Policy Brief

Peacekeeping works: The UN can help end civil wars

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Abstract

Despite some harsh criticisms of United Nations (UN) peace operations, research
demonstrates that many UN missions are successful, though evaluations depend on
how success is defined. Even UN missions that fail in one or more aspects provide a net
benefit to peace processes and help to save lives and alleviate human suffering. While an
understanding of the flaws and limitations of peace operations can help improve the
operations, some unfair criticism must be directly challenged. For instance, contrary
to critiques in a recent paper by Séverine Autesserre, the UN has helped end civil
wars, and it does not have a fixation on elections nor does it ignore the bottom-up
approach. Most UN multidimensional missions pursue multiple levels of engagement,
from local to national leaders. Elections are a key way to engage locals. With decades
of experience, the UN has many positive lessons to offer in making, keeping, and
building peace.

Keywords

Peacekeeping, elections, failure, peacebuilding, peace operations, success

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Some of the scholarship on United Nations (UN) peacekeeping offers constructive criticism that can help inform and improve these operations, while other articles engage in UN bashing without persuasive evidence—and with even less utility. An example of the latter is the recent and highly visible commentary, "The crisis of peacekeeping: Why the UN can't end wars" by Séverine Autesserre,[1] a political scientist at Barnard College, Columbia University. She does usefully point out the UN's perennial problem of resource shortages for ambitious mandates, but her paper's inaccurate assessment of peacekeeping's overall success rate, its preoccupation with "bottom-up" peacebuilding, and its assertion that the UN is "fixated" on elections, are all deeply flawed. The record needs to be corrected, balanced, and evidence-based.

With a subtitle of "Why the UN can't end wars," the paper starts off on the wrong foot. Many UN missions have, in fact, helped end wars in conflict-afflicted regions, though sometimes the process has taken many years. Examples range from West Africa (Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, and Sierra Leone) to Central America (Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador) to Asia (Cambodia and East Timor), and even the Middle East (Cyprus, Egypt/Israel, and Lebanon). Autesserre not only does a disservice to the peacekeepers who struggled in these missions (and some who sacrificed their lives for peace), but also sidelines much of the academic literature and all the missions aside from the one she studied in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo). Many of these missions completed their work long ago, while some are still in progress. Peace processes often take years, if not decades, and these sometimes seem to be failing in their struggle against inhumanity and aggression. Despite this, most UN missions eventually succeed.

Nonetheless, Autesserre writes harshly:

> UN peacekeepers too often fail to meet their most basic objectives. On many deployments, they end up watching helplessly while war rages. On others, they organize elections and declare victory, but without having fixed the root causes that brought them there—making it all too likely that fighting will flare again before long. [...] [E]ven the success stories tend to fall apart on closer inspection.[2]

We challenge both the accuracy and fairness of this judgement.

We agree, as Autesserre argues, that elections are rarely the *sine qua non* miracle tonic and they rarely resolve the entire conflict management and resolution puzzle—particularly if other peacebuilding, prevention, and root-cause elements are ignored. However, we challenge the view advanced in "The crisis of peacekeeping" that the UN is at odds with real needs because its "strategy favors top-down deals struck with elites and [it] fixates on elections."

1. Séverine Autesserre, "The crisis of peacekeeping: Why the UN can't end wars," *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 1, 2019, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-12-11/crisis-peacekeeping (accessed 10 March 2020).
2. Autesserre, "The crisis of peacekeeping," 107.

Does the UN really have a failed record? Is it really "fixated" on the electoral process, and does it mostly prefer top-down control at the expense of grassroots participation during peacekeeping missions, as is being claimed? Our assessment of the evidence is measurably different and far more optimistic. We believe that successful UN peacekeeping missions are often forgotten, while memories of unhappy struggles and controversies linger.

Academic studies that evaluate the success and failure of UN peacekeeping are wide-ranging. Each defines success differently. On the affirming side is Michael Gilligan and Ernest Sergenti's work that finds an 85% percent success rate in keeping a nascent post-conflict peace,[3] but no significant leverage in shortening wars.[4] By contrast, Jeremy Weinstein concludes that 75% of missions have failed in Africa, using the strict criterion that war has not reoccurred within 10 years of a conflict ending.[5] Between these two findings is the essential work by Michael Doyle and Nicholas Sambanis: a 50:50 result for the strictest criteria of their analysis.[6] A similar result was found in an early assessment by Duane Bratt, who admits to applying a "harsh" judgement requiring success on two or more of his four categories (i.e., mandate performance, facilitating conflict resolution, containing the conflict, and limitation of casualties). He found that complete success and moderate success together were only slightly more frequent than failure in the 39 missions studied (up to 1995).[7] A decade later, Darya Pushkina studied 17 peacekeeping operations employing armed forces, and used similar criteria (limiting violent conflict, reducing human suffering, preventing the spread of conflict, and promoting conflict resolution). She came up with similar results: 10 operations succeeded (fully or partially) while seven failed.[8]

