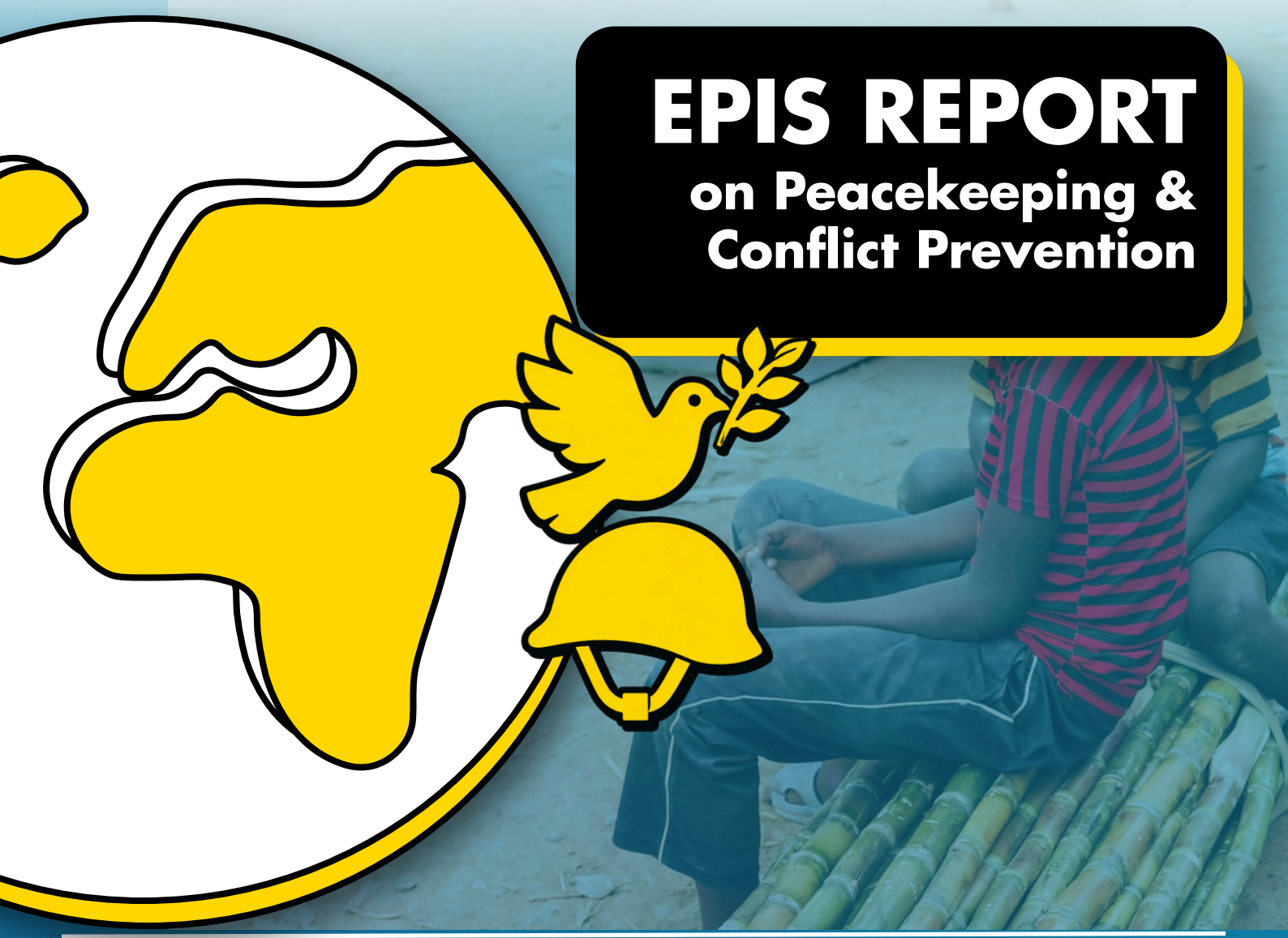
EPIS Thinktank
foreign affairs & security policy

Issue III
July 2026
epis-thinktank.com

EPIS REPORT
on Peacekeeping & Conflict Prevention



Child Recruitment in the DRC

MONUSCO and the Structural Limitations of UN Peacekeeping in Upholding IHL

UN Peacekeeping as a Site of Contestation

China and the Reshaping of the Global Order

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Editorial



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Coline Zozime Delage is a final-year undergraduate student in Applied Foreign Languages (English–Spanish) with a focus on International Relations at Bordeaux Montaigne University in France. Her academic interests include diplomacy, human rights, peace and political communication. Through research projects, associative engagement and intercultural experience, she seeks to contribute to rigorous analysis and informed public debate on complex international issues.

