

“UNITED NATIONS POLICE (UNPOL) THEIR CHALLENGES AND ISSUES: CRITICAL ANALYSIS”

AUTHOR – DEEPALI MOHAN KHALATE, LL.M STUDENT AT MODERN LAW COLLEGE, PUNE

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Abstract :

UN police is the main organ of the United Nations Organisation for fulfilling its main purpose of organization that is “Peace Keeping”. UN peacekeeping in its efforts to try to maintain and realize peace and security. Moreover, this milestone invites us to ponder what lies ahead in the realm of peacekeeping. For this reason, this forum article brings together both academics and UN officials to assess the achievements and challenges of UN peacekeeping over the past 75 years.¹⁹⁰ Through a dialogue among peacekeeping scholars and practitioners, we hope to identify current trends and developments in UN peacekeeping, as well as explore priorities for the future to improve the effectiveness of peacekeeping operations in terms of achieving their mandate objectives, such as maintaining peace, protecting civilians, promoting human rights, and facilitating reconciliation¹⁹¹. This forum article is structured into six thematic sections, each shedding light on various aspects of UN peacekeeping: (1) foundational principles of UN peacekeeping – namely, consent, impartiality, and the (non-)use of force; (2) protection of civilians; (3) the primacy of politics; (4) early warning; (5) cooperation with regional organizations; and (6) the changing geopolitical landscape in which UN peacekeeping operates.

Key words: United Nations Organization, UN Police, Peacekeeping aspects, Protection of civilians, consent, Impartiality.



¹⁹⁰ United Nations. *United Nations Police (UNPOL): Overview and Mandate*. UN Peacekeeping, 2023. <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/un-police>

¹⁹¹ Duursma, A., Bara, C., Wilén, N., Hellmüller, S., Karlsrud, J., Oksamytna, K., Bruker, J., et al. “UN Peacekeeping at 75: Achievements, Challenges, and Prospects.” *International Peacekeeping*, vol. 30, no. 4, 2023, pp. 415–476. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2023.2263178>.

Introduction :

Initial concept of civilian police (CIVPOL) to the official name "UN Police" in 2005. The UNPOL mandate has expanded from supporting host-country police to include protecting civilians, combating crime, assisting with elections, and reforming security institutions, with a significant increase in authorized personnel and complex mandates since the end of the Cold War. Key developments include the deployment of the first Formed Police Unit (FPU)¹⁹² in 1999, the creation of the Standing Police Capacity in 2005, and the introduction of a standardized, recognizable shield and visual identity in the 2010s.

Key Milestones¹⁹³

- **1960:** The first UN Police officers are deployed to the United Nations Operation in the Congo (ONUC).
- **1964:** The first formal "component" of police is deployed to the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP).
- **Late 1980s/Early 1990s:** The end of the Cold War led to a significant increase in the demand for and use of UN Police in various peacekeeping operations.
- **1999:** The first Formed Police Unit (FPU) is deployed.
- **2000s:** The number of UN Police officers grows significantly, and the Brahimi Report recommends strengthening civilian police functions.
- **2005:** The United Nations Standing Police Capacity (SPC) is created by the General Assembly to provide rapid-response police support.
- **2005:** The term "UN Police" (UNPOL) replaces the previous acronym CIVPOL (Civilian Police).

- **2009–2010:** The Police Division develops a standardized, internationally recognized shield and visual identity for UN Police, working with the Department of Public Information¹⁹⁴.