Of course, criteria selection is a major factor in determining success. Whereas Doyle and Sambanis focus on the evidence of absence of violence two years after a peacekeeping mission has left, Paul Diehl and Daniel Druckman acknowledge in their 2010 book, *Evaluating Peace Operations*, that peace operation success should mean "more than stopping conflict, [and] includes improvement in the lives of the local population."[9] This is critical. UN peace operations can still be helpful,

3. Put a different way, they show that "if the monthly probability of returning to war without a UN intervention were 1%, our results show that that same probability with a UN intervention would be only 0.144%." Michael J. Gilligan and Ernest J. Sergenti, "Do UN interventions cause peace? Using matching to improve causal inference," *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 3, no. 2 (2008): 104.
4. Ibid., 111.
5. He found only one success in four examples. Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Autonomous Recovery and International Intervention in Comparative Perspective*, CGD Working Paper 57 (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2005), 33, https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/2731_file_WP57.pdf.
6. Michael W. Doyle and Nicholas Sambanis, *Making War and Building Peace: United Nations Peace Operations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 122.
7. Duane Bratt, "Assessing the success of UN peacekeeping operations," *International Peacekeeping* 3, no. 4 (1996): 64–81.
8. Darya Pushkina, "A recipe for success? Ingredients of a successful peacekeeping mission," *International Peacekeeping* 13, no. 2 (2006): 133–149.
9. Paul F. Diehl and Daniel Druckman, *Evaluating Peace Operations* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2010).

saving and improving lives, even when they do not end a war or are widely labelled as "failures."

Overall, the evidence strongly challenges Autesserre's excessively pessimistic viewpoint and reasoning. Doyle and Sambanis, for example, concluded that, while the UN "cannot manage force as rationally as is necessary," it is "well suited to mediate, mobilize, and manage legitimate international assistance."[10] They also found that multidimensional peace operations, which are now the most frequent and largest missions of the UN, are effective, and many smaller UN observer missions are also successful. Significantly, in conflicts *without* UN involvement, failure in peacebuilding (based on levels of hostility, violence, and democratization) happens three-quarters of the time.

The most comprehensive collection of UN peacekeeping studies to date is *The Oxford Handbook of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations*.[11] Autesserre does not refer to this extensive study in "The crisis of peacekeeping," but an appraisal of all the chapter conclusions of this edited volume, which covers 65 years of peace-keeping missions, suggests at least two-thirds of missions were successes or mixed successes, as assessed by the authors of this policy brief. A quarter could be labelled failures, but only half of *those* (only an eighth overall) are unambiguous failures. Even failed missions can still make some positive difference on the ground. For instance, the UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda—the mission led by Canadian general Roméo Dallaire—was able to save over 20,000 lives during the genocide, despite being reduced to fewer than 300 peacekeeping personnel on the ground.[12]

We readily admit that all UN missions are imperfect, but also confidently assert that a large majority have made significant inroads into improving lives and bringing conflicts closer to peaceful resolution, even if they were not fully successful. The missions are sometimes given overwhelming mandates and are placed in conflict zones in the face of impossible odds. In the end, it is not the peacekeepers that determine if peace will prevail. The UN can encourage and assist the peace process, but it is the conflicting parties that ultimately must commit to ending the violence.

In responding directly to the Autesserre critique about elections, we are unequivocal: the UN does not have a "fixation" on elections, and does not ignore bottom-up peacebuilding efforts. Most UN multidimensional missions pursue multiple levels of engagement: from local to national leaders, based on a peace process or agreement that has been negotiated by the parties with UN facil-itation. They also work with of the UN country team (UNCT) of agencies, like

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10. Doyle and Sambanis, *Making War and Building Peace*, 5.
11. Joachim A. Koops et al., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations*, 1st ed., Oxford Handbooks (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015).
12. A. Walter Dorn, Jonathan Matloff, and Jennifer Matthews, "Preventing the bloodbath: Could the UN have predicted and prevented the Rwandan Genocide?" *Journal of Conflict Studies* 20, no. 1 (2000): 9–52, https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/JCS/article/view/4333/4968 (accessed 10 March 2020).

UNICEF, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), that assist large segments of the population. Furthermore, elections are an important way to engage communities. Their timing may need to come after some maturation of the peace process and following capacity building towards good governance and the rule of law. A focus solely on the bottom-up approach ignores this vital institution-building role of multidimensional UN peace operations. Furthermore, it is not the UN that decides to hold elections. The parties to the conflict must make that decision.