EPIS Report on Peacekeeping & Conflict Prevention

Dear reader,

Peace is rarely lost in a single moment. It erodes where mandates outrun the means to fulfil them, where commitments on paper are not matched by resources on the ground, and where the institutions meant to prevent conflict are themselves contested. This third issue of the EPIS Report on Peacekeeping & Conflict Prevention looks at these gaps – between norms and practice, between ambition and capacity – and at the actors trying to close them.

Mareike Warmboldt opens the issue in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. She asks why the recruitment and use of children by armed groups has increased despite more than two decades of UN peacekeeping, and shows that MONUSCO's tools are poorly suited to a conflict driven by non-state armed groups. Sara Filali then turns to the Horn of Africa, where IGAD and the African Union have built some of the most advanced gender-sensitive peacebuilding frameworks in the world – and where institutional resistance, scarce funding and weak coordination still keep women away from the negotiating table.

Valerio Borgo examines how NATO has embedded the Women, Peace and Security and Human Security agendas in its institutions, and tests what this means in practice through the NATO Mission Iraq. Irene Olivo Garcia shows how China uses UN peacekeeping not to abandon multilateralism, but to contest Western priorities from within – a reminder that peace itself is a politically contested category.

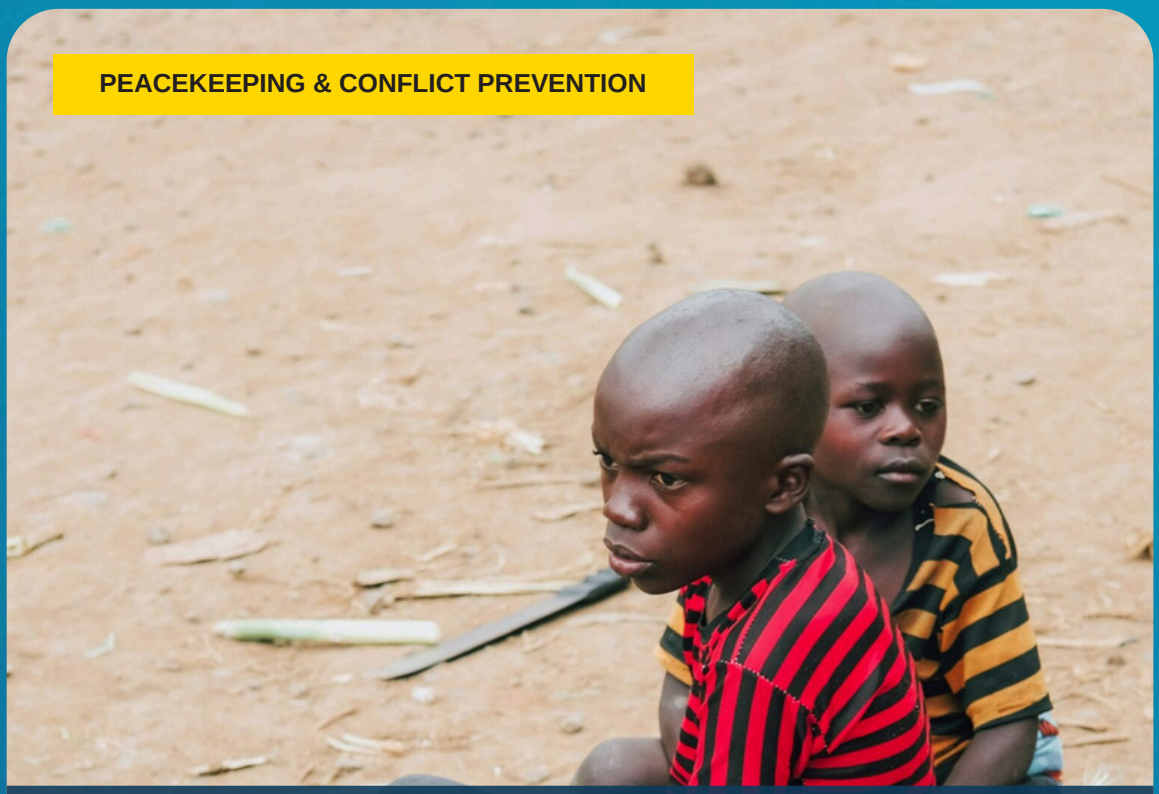
The issue closes with two further contributions: Hansika Baldwa on what the end of Operation Barkhane reveals about changing approaches to peacekeeping in the Sahel, and Ida Fitriyani on how the financing crisis at the UN's Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs reflects shifting priorities in international conflict prevention.