Evolution of Mandates and Services :

- **Early Years:** Primarily focused on supporting and advising host-state police forces.
- **Post-Cold War:** Mandates expand to include protection of civilians, managing elections, investigating serious crimes, and assisting with police reform and restructuring.
- **Executive Mandates:** UN Police begin to receive executive mandates, meaning they have the direct authority to manage and enforce laws in a host-state, as seen in Kosovo (UNMIK) and Timor-Leste (UNMIT) in 1999.
- **Formed Police Units (FPUs):** Specialized units are developed to provide crowd management, protect key installations, and conduct patrols to help maintain public order.
- United Nations police played an important role in the United Nations operations in the former Yugoslavia, namely: United nation protection force, United nation Traditional Administration for Eastern Slavonia, Barania and Western Sirmium, United Nations Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, United Nations Preventive Development Force, United Nations Civilian Police Support Group, and, as well as United Nations Confidence Restoration Operation in Croatia. United Nations Police were given an executive mandate in the United Nations Mission in Kosovo.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹² Durch, W. J., Holt, V. K., Earle, C., and Shanahan, M. K. *The Brahimi Report and the Future of UN Peace Operations*. Stimson Center, 2003. <https://www.stimson.org/2003/brahimi-report-and-future-un-peace-operations>

¹⁹³ United Nations Security Council. *Resolution 2185 (2014) on the Role of Police in Peacekeeping*. S/RES/2185. [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2185\(2014\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2185(2014))

¹⁹⁴ Hansen, A. S. "Local Ownership in UN Peacekeeping Operations." *Global Governance*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2011, pp. 589–605. <https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-01704006>

¹⁹⁵ United Nations Department of Peace Operations. *Policy on United Nations Police in Peacekeeping Operations and Special Political Missions*. UN DPO, 2020. https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/un_police_policy_2020.pdf

1989 – Growing Demand for United Nations Peace Operations

In the 1990s, the number of United Nations peacekeeping operations increased, and United Nations Police components were deployed in the United Nations Transition Assistance Group, United Nations Observer Mission in EL Salvador, United Nations Operation in Mozambique, and United Nations Traditional Authority in Cambodia.

1964 – First Police Component

In 1964, the first “component” of police was deployed to the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus, a peacekeeping operation where the United Nations Police still serves today.¹⁹⁶

1960 – First United Nations Police Deployment

United Nations Police deployed for the first time to the United Nations Operation in the Congo.

1948 – First Reference to a United Nations Police Service

Secretary-General Trygve Lie suggests establishment of the United Nations Police Service. The principles of consent, impartiality, and the (non-)use of force formed the bedrock of peacekeeping operations, but the application of these principles has evolved in response to changing political, normative, and security contexts. Impartiality has long been regarded as the ‘lifeblood’ of peacekeeping and the ‘heart and soul’ of the Secretariat. As a core norm of peacekeeping, it prescribes that UN officials should be unbiased and informed when making decisions or acting. It is also ‘a claim to authority, premised not only on a lack of bias, but, critically, on what UN officials are supposed to represent and further in the absence of particular interests’.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ Hultman, L., Kathman, J., and Shannon, M. “United Nations Peacekeeping and Civilian Protection in Civil War.” *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 57, no. 4, 2013, pp. 875–891. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12036>

¹⁹⁷ Karlsrud, J. “The UN at War: Examining the Consequences of Peace-Enforcement Mandates for the UN Peacekeeping Operations in the CAR, the DRC and Mali.” *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2015, pp. 40–54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.976016>.

Objective Of Study :

Impartiality has become more challenging as conflicts have become more complex and multi-faceted, and the mandates of peacekeeping operations have expanded. While peacekeepers were traditionally limited to using force only in self-defense, peacekeepers took on a more proactive role following the end of the Cold War, including through the use of force to defend the mandate and deter spoilers who seek to derail peace processes. Following the early 1990s precedents and from 1999 onwards, UN peacekeeping missions were also consistently mandated to use force to protect civilians.