Only half of modern UN missions contained an electoral component in their mandates and, in several of these, the elections were not a primary focus. Of 56 missions since 1988, 32 included an electoral mandate. Of 20 missions in place at the end of 1988, as the Cold War began to wind down, there were an average of 11 distinct mandate elements. Peacekeeping mandates are charged with helping to stop the fighting, keeping combatants apart, disarmament, protection of civilians, capacity building, and fostering an inclusive peace process that is informed by a broad civil society dialogue that reaches down to the grassroots level. In some cases, elections are a critically important part of the package, but certainly not all of it. Those, like Autesserre, who advocate a "bottom-up" alternative, must recognize the importance of giving local local populations a say in who governs them. Democratic elections are demonstrably bottom-up initiatives, allowing wider participation of individuals than almost any other activity.

Another critique from "bottom-up" enthusiasts, highlighted in "The crisis of peacekeeping," is that because outsiders may be resented, local actors must always be better. However, in Autesserre's only country case, DR Congo, much of the violence, as she admits, "is local in origin. Disputes often centre on who will control neighbouring land[.] [...] These tensions often result in localized fighting in one village or territory" that can escalate "into generalized conflict across a whole province."[13] Problems of local actors and local dynamics apply not only to DR Congo but to other conflicts as well, which makes it more difficult for UN peace operations to reach an uncomplicated but fruitful outcome. In addition, neighbours can play catalytic roles in escalating conflicts (like Paul Kagame's Rwanda in DR Congo, or Charles Taylor's Liberia in Sierra Leone earlier). Locals struggling for peace may need help from the rest of the world.

A primary advantage of UN peacekeeping is the impartiality offered by UN oversight and the internationalization of the assistance. Because most of the violent conflicts since the end of the Cold War are civil wars and not directly between states, enlarging local participation can sometimes deepen the challenges, not alleviate them. Bringing in impartial experienced outsiders is beneficial, including to supervise and support elections, and support the peace process.

Under these circumstances, will rejecting international peacekeeping contributions and relying solely on locals be the best solution? Sometimes, perhaps. But it can also be the worst solution if the domestic leadership is compromised and

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13. Autesserre, "The crisis of peacekeeping," 111.

involved with one or more sides of the conflict, acting as spoilers or encouraging outside interests to plunder. There is no cookie-cutter approach to peace, as Autesserre agrees. But the local/international distinction is less important if true partnerships are built.[14]

The world should work to give the UN more resources and tools to quickly bring in professionally trained civilians, troops, and police that can exit as early as advisable, making the handoff to local governments and security forces easier. With UN support, the peace can be built, and supervised elections can be the most appropriate step towards conflict resolution. Without UN-enabled negotiations and plans for elections in the medium- to long-term, nations would be left in the hands of dictators or warlords.

We agree with Autesserre that the UN is under-resourced to do its job. Efforts by the Trump administration to reduce peacekeeping budgets for the sake of "cost-effectiveness" only make things worse. When it comes to peacekeeping, money matters. A 2015 article from Håvard Hegre, Lisa Hultman, and Håvard Nygård predicts that with strong mandates and substantial budgets, "the risk of armed conflict in the world in the next 25 years would be reduced by up to two thirds relative to a hypothetical scenario where the UN reduces its [peacekeeping operation] activities to the Cold War level."[15] If we are looking *only* for the cheapest route to stability, we miss the necessary long-term peacebuilding mechanisms. Here, Hegre et al. demonstrate that "a large UN peacekeeping budget is money well spent."[16] In 2006, the US General Accountability Office (GAO) estimated that the UN could deploy for half the price of a US mission.[17] While a US capacity could bring "higher operational standards and [be] supported by an extensive military infrastructure," in addition to other favourable political trade-offs, the GAO found that deploying the international peacekeeping community "has notable advantages for leveraging development funding, experience, and other resources of nations and organizations."[18] A 2005 RAND study also concluded:

> The cost of UN nation-building tends to look quite modest compared to the cost of larger and more demanding U.S.-led operations. At present the United States is spending some $4.5 billion per month to support its military operations in Iraq.

14. For example, the importance of local actors is highlighted in the book review by Thierry Tardy, "Measuring the success and failure of peace operations," *International Peacekeeping* 24, no. 3 (2017): 489–493.

15. Håvard Hegre, Lisa Hultman, and Håvard Mokleiv Nygård, "Peacekeeping works: An assessment of the effectiveness of UN peacekeeping operations," *Conflict Trends* 1 (Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2015), 2, https://www.prio.org/Publications/Publication/?x = 7613 (accessed 10 March 2020).

16. Ibid., 4.

17. In a Haiti-scale operation. See, US Government Accountability Office, "Peacekeeping: Cost comparison of actual UN and hypothetical U.S. operations in Haiti," US Government Accountability Office Report to the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives. US Government Accountability Office, Washington, DC, February 2006, https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-06-331 (accessed 10 March 2020).