Taken together, these articles share a common insight: effective conflict prevention depends less on new frameworks than on the political will, the resources and the local ownership needed to make existing ones work. I would like to thank all authors for their careful research and the editorial team for their support in bringing this issue together.

I hope you enjoy reading it.

Coline Zozime Delage
Report Group Leader, Peacekeeping & Conflict Prevention

PEACEKEEPING & CONFLICT PREVENTION



Child Recruitment in the DRC: MONUSCO and the Structural Legal Limitations of UN Peacekeeping

MONUSCO and the Structural Limitations of UN Peacekeeping in Upholding IHL

Mareike Warmboldt

About the Article

The data suggest a deteriorating protection environment for children in eastern DRC even as the UN highlights progress.

About the Author

Mareike Warmboldt holds a BA in International Studies from Leiden University and is currently pursuing the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Programme in International Humanitarian Action. Her work focuses on conflict transformation, peacekeeping, and human rights, supported by hands-on experience with NGOs.

Despite more than two decades of continuous UN peacekeeping presence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the recruitment and use of children by armed groups have not only persisted but increased between the years 2022 and 2024 (UN Secretary General 2023; UN Secretary General 2024; UN Secretary General 2025). This trend is alarming considering that the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) operates under a large body of international humanitarian law (IHL) and an increasingly dense normative framework explicitly prohibiting such conduct. Therefore, the following questions arise: how does the case of MONUSCO in the Democratic Republic of the Congo inform our understanding of the structural limitations in UN peacekeeping missions' ability to uphold IHL obligations concerning child recruitment in non-international armed conflicts? It is argued that MONUSCO's experience reveals limitations on two levels. First, a normative ambiguity over whether child protection mandates create binding obligations or only authorise action. Second, even where doctrine exists, MONUSCO's principal tools are not adapted to a conflict increasingly driven by non-state armed groups, and are further weakened by the mission's ongoing withdrawal. These findings suggest that the persistence of child recruitment reflects not only gaps in implementation, but a deeper structural discrepancy between peacekeeping's available tools and the actors driving the violation. The paper proceeds by outlining the conflict context, the applicable IHL framework, the UN's CAAC mandate, and MONUSCO's operationalisation of child protection.

Context: Conflict in the DRC

Despite peace agreements in place, the presence of UN peacekeeping forces and the establishment of a transitional government between 2002 and 2003, following the First and Second Congo Wars, unrest and violence persisted in the eastern DRC. Since then, conflicts, most often involving ethnic and militant groups with roots in the Congo Wars, have arisen in states on the Congo-Rwanda border. Notably, one of the most prominent groups is the March 23 Movement (M23), which has become an undeniable force in the region since the early 2000s. In 2013, the UN Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) was authorised by the UNSC to support the Congolese army in the fight against M23, successfully repressing M23. After five years of inactivity, M23 resurfaced in 2022, gaining control of large territory in North Kivu. While the presence of international security forces has been controversial for several years, during the resurgence of M23 between 2022 and 2023, the anti-intervention sentiment among local officials and the public was exacerbated, and a series of protests against MONUSCO's presence turned violent. Consequently, the Congolese president called for the withdrawal of the peacekeeping forces; however, the UNSC did not fulfil this demand and extended MONUSCO's mandate due to the fear of a security vacuum and further obstruction of humanitarian aid (Centre for Preventive Action 2026).

Despite Rwanda's involvement in the ongoing conflict in the eastern DRC, the conflict remains a non-international armed conflict under international law.

