

THE CHANGING CHARACTER OF PEACEKEEPING

New Zealand Defence Assessment, 13 September 2018



Key points

- Peacekeeping is one of the primary tools available to the United Nations (UN) to support countries in establishing the conditions for peace.
- Missions are increasingly conducted in highly volatile environments where there is no peace to keep. In some areas where conflict is ongoing, the blue helmet no longer offers natural protection to peacekeepers.
- Peacekeeping missions are facing significant challenges, with key capability shortages, resource gaps, non-cooperative host governments, and issues with the training and performance of deployed personnel.
- The UN is working to respond to findings that deaths of peacekeepers resulting from malicious acts have continued to increase since 2011. Any fast reduction in risk on the ground will be difficult to achieve.
- New Zealand could support the UN in improving peacekeeping conditions and mission effectiveness through specialised training and continued niche contributions to missions.

Peacekeeping missions are evolving

This year marks the 70th anniversary of UN peacekeeping. Since 1948, the UN has undertaken 71 missions and provided essential security and support to millions of vulnerable people affected by armed conflict. In the last decade alone, it has helped to disarm more than 500,000 ex-combatants. Key strengths of peacekeeping missions include the legitimacy derived from the international character of UN Security Council-authorisations and the wide range of troop contributing countries.

2. When peacekeeping was first established, missions were composed of unarmed military observers and lightly armed troops, and their roles were primarily limited to monitoring, reporting, and confidence-building. The missions were developed to deal with inter-state conflict, and comprised mostly of military personnel. The first established peacekeeping operation, the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) in the Middle East, exemplified this type of traditional operation. The mission continues today and New Zealand has contributed to it for 64 years.

Riskier peacekeeping environments

3. Over the past 70 years the character of UN Peacekeeping missions has evolved.¹ Modern UN peacekeeping missions are complex and risky. There are real challenges associated with the practicalities of peacekeeping, both at a strategic level for the UN— as it aims to maintain peace in places where a strong political will for peace is lacking—and at the ground-level for the peacekeeping contributing countries, in terms of personnel safety and effectiveness.

¹ A significant milestone in the evolution of the UN's approach to addressing security and humanitarian crises was the introduction of the principle the "responsibility to protect". Its introduction followed the atrocities in the 1990s in the Balkans and Rwanda. Although this principle does not exclusively relate to peacekeeping, it represented a shift in the UN's approach to collective security by recognising the responsibility of UN member states to protect populations when governments fail to do so themselves.

4. As UN Peacekeeping missions now deploy into volatile and sometimes hostile environments, mandates have broadened to include diverse and complex tasks, such as human rights monitoring, institution building, disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of former combatants, and assistance in restoring rule of law. Missions are no longer uniquely composed of military personnel. Peacekeepers are now humanitarian workers, police officers, administrators, economists, and legal experts.

5. UN mandates are now more robust in their approach to the use of force. Five of eight current missions, accounting for 68 per cent of peacekeepers, authorised under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, have “use all necessary means” mandates. In addition to allowing the use of force for self-defence, it allows the use of force to deter forceful attempts to disrupt the political process, protect civilians under imminent threat of physical attack, and/or assist the national authorities in maintain law and order. Four out of five of these Chapter VII missions are located in Africa, and New Zealand contributes to two of them—South Sudan and Mali.

6. The UN is currently facing some serious challenges managing the changing character of peacekeeping missions. Capability gaps, resource shortages, and the performance of deployed personnel are some of the key issues. Since about 2011, annual peacekeeper deaths as a result of malicious acts have increased, almost year-on-year, with UN data showing 61 peacekeepers were killed by malicious acts in 2017. Most of these deaths are the result of gun or IED attacks on peacekeepers from African states, on missions in Africa. This increase in deaths appears to be a new normal baseline.²

7. A December 2017 report commissioned by the UN Secretary-General, *Improving Security of United Nations Peacekeepers: We need to change the way we are doing business*, often referred to as the “Santos Cruz Report”, explores this increase in deaths resulting from malicious acts. The report concludes that a riskier operating environment for peacekeeping is the new normal, and that “the blue helmet and the United Nations flag no longer offer ‘natural’ protection”.

Responding to an increased threat environment

8. UN Secretary-General Guterres’s current Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) initiative calling for member states to jointly recommit to peacekeeping is a timely initiative to help change mind-sets and give the UN more urgency to take forward key recommendations from the Santos Cruz Report. The initiative notes the importance of the Secretary General’s Action Plan in addressing the rise in peacekeeper fatalities and the need to enhance safety and security.

9. As part of this enhanced agenda by the Secretary-General to address the concerns in the Santos Cruz Report, the April 2018 Action Plan on improving security of UN Peacekeepers sets out an ambitious range of mechanisms, separated into actions to be taken at both UN headquarters and field levels. The UN is aiming to take a more robust approach to mission security, but it is likely to take a long time for the full range of actions to be fully implemented.

10. Implementing the Action Plan will require the UN to work with peacekeeping contributing member states to draw on specific skills to best ensure that the range of actions in the plan are actually progressed. The plan requires increased training for contributing countries’ peacekeeping troops so that they are adequately prepared for the threat

² Two other substantial spikes in peacekeeper deaths have occurred since 1948: the first over 1960-62 during the Suez crisis and UN operations in the Congo; and the second over 1992-96 during UN deployments to Rwanda, Somalia, Cambodia and the Balkans. Both these spikes were followed by sharp decreases in fatalities as missions were withdrawn.

environment and supporting the UN in the complex task of implementing required security adjustments to mission footprints.

Implications and opportunities for New Zealand

11. The Secretary-General's enhanced agenda on peacekeeping will increase UN expectations of member states that contribute to UN peacekeeping. New Zealand's existing contributions in highly valued niche areas already support the Secretary-General's aims by helping in key leadership roles, supporting peacekeeping training and by contributing to mission intelligence capacity.

12. The effectiveness of peacekeeping has a strong correlation with the quality of training. More opportunities exist in the pre-deployment training space to better equip troops for complex threat environments. Leveraging New Zealand's upcoming presidency of the International Association of Peacekeeping Training Centres could provide increased influence in promoting change.

13. Any increased New Zealand involvement in UN peacekeeping missions in Africa will continue to be associated with a high level of risk in the coming years, as tasks in the Action Plan will take time to implement and have a meaningful impact on the ground.

Strategic Defence policy considerations

14. At the high level, contributing to peacekeeping-related activities supports the goals outlined in the *Strategic Defence Policy Statement 2018*, which notes that the international rules-based order is under pressure. The goals of the Secretary-General's enhanced agenda are consistent with the interests of the Canada-Australia-New Zealand group, including the women, peace and security agenda, protection of civilians and healthcare workers, the need for enhanced safety and security of peacekeepers, and the need for cultural, as well as institutional, change within the UN.

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