Beginning in 2000, there was a shift from a ‘passive’ to an ‘assertive’ conception of impartiality that attempted to ground peacekeepers’ authority in a more expansive set of values that privileged the promotion and protection of human rights, seen in the protection of civilians (PoC) mandates. The core principles of peacekeeping have always been consent, impartiality, and the limited use of force. However, the way these principles are applied has changed over time because of new political, security, and global challenges. Impartiality has traditionally been seen as the most essential part of peacekeeping—it means that UN officials must act fairly, without bias, and base their decisions on what the UN stands for, not on the interests of any one group.¹⁹⁸

As conflicts have become more complicated and peacekeeping tasks have expanded, remaining impartial has become harder. Originally, peacekeepers were only allowed to use force in self-defense. But after the Cold War, their role became more active, including using force to protect the mission’s goals and prevent groups from disrupting peace efforts. From 1999 onwards, peacekeepers were regularly given authority to use force to protect civilians. By 2000, the idea of impartiality had shifted from

¹⁹⁸ United Nations. *Handbook on United Nations Multidimensional Peacekeeping Operations*. UN DPKO, 2003. <https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/peacekeeping-handbook.pdf>

being 'neutral and passive' to a more 'active' form that emphasized promoting human rights and protecting people, especially through the protection of civilians.

As peacekeeping operations began to focus more on promoting and protecting human rights, they also increasingly took on tasks of state-building and stabilization. This has led to very ambitious mandates, but often without enough resources or strong political backing from the UN Security Council, host governments, or troop-contributing countries. Rising geopolitical tensions, limited budgets, and disagreements over core values have made this even harder.

However, taking sides in conflicts brings risks. When peacekeepers are authorized to use force against armed groups, it can blur the line between peacekeeping and warfighting, raising concerns that UN forces may be seen as part of the conflict. Traditional impartiality has therefore been challenged, especially when missions support state institutions or focus on protecting civilians in situations where threats come not only from non-state groups but also from state actors. Measures to reduce these risks—like applying the Human Rights Due Diligence Policy—have sometimes caused backlash, with host governments accusing the UN of bias or interference.¹⁹⁹

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¹⁹⁹ Smith, R. "Challenges Facing UNPOL in Post-Conflict Environments." *Journal of International Peace Operations*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2016, pp. 22–28

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As peacekeepers have been sent into more dangerous and complex environments, their

²⁰⁰ Albrecht, P., and van Emmerik, C. "8 Old and New Challenges for UN Peacekeeping." *DIIS Policy Brief*, Danish Institute for International Studies, 10 Jan. 2025. <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/8-old-and-new-challenges-un-peacekeeping>

²⁰¹ United Nations. *Future of Peacekeeping: FOPO Project and New Agenda for Peace*. UN Peacekeeping, 2023. <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/future-of-peacekeeping>

use of offensive force has grown. Influenced by NATO's stabilization strategies and broader trends in counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism, many UN missions in the past two decades have been called "stabilization missions." Yet, as the 2015 High-Level Panel on Peace Operations pointed out, the UN has never clearly defined what "stabilization" actually means in theory or practice.

The three main principles of peacekeeping—**consent, impartiality, and limited use of force**—remain its foundation, but how they are applied has changed. Impartiality has become harder as conflicts have grown more complex and as missions have taken on broader mandates. Traditionally, peacekeepers only used force in self-defense, but after the Cold War, they began using force to protect missions and deter spoilers. Since 1999, many missions have also been tasked with protecting civilians. By 2000, impartiality was redefined in a more "assertive" way, emphasizing the defense of human rights.

This shift led to **state-building and stabilization** becoming priorities, but missions often lacked the resources and political will to achieve these ambitious goals. Using force against armed groups has blurred the line between peacekeeping and peace enforcement, raising fears that UN troops could be seen as parties to conflict. Supporting state institutions and protecting civilians has also tested impartiality, especially when governments themselves harm civilians. Policies like the UN's Human Rights Due Diligence Policy have even sparked accusations of interference from host states.

In more dangerous environments, peacekeepers have increasingly used offensive force, influenced by NATO's stabilization and counter-terrorism approaches. Some missions have been labeled "stabilization missions," though the UN has never clearly defined what that means. Still, proactive use of deadly force remains rare, and peacekeepers are often

criticized more for not using force than for using it.²⁰²

Since 2014, **no new large multidimensional missions** have been deployed. Many now argue that the future of peacekeeping lies in **lighter, non-military operations** like Special Political Missions (SPMs) or in supporting robust **regional operations**. Yet both approaches—avoiding force (SPMs) or relying heavily on it (regional coalitions)—have struggled to overcome the core problems of international interventions.