18. Ibid., 20–21.

This is more than the United Nations spends to run all 17 of its current peacekeeping missions for a year. This is not to suggest that the United Nations could perform the U.S. mission in Iraq more cheaply, or perform it at all. It is to underline that there are 17 other places where the United States will probably not have to intervene because UN troops are doing so at a tiny fraction of the cost of U.S.-led operations.[19]

This notion of prevention through financial investment is bolstered by a 2019 study, again by Hegre et al., who found that "ambitious PKO policies can reduce the risk of major conflict [by] about two-thirds relative to a no-PKO scenario and by about 45% compared to the observed UN PKO policy for 2001–13."[20] In 2013 alone, this would have meant 4.5 fewer major conflicts globally. Development gains achieved by doubling UN peacekeeping budgets would have resulted in "57,500 fewer infant deaths, 900,000 fewer people without adequate access to potable water, and 1,380,000 fewer undernourished people."[21] Huge financial benefits would result from ending conflicts early "not only in terms of global security but also in terms of development and economic growth."[22]

Failure and ineffectiveness are sometimes a direct consequence of nations not providing enough financial and personnel support for the UN's very ambitious mandates. Autesserre, for example, agrees that too few deployed peacekeepers will make it "difficult for the UN to even scratch the surface of its mandates."[23] We would go even further and emphasize the need to create multinational standby brigades and eventually a *standing* capacity with UN-hired peacekeepers. This will avoid having UN peace operations arrive too late to pinch off conflicts before they escalate, obliging peacekeeping to instead become enmeshed in more complicated clean-up exercises. We think the UN Emergency Peace Service proposal, while not cost-free, would be cost-effective. It should be considered as a way to overcome many of the problems of capacity, training, impartiality, and rapidity limitations in current UN arrangements.[24]

Another frequent critique, though not addressed by Autesserre, is that UN peace operations are "toothless"—i.e., they fail to achieve their mandates because they do not apply the required degree of armed force. While UN missions have been very hesitant to use force, it has been increasingly used in the past decade.[25] This includes armed force for protection of civilians, such as the neutralization of the M23 armed group in DR Congo, and armed groups in the Central African

19. James Dobbins et al., *The UN's Role in Nation-Building: From the Congo to Iraq*, RAND Monographs, MG-304-RC (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2005), xxxvi.
20. Håvard Hegre, Lisa Hultman, and Håvard Mokleiv Nygård, "Evaluating the conflict-reducing effect of UN peacekeeping operations," *The Journal of Politics* 81, no. 1 (2019): 227.
21. Ibid., 229.
22. Ibid., 228.
23. Autesserre, "The crisis of peacekeeping," 107.
24. See, in particular: H. Peter Langille, *Developing a United Nations Emergency Peace Service: Meeting Our Responsibilities to Prevent and Protect*, Palgrave Pivot (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
25. John Karlsrud, *The UN at War: Peace Operations in a New Era* Cham, Switzerland: (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

Republic. This general shift towards robustness follows lessons from mass atrocities in Bosnia and Rwanda (1993–1995). In general, the UN's minimal use of force is deliberate in order for it to avoid becoming a party to the conflicts that the world organization seeks to de-escalate.

Peacekeeping missions, even where they have become more complex, such as in Mali and DR Congo, are not organized as counterinsurgency (COIN) or counter-terrorism (CT) projects. These COIN/CT operations are enemy-centric missions that involve an offensive approach, whereas peacekeeping is based on a trinity of alternative principles: consent of main conflicting parties for the UN deployment, impartiality, and the defensive use of force. Special skills, separate from those learned in COIN and CT, are applied in peace operations, especially skills in negotiation, mediation, conflict management, and resolution.[26]

All these UN elements are foundational to the settlement of grievances. But no peace process will work well if the leadership of the conflicting parties is ignored. After all, they take the vital decisions that make the difference between war and peace. And elections can be a key part of a long-term transitional process by engaging all citizens. Clearly, therefore, the UN must deal with *all* levels of society, and simultaneously pursue both bottom-up and top-down approaches.

This multi-level approach is what the UN *is* doing today, with its protection of civilians mandates and its key leader engagement strategies, seeking local consent wherever possible. This is worth celebrating and encouraging. We wholeheartedly agree with Séverine Autesserre that UN operations need more funding. But the world organization, though struggling to achieve difficult goals, at great expense to the lives and limbs of peacekeepers, is pursuing a balanced approach, and it is much better at ending wars than some might think.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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26. A. Walter Dorn and Joshua Libben, "Preparing for peace: Myths and realities of Canadian peacekeeping training," *International Journal* 73, no. 2 (2018): 257–281.

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