Peacekeeping After the Russia-Ukraine War

28 JUNE 2025

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The Role of Peacekeeping After the Russia-Ukraine War: Re-assessing the Peacekeeping Concept and Its Global Implications

Introduction

The United Nations (UN), established in the wake of the Second World War, was founded with the primary objective of maintaining international peace and security, as enshrined in the UN Charter. At the heart of this mandate

lies the institution of UN peacekeeping, which has evolved into one of the most operational and visible instruments for fulfilling the international community's collective responsibility to uphold global order. Peacekeeping missions are tasked with protecting civilians, preventing conflict escalation or relapse, and supporting national authorities in post-conflict recovery. Though lacking coercive power, these missions have frequently demonstrated effectiveness in de-escalating violence through non-violent conflict management tools. Designed to operate with impartiality and legitimacy, peacekeeping initiatives play a crucial role in fragile contexts, supporting the broader goals of stabilisation and sustainable peacebuilding.

At present, more than 90,000 personnel from 125 member states participate in UN peacekeeping operations across military, police, and civilian roles. Despite being the largest financial contributor, the United States ranks 82nd in troop contributions, with just 31 personnel – approximately 0.00000009 per capita. The Russian Federation, a permanent member of the Security Council and active belligerent in the war against Ukraine, ranks 64th with 72 peacekeepers (0.00000049 per capita). In contrast, Ukraine, currently under direct military assault, ranks 44th, contributing 307 personnel (0.00000743 per capita). These figures reveal a structural asymmetry in the UN system, whereby smaller, often more vulnerable states bear a disproportionate burden in upholding the very principles of peace and security the system was designed to protect (Burkle, Goniewicz, & Khorram-Manesh, 2022).

This article critically examines a core contradiction at the heart of the UN's institutional architecture: a peacekeeping system founded on collective enforcement and neutrality becomes fundamentally compromised when a permanent Security Council member engages in aggression. Russia's invasion of Ukraine reveals this structural weakness. By exercising its veto, Russia has blocked binding Security Council actions and obstructed any coordinated UN peacekeeping initiative. This dual role – as both enforcer and violator – erodes the credibility of the UN and exposes the limitations of its conflict management architecture in the face of great power impunity.

The central argument advanced in this article is that the involvement of a permanent Security Council member as a belligerent actor reveals critical structural deficiencies in the UN system, specifically within the realm of peacekeeping and conflict management. These deficiencies compromise the UN's legitimacy, neutralize its enforcement capacity, and render its peacekeeping architecture ineffective in the face of geopolitical contestation. The article contends that the future viability of global peace operations depends on rethinking the normative and operational foundations of collective security.

Extract of Source: Center for International Peace Operations (2024). Peace Operation 2024/2024. (https://www.zif-berlin.org/sites/zif-berlin.org/files/2024-12/Peace%20Operations%202024-2025.pdf)

The UN's Mandate and the Promise of Collective Security

The United Nations (UN), established in 1945, operates under the UN Charter, which tasks it with maintaining international peace and security, fostering cooperation, and promoting human rights. UN peacekeeping, a key instrument of this mission, has evolved over 75 years into a critical tool for global conflict management. Peacekeeping is guided by three core principles: (1) consent of the main parties to the conflict, (2) impartiality, and (3) non-use of force except in self-defence or defence of the mandate. These principles ensure missions deploy with host government approval, remain neutral, and avoid aggressive military action.

Traditional peacekeeping missions focus on monitoring ceasefires in buffer zones to facilitate political solutions. Examples include operations in Cyprus and Western Sahara, where resolutions remain pending. Post-Cold War, peacekeeping has shifted to more complex Peace Operations, tackling tasks like election support, civilian protection, and state-building. These broad "Christmas tree mandates" incorporate diverse objectives, such as human rights monitoring and disarmament, but often lack sufficient resources, challenging mission effectiveness. Deployments in unstable settings without solid peace agreements further strain adherence to the core principles (Benkler et al., 2023).