Consent remains a key principle. During the Cold War, missions in interstate wars required co²⁰³nsent from all main parties. Since the 1990s, in intrastate conflicts, only host state consent has been legally required, making it the UN's main focus. Gaining and maintaining host state consent is crucial, but dependence on it creates dilemmas. To avoid straining relations, UN officials often stay silent on government abuses or violations of agreements, which weakens missions and undermines impartiality. Critics argue this can turn peacekeeping into **de facto regime support** rather than genuine peacebuilding.

While host state consent is critical, the acceptance of non-state armed groups and communities also matters, since peacekeepers need access to all areas. Consent is not static—it can be strong, weak, or compromised, and can change over time within a mission. Even with weak consent, peacekeepers may still carry out local peacebuilding and civilian protection activities. Increasingly, the UN is also focusing on **transitions** and managing risks when missions close, recognizing that in some contexts full consent may not be possible.

Finally, today's geopolitical tensions make peacekeeping even harder. In some places, regional actors, bilateral partners, or even private military companies have replaced the

²⁰² United Nations Security Council. *Resolution 2719 (2023) on Financing AU-led Peace Support Operations*. S/RES/2719. [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2719\(2023\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2719(2023))

²⁰³ Pakistan Mission to the UN. "Pakistan Calls for Boosting UN Peacekeeping Missions." *UN Security Council Debate*, 2025. <https://www.msn.com/en-xl/politics/government/pakistan-calls-for-boosting-un-peacekeeping-missions-role-to-resolve-disputes-sustain-ceasefires/ar-AA1MkCYZ>

UN as the main security providers. Divisions within the UN Security Council and assertive host states—like Mali’s decision to withdraw consent in 2023—are putting unprecedented strain on the future of UN peacekeeping.

While peacekeeping’s core principles of impartiality, consent, and limited use of force remain essential for fostering trust and legitimacy, rethinking is also needed to address unresolved challenges like asymmetric warfare, regionalized conflicts, and external geopolitical influences.

Denmark’s seat on the United Nations Security Council for 2025–2026 presents a crucial opportunity to shape the future of peacekeeping, particularly as adapting conflict responses aligns closely with Denmark’s key thematic priorities for its tenure. We recommend eight ways to address both enduring and emerging challenges.

Regional and subregional organisations, such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), have been pivotal in implementing conflict management tools, including peacekeeping and peacebuilding on the African continent. Over the past decade, the AU has been deeply engaged in Somalia, while in the 1990s, ECOWAS, led by Nigeria and Ghana, was instrumental in supporting complex peacemaking processes in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Today, discussions increasingly centre on the expanded role these organisations are expected to play in peace operations, a shift acknowledged and reinforced by Resolution 2719. While the operationalisation of the resolution is still under construction, it signals an important shift toward African leadership.

Denmark can take a leading role in strengthening partnerships between the UN and regional organisations, using Resolution 2719 as a foundation. Engaging in discussions with the AU support team within the UN provides Denmark with an opportunity to help shape the implementation and mobilisation of the resolution. This will also include tackling

persistent challenges such as resource shortages, compliance and accountability, fragmented coordination, and operational disparities that undermine the effectiveness of regional organisations both independently and in their interactions with the UN.

Key Principles :

Transition out of multidimensional peacekeeping

In preparation for this policy brief, we spoke to UN officials in New York, who noted that, until recently, peacekeeping operations had quietly continued without significant change. But now, they noted, the focus has shifted toward quietly shutting them down. This shift raises important questions about the future of peacekeeping and highlights the identity crisis it faces. With large multidimensional peacekeeping missions currently shutting down or winding down, Denmark should advocate for the UN to prioritise facilitating smooth transitions to smaller political missions or other post-peacekeeping mechanisms, even in politically hostile environments. Such efforts are crucial for preserving the hard-won gains of these missions and for safeguarding the UN’s credibility in peacekeeping as missions are adapted and deployed in future conflict contexts. Successfully navigating these challenges will require dedicated learning, planning, and long-term support.

