can a UN Logistics Package Give the Kenyan-Led Police Mission in Haiti a Much-Needed Boost?’.

⁴⁴ United Nations General Assembly, ‘Resolution 79/1. Pact for the Future’.

in the HIPPO report, but twisted the meaning and intention behind those shifts. The HIPPO used those shifts to highlight areas of consistent shortcomings in mission design and mandate implementation. Instead of acknowledging the persistence of these shortcomings, the peace operations review report misappropriates the language of the HIPPO recommendations to describe existing practice in order to reinforce the narrative that there are no issues with the current Secretariat approach to peace operations.

The report does call for a few new approaches, but these seem to be half-hearted afterthoughts. The concept of networked peace operations – which the Secretary-General had previously raised in the context of *An Agenda for Peace* and workstream 3 of the UN80 report – is featured, but more as a theoretical concept rather than as an approach the Secretariat is prepared to implement, whether in the case of a new mission or as part of mission transitions. And there are a few additional internal review processes mentioned, including the modalities for ensuring transparent reporting of results under networked operations (para. 40 (a)), of peacekeeping mission structures (para. 44 (b)), potential obstacles that prevent heads of mission from making mission adaptations more flexibly (para. 44 (c)), and key capabilities for military and police (para. 62 (a)). But there are no timeframes presented for any of these. More broadly, the fact that

the report contains no follow-up mechanism only drives home the point that this is not a serious change initiative.

The report also consistently identifies divisions within the Security Council as an obstacle, but presents no practical options for getting around this deadlock. Member states must rediscover how the General Assembly can provide a venue through which member states can mandate peace operations when the Security Council is unable to, as was the case during the Cold War. Here, the Peacebuilding Commission can play an important role – within its existing mandate – to advise the General Assembly on developing tailored solutions, potentially through a peace operation, with the deployment of capacities to support national prevention and peacebuilding strategies at the request of a member state.

Ultimately, it is in the interest of all member states for the UN peace and security toolkit to be available to prevent, defuse, and resolve conflict, and this review can still help realign and reposition UN peace operations accordingly. It is not too late for member states to salvage the review process; they simply need to treat the peace operations review report not as the end of the process, but the beginning of a new phase. As DPPA and DPO are unwilling and unable to engage in the honest self-reflection necessary to acknowledge shortcomings in existing sys-

tems, structures, and approaches, an external review may be necessary to help develop the shared understanding of the limits, opportunities, strengths, and weaknesses required to help adapt peace operations to a new political and security context.

Member states must press the next Secretary-General to articulate a clear vision for the UN role in the maintenance of international peace and security. The Secretary-General, in turn, must make sure that the manner in which this vision is translated into practice reflects not just the depth of expertise and experience available within the Secretariat and the broader UN system, but also an understanding of the problems with existing systems, structures, and approaches. Key to a new vision should be an acknowledgement that the three principles of impartiality, consent of the parties, and non-use of force except in self-defence are relevant to all UN peace and security efforts, and not just peacekeeping operations. These need to be recognized as necessary but not sufficient conditions for peace operations to

effectively support political solutions to conflict. Indeed, political solutions and strategies need to sit at the heart of everything UN peace operations do. The tensions inherent between current approaches – particularly the primacy of the military, alignment with host state authorities, and permissive use of force against non-state armed groups – and the three principles need to be confronted, and new approaches devised. Flexible, tailored approaches based on the requirements of the context, the capacities and expertise of partners, and the needs and expectations of the parties to the conflict should drive mission design, rather than the desires and interests of the Secretariat lead departments.

As the world enters a period of greater contestation and unprecedented violence, the UN must not lose this opportunity, when a new Secretary-General is about to take office, to reach a shared understanding of how UN peace operations can be adapted to better meet the threats and challenges of a changing global order.

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