The UN is reinventing peacekeeping – Haiti is the testing ground

Bulbul Ahmed, PhD Candidate, University of Iowa; Bangladesh University of Professionals

Published: November 11, 2025 8:30am EDT

A Kenyan police officer, part of a U.N.-backed multinational force, patrols a street in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in December 2024.

AP Photo/Odelyn Joseph

For decades, the United Nations has intervened in Haiti in a bid to address persistent political, economic and security crises. To date, all attempts have failed.

Now, the international body is trying something new. On Sept. 30, 2025, the United Nations Security Council approved an expanded international military force for Haiti in hopes of turning the tide against organized criminal gangs that have taken hold of swaths of the Caribbean nation.

Resolution 2793 authorized the doubling of U.N.-backed military and police forces to more than 5,000 and transforming the Kenya-led Multinational Security Support mission in place since 2023 into a new Gang Suppression Force.

Operational command of the mission will now be held by a coalition of nations including Kenya, Canada, Jamaica, the Bahamas, El Salvador, Guatemala and the United States. Meanwhile, the U.N. will provide logistical, administrative and political assistance through the newly established U.N. Support Office in Haiti.

Yet the true significance of Resolution 2793 lies not in its military content or its specific application in Haiti, but rather in its institutional design.

As a scholar of international peace operations, I see this as a major shift in how the U.N. exerts authority. The organization's legitimacy now rests less on commanding troops directly and more on coordinating coalitions. In an era of constrained budgets and fragmented global power, the United Nations increasingly sees its strength in its ability to confer legitimacy and structure collaboration among coalitions of states, regional organizations and international nongovernmental organizations.

The logic of adaptation

At one time, U.N. peacekeeping symbolized the collective will of nations deployed across the world under a unified command.

Beginning formally in 1956 with the deployment of the first U.N. Emergency Force during the Suez Crisis, peacekeeping operations were conceived as neutral forces positioned between warring parties to monitor ceasefires and buffer zones.

Traditional missions deployed tens of thousands of troops wearing distinctive blue helmets, all under direct U.N. command. Field commanders reported to United Nations headquarters in New York through a clear chain of authority.

At their peak in the 1990s and 2000s, the U.N. ran dozens of these operations simultaneously – from Cambodia to Mozambique and the Balkans – with mandates to separate combatants, disarm militias and support peace agreements after civil wars. Some succeeded in ending long-running conflicts, but others became mired in situations where there was no peace to keep.

A U.N. peacekeeping soldier, right, shown in 1956 during the first-ever U.N. peacekeeping deployment.
AFP vis Getty Images

U.N. missions such as those in Haiti from 2004 to 2017 and in the Democratic Republic of Congo from 2010 to the present reflected an era when member states were willing to finance large, multilateral deployments under one flag.

But that model has become harder to sustain.

Over time, U.N. peacekeeping has had to confront not only conventional conflicts but also transnational and urban violence, organized crime and fragile governance – problems that stretched beyond its original design.

Compounding those challenges in recent years has been deep polarization on the U.N. Security Council. Conflicts ranging from Syria to Ukraine have exposed divisions that constrain the authorization of new large-scale missions. Meanwhile, peacekeeping budgets have plateaued as major contributing countries have drawn back funding amid domestic political pressures, and many traditional troop contributors have grown cautious about costly, open-ended deployments.

The United Nations has had to evolve in a number of ways.

Haiti's most recent multinational security support mission already departed from the classical design.

When the Kenya-led operation was authorized in 2023, it was funded entirely through voluntary contributions from willing countries, not the regular U.N. budget that all member nations pay into.

It represented a partial departure from traditional peacekeeping by authorizing a non-U.N. coalition under U.N. approval. Resolution 2793 transforms that ad hoc arrangement into a more structured and durable framework. The new Gang Suppression Force features a clearer command architecture, expanded troop strength and a dedicated U.N. support office to coordinate logistics, training and political liaison.

In doing so, it effectively institutionalizes what had been an experimental model, shifting operational control to willing nations while preserving the U.N.'s oversight. Its proponents argue that this approach keeps the organization's most valuable asset – its legitimacy – at the center of collective security.

The command clause that changes everything

Tucked into the new resolution is a paragraph that entrusts a coalition of participating nations with "strategic direction, oversight and political decision-making," while day-to-day command remains with the mission's field commander chosen by that group.

A soldier patrols the streets of Port-au-Prince in 2011 during a previous U.N. peacekeeping mission in Haiti.

AP Photo/Ramon Espinosa

Under this arrangement, the chain of command flows through a coalition of nations acting with U.N. authorization but not U.N. control. In other words, peacekeeping is being somewhat outsourced – though under the United Nations' legal and moral umbrella.

The way this new type of model is funded reiterates this logic: All personnel costs will be borne by voluntary contributions, not the U.N.'s assessed peacekeeping budget. This approach gives donor countries flexibility while keeping the United Nations' human rights and reporting obligations intact.

This is not mere bureaucratic tinkering. It represents the U.N.'s redefinition of how it sees its comparative advantage – from direct command to networked coordination.

Risks and promise of the Haiti model

The new Gang Suppression Force in Haiti offers both opportunities and challenges.

Its coalition structure could enhance responsiveness and regional ownership of the problem. Indeed, countries neighboring Haiti or with historical ties have strong incentives to stabilize the situation. The mission could deploy more quickly than traditional U.N. operations, which often take months to organize.

For everyday Haitians, this could mean faster relief from gang violence that has displaced hundreds of thousands of people, shut down schools and hospitals, and made basic activities like going to the market dangerous. If successful, the force could help the Haitian government to gradually restore its authority over neighborhoods currently controlled by armed groups.

The latest U.N. peacekeeping mission in Haiti signals a shift in focus.

AP Photo/Dieu Nalio Chery

But coordination challenges could emerge when multiple countries share control, and disagreements over strategy or rules of engagement could slow decision-making. There are also questions about how this model ensures consistent oversight – different countries may have varying standards for human rights monitoring or different interpretations of the mission's scope.

Resolution 2793 tries to address these concerns by mandating robust human rights safeguards, child-protection advisers and clear rules of engagement. If these mechanisms work effectively, they could set a new standard for hybrid peace operations.

For Haiti, the stakes are existential. Success will depend on seamless coordination between the Gang Suppression Force, the Haitian National Police and civil authorities, and on ensuring that stabilization builds up Haiti's own capacity to maintain security rather than creating long-term reliance on foreign forces.

A template for the future?

The Gang Suppression Force embodies both the risks and the promise of the United Nations' reinvention. If coordination succeeds, it could provide a practical blueprint for missions in settings where large, centrally managed U.N. deployments are politically or financially difficult to sustain. But if it fails, it could raise questions about how best to combine legitimacy and effectiveness in complex crises amid renewed great-power competition.

More broadly, Haiti's approach signals a wider shift in how collective security is organized. The post–Cold War image of a single, centrally directed multilateral system is giving way to a more textured landscape of regional partners, ad hoc coalitions and overlapping mandates. In that environment, the U.N. see its comparative advantage as less about directly supplying every soldier than about convening partners, setting standards and conferring legal and moral authority.

In that sense, Haiti's mission is more than a single intervention; it is an early example of how international peace operations may be organized in the decades ahead.

Bulbul Ahmed does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.