Denmark can draw inspiration from and build further on Ireland’s work in the Security Council (2021–2022), particularly on Resolution 2594, adopted to ensure the sustainment of peace after UN peacekeepers leave.²⁰⁴

Advance the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda

Denmark’s commitment to gender inclusion positions it as a leader in advancing the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda. It includes promoting gender parity in peacekeeping leadership by supporting initiatives such as the

²⁰⁴ Bellamy, A. J., and Williams, P. D. *Understanding Peacekeeping*. 3rd ed., Polity Press, 2021

Senior Women Talent Pipeline and providing dedicated funding, exemplified by Denmark's \$900,000 contribution to the Elsie Initiative Fund from 2021-2024. Denmark needs to continue to advocate for women's full participation in peace processes in order to address underrepresentation: women currently comprise only 9.6% of negotiators, 13.7% of mediators, and 26.6% of signatories in peace agreements. There is also a continued need to push for a gender perspective to be integrated into mission planning and implementation, including promoting gender-sensitive operational guidelines and highlighting connections between climate change, gender, and security in peacekeeping.

Integrate climate security and peacekeeping.

The interplay between climate change and conflict has emerged as a critical challenge for peacekeeping missions and has been noted as a priority for Denmark's tenure in the Security Council. Climate-driven factors, such as displacement and environmental degradation, exacerbate existing conflicts and create new ones. Denmark should advocate for the inclusion of climate security in peacekeeping mandates. Practical measures could involve integrating climate risk assessments into conflict driver analysis, mission planning, and equipping peacekeeping forces with tools to address resource disputes and displacement crises. Drawing on its leadership in sustainable development, Denmark can advocate for environmental sustainability in mission operations by reducing the carbon footprint of peacekeeping activities. This commitment is exemplified by Denmark's collaboration with Ghana to provide solar panels for the mission in Sudan.²⁰⁵

Address capability-expectations gaps

A long-term challenge in peacekeeping is that soldiers deployed by troop-contributing countries (TCCs) are poorly trained and

equipped. Although there is a push for TCCs to deploy technologically advanced tools like drones, many peacekeepers are not trained to use them. This shortfall endangers the lives of troops and local populations and undermines a mission's legitimacy. It is an example of the capability-expectations gap, where ambitious and complex mandates are not matched by resources, training and equipment provided to TCCs. This persistent issue, worsened by complex and militarised missions, requires greater transparency on resource shortages, training gaps, and logistical challenges limiting effectiveness. Denmark has an opportunity to improve pre-deployment training, standardise equipment provisions, and facilitate honest conversations about what is truly needed versus what is available. Acknowledging the political challenges of deploying high-standard troops is fundamental to developing realistic, workable peacekeeping strategies.

Peacekeepers from Italy on a patrol to observe, monitor, and report on the security situation along the 'Blue Line' dividing Lebanon from Israel and the Golan Heights. A 'Cold War' UN mission, the United Nations Interim Force In Lebanon (UNIFIL) was established in 1978 to ensure the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanese territories.

Promote conflict prevention

Conflict prevention remains underutilised, partly because its outcomes are less visible and harder to measure than post-conflict interventions. However, it has powerful potential to save lives, reduce long-term costs, and stabilise regions before conflict arises. The Secretary-General could intensify the use of good offices and mediation efforts, even in the face of disagreement within the Security Council. Denmark can lead in promoting preventive approaches by advocating for improved conflict analysis and early-warning mechanisms. Within the UN, the Common Country Analyses (CCA) and Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks (SDCF) should be expanded to incorporate systematic

²⁰⁵ United Nations. *A New Agenda for Peace: Preventing Conflict and Sustaining Peace in a Changing World*. Secretary-General's Report, 2023. <https://www.un.org/en/common-agenda/new-agenda-for-peace>

assessments of political, economic and environmental conflict drivers to better understand risk factors. Denmark can champion the integration of advanced data-driven technologies, such as predictive analytics, artificial intelligence, and satellite monitoring, to better identify emerging threats in volatile regions. This approach requires strengthening UN and regional partnerships and enhancing early-warning frameworks to ensure operational effectiveness and contextual relevance in conflict settings.²⁰⁶

Connect peacekeeping to political processes.