UN peacekeeping relies on cooperation from member states, particularly the Permanent Five Members of the UN Security Council (P5), whose political support and resources are crucial. The global coalition of troop-contributing countries, drawn from 121 nations, highlights the UN's strength, but P5 backing is vital for mandate implementation (Paris, 2023). Host government consent remains critical but fragile, as seen in Mali, where counterterrorism priorities clashed with MINUSMA's human rights objectives, leading to restrictions and its planned withdrawal by 2023. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, MONUSCO's support for government military goals risks bias perceptions, complicating its ongoing transition toward closure. Weak Security Council consensus, with Russia and China's abstentions, further undermines these missions' effectiveness.

When Russia and China abstain from resolutions, as with MINUSMA, missions lose leverage to influence conflict parties. Host governments, like Mali's, exploit this by challenging UN authority, while third-party support from non-UN actors reduces incentives for cooperation. The UNAMID mission in Darfur (2008–2020) faced systematic Sudanese government obstructions, such as movement restrictions, highlighting how lack of cooperation and weak P5 unity limit even robust missions.

Collective security, the UN's ideal of nations uniting to prevent and resolve conflicts, is embodied in peacekeeping's global composition and Security Council mandates. However, political realities – P5 divisions, host government resistance, and normative disputes – undermine this vision. Tensions, exacerbated by events like Russia's actions in Ukraine, limit the

Council's ability to authorize new missions or adapt existing ones (Benkler et al., 2023). The decline in peacekeeping personnel by 31% from 2015 to 2022 reflects these constraints (Paris, 2023).

Critics argue that missions must prioritize local ownership and pragmatic mandates to regain legitimacy, as liberal approaches often fail to address local dynamics (Cassin & Zyla, 2023). The shift to pragmatic peacekeeping, conceptualized as scaled-down, flexible missions, remains largely theoretical due to Security Council gridlock, which stifles operational changes in peacekeeping operations. This shift risks undermining ambitious liberal peacebuilding objectives as normative disagreements and geopolitical tensions hinder consensus on expansive mandates in a multipolar era. Yet, without unified P5 support and cooperative host governments, even pragmatic missions struggle (Benkler et al., 2023). The UN remains a key player in crisis management, but fulfilling collective security requires navigating these political obstacles and reforming to align with local needs (Cassin & Zyla, 2023). These challenges manifest acutely in the Russia-Ukraine War, exposing institutional peacekeeping flaws.

The Russia-Ukraine War: A Case Study in Institutional Contradiction

The Russia-Ukraine War, sparked by Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and escalating with its 2022 full-scale invasion, has destabilized global security and exposed deep flaws in the United Nations Security Council, revealing a stark contradiction between its mandate to uphold peace and its operational realities. Russia's aggression, violating the UN Charter's prohibition on the use of force against a state's sovereignty, has displaced millions, disrupted global food and energy supplies, and challenged the UN's ability to respond. As a P5 member, Russia is tasked with maintaining international peace, yet its role as the primary aggressor undermines this responsibility. By deploying forces as "peacekeepers" in Ukraine's separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk in February 2022, Russia misrepresented peacekeeping, a move condemned by UN Secretary-General Guterres as a "perversion" that violates impartiality principles, as belligerent states cannot contribute peacekeepers (Burkle et al., 2022).

This duality, coupled with Russia's use of private military companies like the Wagner Group, extends its destabilizing influence, challenging the UN's normative framework. Russia's veto power, enshrined in the UN Charter, allows it to block resolutions, such as the February 2022 draft condemning its invasion, paralyzing the Security Council. Despite majority support, this veto privilege enables Russia to obstruct peacekeeping proposals, including post-Minsk agreement talks, prioritizing national interests over global peace. The Council's paralysis is deepened by divisions, with China's reluctance to support Western initiatives and neutral stances by states like India and Brazil hindering consensus, echoing tensions in prior conflicts

like Libya and Syria (Geis & Schröder, 2024). The General Assembly's non-binding March 2022 resolution condemning Russia's aggression lacks enforcement power. Proposals for a General Assembly-authorized peacekeeping mission risk escalation without Russian consent, a core UN principle alongside impartiality and non-use of force (Arif, 2022). Russia's rejection of NATO-affiliated peacekeepers further complicates mission composition.

