

BACKGROUND PAPER

Sustainable Political Solutions for Successful Peace Operations

ABOUT THE EVENT

The Challenges Annual Forum 2024 (#CAF24Berlin) will gather partners and key stakeholders to discuss how to strengthen international peace and security and lay the foundation for the next generation of peace operations. The event is co-hosted by the Challenges Forum's German partner Center for International Peace Operations (ZIF), in Berlin on 3-4 December.

Challenges Forum is a global partnership that uses its convening power to generate innovative ideas and promote results for more effective peace operations.

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Peace operations frequently struggle to align their activities with sustainable political strategies. There is a need to better integrate political considerations into the design and implementation of peace operations. This will ensure more effective long-term successes and durable peace in mission theatres.

However, peace operations alone cannot achieve the desired strategic objectives. Accountability should to a higher degree be shared between the Security Council, member states, host countries and peace operations.

This paper highlights the barriers of achieving sustainable political solutions and proposes a strategy that facilitates collaboration among actors at the international, national and sub-national levels.

With the Pact for the Future, Member States recently reaffirmed their strong commitment to peace operations as a critical tool in international crisis management. With their multinational composition and versatile and well-developed toolbox, UN peace operations are indeed uniquely positioned to navigate the challenges of modern conflict resolution.

However, over the past two decades, many UN interventions have prioritised short-term stabilisation wins and protection of civilians over lasting political solutions.¹ Moreover, the changing nature of conflict and the inability of Member States – and peace operations – to deal with intractable local and/or regional conflicts have led to a crisis of confidence and pushback by many host populations.²

A number of independent studies and policy documents³ have highlighted that for peace operations to be effective and responsive, they need to prioritise political strategies and solutions.⁴ These strategies should aim to address protracted conflicts, failed peace agreements and recurring instability.⁵

Without political engagement, peace operations risk becoming reactive and ineffective, leading to fragile post-conflict environments where the root causes of violence remain unresolved, and peacebuilding cannot thrive.

“Member States recently reaffirmed their strong commitment to peace operations as a critical tool in international crisis management.”

Three levels of barriers: International, National and Sub-national

There are several known barriers to aligning peace operations with sustainable political solutions.

1. International Level: Geopolitics, Diverging Agendas and Third-Party Interference

While UN reforms have shown promise over the last decade, a primary challenge remains generating the political will to act. In the New Agenda for Peace, the Secretary-General called for renewed investment in diplomacy, prevention and sustainable peace – with the UN in a leading political role – and emphasised that responding to violence must place a political strategy at its core.

“Without the consent, commitment and cooperation of host governments, peace operations will remain ineffective.”

For peace operations, the ability to use their leverage effectively in support of political processes depends on the sustained backing of a united Security Council.⁶ The current geopolitical competition and diverging agendas among Member States often make it difficult to agree on a vision for a desired end state and on clear priorities. As a result, fragmented strategies undermine coherent efforts toward sustainable peace.⁷ For example, despite the deteriorating situation in Haiti and a request from the Haitian government, the Security Council has not been able to agree on authorising a UN peacekeeping mission in the country. Instead, a Multi-national Security Support Mission (MSS), consisting mainly of Kenyan police, has been mandated to stabilise the country.

The need for strategic coherence grows further when regional organisations or bilateral actor provide different pieces of the multilateral response. The Peace Research Institute in Oslo reports a trend towards growing internationalisation of civil conflicts, with 23 out of 59 state-based conflicts in 2023 involving one or more third-party governments.⁸ With too many competing voices and without a strong political strategy, UN peace operations risk being marginalised.

2. National Level: Host-State Consent and Mission Strategies

Peace operations are increasingly confronted with complex threats arising from rapidly changing and fluid conflict situations and have continuously expanded their portfolio in response to this complexity. As a result, they have become “distracted or disconnected”⁹ from their core political task, especially the focus on stabilisation and protection tasks. This has led to insufficient commitment from both peace operations and host governments to prioritise long-term political solutions over short-term stability and “technical” gains.

Without the consent, commitment and cooperation of host governments, peace operations will remain ineffective. To foster cooperation, peace operations must find a balance between the priorities set by the Security Council reflected in a mission’s mandate, and the national interests of the host government and the populations they are created to serve.¹⁰

A clear political strategy is essential to maintain this balance. Interference by external actors with competing regional or geopolitical interests disrupt peace processes and complicate the alignment of peace operations with political solutions, which makes it difficult to find consensus among conflicting parties.

For example, the unconstitutional changes of government in Mali and Sudan resulted in strained relations and ultimately a request for the peace operations to leave at short notice.¹¹ Additionally, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Iraq, host governments have called for accelerated transition processes, and in Somalia, the special political mission was recently re-named as the UN Transitional Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNTMIS), to reflect the two-year withdrawal process that will begin in January 2025.

3. *Sub-national Level: Root Causes, Complexity of Conflict at the Local Level and Local Engagement*

A particular challenge is understanding how political processes unfold at local levels and change over time and how peace operations themselves may impact conflict dynamics through their actions. For any efforts to be sustainable, peace operations need to address root causes. Ignoring root causes results in superficial peace efforts that only address symptoms, leaving grievances unresolved and leading to fragile ceasefires and recurring violence.

A significant barrier to achieving sustainable outcomes is the limited involvement of local stakeholders, including women, in decision-making.¹² Excluding those directly affected by conflict risks imposing external solutions that neglect local dynamics. This ultimately undermines the legitimacy and weakens long-term prospects for peace.

Ways forward

Strategic direction from the UN Security Council is crucial for the success of peace operations. The Security Council and UN Headquarters need to ensure the adoption of clear and realistic strategic goals as well as provide sustained political support for operations with the active involvement of concerned troop-, police- and resource-contributing Member States.

Creating a unified mandate through consultation with regional stakeholders can align diverse agendas and reduce conflicting interests. Such mandates should focus on sustainable political solutions and set clear objectives for peace operations, ensuring all actors work toward shared strategic goals.

To avoid fragmentation, international organisations should adopt decision-making structures that include a broader range of voices, especially from regional actors and populations in conflict-affected countries. This inclusive approach would promote shared responsibility and enhance the likelihood of coherent, multilateral peace strategies.

To ensure continued collaboration and prevent the withdrawal of host nation consent, a closer cooperation is needed with counterparts at the national and local level throughout the mission's life cycle. This involves integrating local perspectives, particularly from marginalised groups, addressing root causes of conflict and fostering inclusive political dialogue. This inclusive approach builds trust, empowers stakeholders and enhances the legitimacy of peace operations, ensuring that solutions truly resonate with those most affected by conflict.

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Guiding questions

- How can the Security Council's revived support for peace operations create opportunities for clear and realistic mandates, that can better adapt to evolving fragile political contexts throughout their life cycle?
- How can we work with host countries, to build trust and foster commitment, particularly during periods of varying levels of cooperation and support?
- How can peace operations more effectively collaborate with key stakeholders – such as the UN Security Council, host nations, neighbouring countries, regional organisations, local communities and underrepresented groups – to address shared security challenges?

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