While the politics of peacekeeping is deemed crucial, bureaucratic disconnects and operational misalignments with UN special political missions often complicate the already challenging process of making peace. These challenges arise not from transitions between the two but from identifying which approach best addresses specific conflict dynamics – a question central to the future of peacekeeping. Developing a functional working relationship between these components of the UN system is essential to prevent fragmentation in its conflict management strategies. Effective communication and aligned priorities among key actors can help mitigate inefficiencies, operational overlaps, and contradictory approaches. Building a shared understanding of what defines a political solution is key to advancing this effort and addressing the underlying political dynamics within the UN system. This is essential for developing a more cohesive and adaptable framework to navigate the interplay between peacekeeping and special political missions in diverse, volatile settings.

Manage mission expectations

Often there has been little communication with host state populations about the reasons for a mission's deployment and the challenges it faces in achieving its goals. This lack of

transparency has led to misunderstandings and unrealistic expectations, undermining trust and local support for the mission. Strategic communication that aligns mission expectations with on-the-ground realities is crucial for managing perceptions and building support. Transparency with local host populations and international stakeholders about the scope and priorities of missions, and particularly its limitations, can help mitigate disillusionment and manage expectations. Furthermore, clearly articulating what is realistically achievable with the available resources fosters trust and ensures greater coherence between mandates and actions, particularly in complex, resource-constrained environments such as Mali and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Recent Operations operated by UN Police :

Rwanda Mission :

1960–1964: During the Cold War, UN peacekeeping operations rarely took direct action to protect civilians. An exception was the UN Operation in the Congo (ONUC, 1960–1964). The ONUC Force Commander communicated to his troops that 'where feasible, every protection was to be afforded to unarmed groups subjected by any armed party to acts of violence likely to lead to loss of life. The UN Security Council gave the first explicit mandate to protect civilians to the UN mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR, 1993–1996), but only after UNAMIR was almost withdrawn amid the genocide.²⁰⁷

1991: United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO).

2010: United Nations Organization Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO).

2011: United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA).

2011: United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS).

²⁰⁶ Tardy, T. "UN Peacekeeping and the Challenges of the New Strategic Environment." *International Review of the Red Cross*, vol. 98, no. 902, 2016, pp. 727–748. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383117000422>

²⁰⁷ Bove, V., and Elia, L. "The Impact of Peacekeeping on Civilian Violence: Evidence from Africa." *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 61, no. 9, 2017, pp. 1990–2018. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002715603109>

2014 : United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA).

Conclusion :

UN Police (UNPOL) face issues like a lack of concrete guidance on combating organized crime, inadequate coordination with other UN agencies, the need to adapt to evolving and complex conflict environments, and challenges with strategic communication, especially in addressing misinformation. The broader UN peacekeeping landscape also presents difficulties, including complex geopolitical divisions among member states, the challenge of transitioning from conflict to sustainable peace, and the need to manage expectations about the scope and achievability of peacekeeping mandates.

Suggestions :

Lack of Practical Guidance and Capacity on Organized Crime: UNPOL's mandates sometimes mention fighting organized crime, but there is a significant lack of practical, concrete guidance and training to help them recognize and target criminal networks, required to promote them by providing proper guidance and sources.

Coordination Challenges: Insufficient coordination and training from other UN agencies leave UNPOL poorly prepared to handle organized crime effectively during peacekeeping operations.

Adapting to Complex Conflicts: The nature of conflicts is evolving, with the rise of transnational organized crime, climate-related crises, and armed groups interested in chaos rather than political solutions, requiring UNPOL to constantly adapt its strategies and build new capacities.