The UN's purpose of promoting peace clashes with the Security Council's structure, which empowers the P5 to flout international law when it serves their interests (Ekpe & Abumbe, 2024). Despite challenges, a Ukraine peace mission could de-escalate tensions, as shown by the OSCE's Special Monitoring Mission in Donbas from 2014 to 2019, but securing Russia's consent remains a hurdle. The UN's diplomatic efforts, like the Black Sea Grain Initiative, show potential, but the Council's paralysis prevents enforcement. The P5's moral responsibility, evident in the 1956 Suez Crisis where the conflict was averted, is often overridden by national interests, as seen in Russia's actions. The Russia-Ukraine War demands reform of peacekeeping principles and the Security Council to align the UN's operations with its mission, ensuring effective responses to conflicts involving great powers.

UN Peacekeeping in Crisis: Structural Flaws and the Need for Change

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, as a P5 Security Council member, exposes profound structural contradictions in the UN's mandate to uphold international peace, undermining its legitimacy and rendering peacekeeping ineffective amid great-power rivalry. This aggression reveals foundational flaws in the UN's peacekeeping architecture, necessitating theoretical and institutional reforms to restore efficacy. Russia's deployment of forces as "peacekeepers" in Ukraine's separatist regions breaches impartiality, eroding normative frameworks like human rights and international law (Arif, 2022). The Security Council's veto power shields aggressors, as Russia's 2022 veto of a resolution condemning its invasion paralyzed UN action, prioritizing national interests over collective security (Hultman & Peksen, 2023). This paralysis hinders impartial peacekeeping operations, with Russia's refusal to consent blocking Poland's 2022 mission proposal (Benkler et al., 2023).

Member states must pursue pragmatic reforms, such as normatively flexible training and regional partnerships, to support localized, adaptive missions (Cassin & Zyla, 2023; Tardy, 2023). Evolving norms, including International Criminal Court probes and sovereignty redefined to prioritize civilian protection, lack enforcement against P5 members. Compact, mediation-focused missions align with pragmatic peacekeeping demands amid fiscal and legitimacy challenges (Karlsrud, 2023). The Russia–Ukraine

war highlights the need to overhaul collective security's foundations. Despite diplomatic efforts like the Black Sea Grain Initiative, peacekeeping's reliance on Council mandates limits its scope (Rothman et al., 2024). Reforming the Council to curb aggressor protection is essential to align peacekeeping with the UN's mission, ensuring resilience in a fractured global order. Russia's actions highlight broader UN peacekeeping crises, necessitating systemic reforms.

Policy Recommendations

Russia's 2022 UN invasion of Ukraine highlights systemic flaws in UN peacekeeping, necessitating reforms to restore legitimacy and effectiveness in collective security. To address P5 veto misuse, host government resistance, and operational constraints, the UN must reform its structures and adopt pragmatic, localized strategies (Paris, 2023). The following recommendations aim to enhance peacekeeping resilience and align with the UN's mandate.

Conclusion

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine as a permanent Security Council member lays bare the UN's structural contradictions, eroding its legitimacy and paralyzing peacekeeping amid great-power conflicts. The veto system enables aggressors to block collective action, while violations of impartiality undermine the principles of peace operations. This crisis highlights deep flaws in the UN's peacekeeping framework, demanding urgent rethinking of its normative and operational foundations. Compact, mediation-driven missions and regional partnerships offer a path to adapt to fragile contexts, but their success depends on unified political backing and local engagement. Reforming the Security Council to limit veto misuse and enhance General Assembly authority is essential to restore credibility. The Ukraine conflict reveals that without addressing these systemic challenges, the UN risks becoming irrelevant in managing global crises. Overhauling collective security is critical to ensure peacekeeping remains a viable tool for fostering peace, aligning with the UN's mission to uphold international stability in an increasingly contested world order. The future of global peacekeeping hinges on bold reforms to bridge the gap between the UN's ideals and its operational realities. These reforms offer a path to revitalize UN peacekeeping's global role.

Appendix: Acronyms

UN – United Nations

P5 – Permanent Five Members of the UN Security Council (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States)

MINUSMA – United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali

MONUSCO – United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

UNAMID – African Union – United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur

OSCE – Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

PKOs – Peacekeeping Operations

ICC – International Criminal Court

Literature:

DOI 10.69790/epis-rep-pcp-1/36491

EPIS