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What next for UN peace operations?

Global crisis management in a post-Covid19 world

Gowan, Richard; Andersen, Louise Riis

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Global crisis management in a post-COVID19 world **WHAT NEXT FOR UN PEACE OPERATIONS?'**

With a global recession looming due to COVID-19, the large blue-helmet UN missions will be harder to sustain, both financially and politically. So the UN is learning to “think small”.

In the years to come, there will be little appetite for new large-scale peace operations. The UN's existing budget crisis seems bound to deepen and, while even the largest UN missions today cost little more than \$1 billion – cheap by comparison with NATO-led operations of a similar size – member states are likely to cut back UN expenditure even further.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Secretariat should work with member states to improve the UN's mechanisms for deploying bespoke, case-specific peace operations and SPMs at short notice.
- Member states should stand ready to deploy small numbers of military and police personnel to serve in more flexible forms of UN operations and to offer specialized expertise and training as requested.
- Member states should pay their respective share of the UN peacekeeping budget on time and increase their voluntary contributions.

At the same time, growing divisions between the permanent members of the Security Council – above all, between China, Russia and the US – makes it unlikely that they will agree on any new large-scale peace operations. Despite successfully stabilizing many weak countries, UN forces have struggled in countries such as South Sudan and Mali, and proposals for similar peacekeeping missions in high-profile conflicts, including Syria, Ukraine and Yemen, have gone nowhere.

This does not mean that the UN will shutter ongoing peace operations overnight and start closing down its flagship enterprise. But as the fallout from COVID-19 threatens to create fresh economic and political instability worldwide, UN officials must think creatively about how to address new crises, with an inevitable emphasis on smaller and less costly options.

“ Smaller missions may prove politically as well as financially more feasible in future. ”

Compromise and flexibility

As we have already seen, smaller missions may prove politically as well as financially more feasible in future. Despite great-power rivalry, council members have compromised on limited deployments, ranging from chemical weapons experts in Syria to local ceasefire monitors in Yemen.

Rather than take on a broad array of security, political and governance tasks, future UN missions could have limited but varied roles, ranging from managing local ceasefires to helping medics handle disease outbreaks, on a case-by-case basis. UN planners and mission managers will need to be flexible in responding to a diverse set of demands across different crises.

Working with others

This flexibility will require close cooperation with other multilateral organizations in order to bring their limited resources together. The UN has long been undertaking “partnership peacekeeping” and political coordination with the African Union, the EU and others. As UN

resources become even scarcer, such relationships may become even more crucial. Based on the UN’s comparative advantages in key areas such as peace talks and mediation and the technical dimensions of running operations, the UN can act as a “hub” for other international players to pool their efforts.

A spectrum of mission types

To some extent, the UN has already pivoted towards adapting to these new realities. Member states have pressed to keep peacekeeping costs down since the 2008 financial crisis. Some UN officials have also expressed a concern that the burden of running big blue-helmet missions is a distraction from the political aspects of peacemaking. The 2015 High Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations argued that the UN should run a “spectrum” of missions of all shapes and sizes.

In addition to its peacekeeping operations, the organization has run a suite of largely civilian Special Political Missions (SPMs) – for example, those in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya – responsible for tasks including mediation and advising governments on administrative and human rights issues. The UN is now preparing for an SPM in Sudan to support the country’s transition to civilian rule.

The line between SPMs and peacekeeping operations can sometimes be blurred. In recent years the UN has deployed non-military personnel to monitor both the disarmament of rebels in Colombia and military disengagement in the Yemeni Port of Hodeida, a vital hub for humanitarian aid. In talks on the new Sudanese mission, British and German diplomats tabled proposals in the Security Council for the SPM to oversee a small military and police force to protect civilians as existing peacekeepers withdraw. In addition to SPMs, the UN can also deploy a variety of technical support missions (see Box 1).

“ The COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath present an opportunity for the UN to experiment with diverse forms of crisis management. ”

The UN as a hub of conflict expertise

Having already demonstrated its ability to deploy a wide range of smaller missions as required, the UN also has the potential to act as a “hub” for crisis management. This is needed in order to draw in other multilateral actors, which may have greater ability than the UN to engage in certain future crises but lack the UN’s range of skills and experience. While regional organizations such as the AU and the EU have increasingly become engaged in crisis management and peacemaking, the UN continues to have significant capabilities that regional counterparts may lack, including:

■ **Strong mediation and civilian political capacities.**

The UN is still able to put together mediation teams of experts to support envoys and manage peace processes faster and more efficiently than most multilateral actors.

■ **Solid logistical and administration structures.**

Although the UN’s civilian logistics may not rival the military capabilities of the U.S. or NATO, its experience of back-stopping peace operations means that it has more robust systems for supporting operations in remote and challenging locations.

■ **Specialist technical expertise.**

As the variety of recent UN missions shows, the UN is also able to draw on an unusual variety of expertise on topics ranging from WMD to human rights as necessary, allowing the organization to pull together unique mixes of specialists.

Deepening intra-UN cooperation and pooling funds

Secretary-General António Guterres has encouraged the UN secretariat to think about crisis management holistically, partly by merging the departments handling peace operations, political affairs and peacebuilding. UN funds and agencies have responded to COVID-19 by putting aside institutional differences to pool funds and align their programming. Peacemakers, peacebuilders and peacekeepers will need to do the same. In future crises, the UN may not deploy large numbers of troops on the ground; however, by combining its political and technical expertise better, it may be able to connect with and support other actors. This will be especially important in those cases where a divided Security Council is not willing to intervene directly.

BOX 1. TECHNICAL SUPPORT MISSIONS

WMD management.

The UN and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) has partially dismantled the Syrian chemical weapons arsenal.

Logistical and administrative support.

The UN has provided logistical and administrative support to the African Union Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and directed UN forces in Mali to offer logistical support to a regional counter-terrorism effort (the G5 Sahel Force).

Human Rights and Rule of Law support.

The UN is supporting the G5 Sahel Force by deploying advisers to offer guidance on G5 contingents’ compliance with human rights standards. UN officials in New York also say that they see opportunities to deploy expert teams to work alongside countries that request assistance.

The role of member states

The UN's potential shift to more flexible forms of crisis management has important implications for the sorts of support it will need from governments. In operational terms the organization will probably need fewer infantry battalions, but require more military and civilian experts to serve in SPMs and other smaller missions.

Financially, UN Member States should ensure that key elements of the UN crisis management system remain properly funded during the COVID-19 recession. Much of the organization's mediation and political work is financed through voluntary contributions by governments rather than regular UN budget lines. If this financing disappears, the UN's overall ability to mount flexible missions and act as a hub for broader crisis management efforts will shrink.

Governments should also not overestimate the potential of smaller UN missions to replace larger blue-helmet forces. In some cases, only sizeable operations will have an impact. Nonetheless, the COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath present an opportunity for the UN to experiment with diverse forms of crisis management.

Richard Gowan, UN Director, International Crisis Group (rgowan@crisisgroup.org) (writing in a personal capacity) & **Louise Riis Andersen, Senior Researcher, DIIS** (lan@diis.dk)

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