MONUSCO was established in 2010 as the successor to the earlier peacekeeping operation MONUC, which had originally been set up in 1999 to monitor a ceasefire among the DRC, Angola, Namibia, Rwanda, Uganda, and Zimbabwe after the First and Second Congo Wars. The mission's overarching purpose is to help protect civilians and support the restoration of peace in Congolese territory, with its operations currently concentrated in the Ituri and North Kivu provinces (United Nations Peace Operations 2026). The mission is authorised to use all necessary means to fulfil three strategic priorities, namely, protecting civilians, supporting the goals of Resolution 2773, and helping stabilise and strengthen DRC state institutions. Resolution 2808 tasks MONUSCO with helping end the M23-Rwanda offensive, dismantling parallel administrations, and supporting the wider Washington and Doha peace processes (United Nations Security Council 2025a). Moreover, the mission monitors and reports on human rights abuses and IHL violations and has a child protection section, including the prevention of child soldier recruitment. Although the mission is undergoing a gradual, phased withdrawal, with its area of operations largely limited to North Kivu and Ituri, a pause in disengagement was announced in mid-2025 due to worsening security conditions (United Nations Security Council 2025b).

From MONUC to MONUSCO

1999
MONUC set up to monitor a ceasefire

2010
MONUSCO established as successor

mid-2025
Pause in disengagement announced

Operations concentrated in Ituri and North Kivu

Source: Mareike Warmboldt, based on the article text

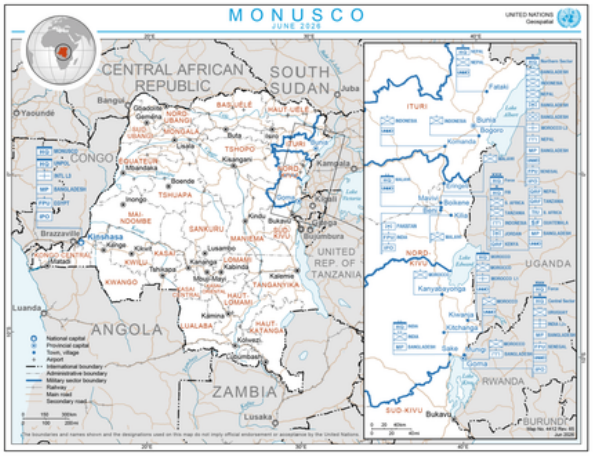


Figure 1: MONUSCO Deployment Map, June 2026 (UN Geospatial 2026).

Local but also external actors are incentivized to get involved in the ongoing conflict because "the DRC has one of the world's largest reserves of metals and rare earth minerals," increasingly globalizing the conflict (Center for Preventive Action 2026). For example, Rwanda continues to have a significant military presence in eastern DRC and is accused of supporting M23. Military attacks and exchanges of fire between Congolese forces, M23 and other militia groups, as well as Rwandan troops, remain common, even though both Rwanda and the DRC have agreed to a pact reducing their military presence near the border in 2023. Currently, the DRC is not only facing persistent violence but four converging crises: crisis levels of food insecurity, its 16th Ebola outbreak in 2025 and the severe impact of USAID funding cuts (International Rescue Committee 2026). Hostilities have caused massive displacement, with nearly

"The data suggest a deteriorating protection environment for children in eastern DRC even as the UN highlights progress."

123,000 people fleeing eastern DRC to neighbouring countries and 5.7 million internally displaced people (IDPs) in 2025. Moreover, the Fact-Finding Mission by the UN Human Rights Office, launched at the beginning of 2025, "concluded that grave and widespread violations and abuses committed by all parties to the conflict may constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity"; among these crimes are also the recruitment and use of children in the conflict (Human Rights Watch 2026).

According to the UN Secretary-General's annual reports on children and armed conflict, the recruitment and use of children in the DRC increased over the three most recent reporting cycles, climbing from 1,545 verified cases in 2022 to 1,861 in 2023 and 2,365 in 2024. This increase was driven mostly by local armed groups, particularly Raia Mutomboki and various Mai-Mai factions, rather than by M23, whose recorded recruitment numbers remained comparatively low and even declined across the period (31 in 2022, 69 in 2023, 22 in 2024). The proportion of children used directly in combat also grew, while the detention of children by Congolese state forces persisted throughout the period, despite UN advocacy that secured the release of most detained children. Verified conflict-related sexual violence against children also increased, from 281 victims in 2023 to 358 in 2024, with M23 among the most frequently cited perpetrators. In sum, the data suggest a deteriorating protection environment for children in eastern DRC even as the UN highlights progress, such as unilateral declarations by armed group commanders that led to the release of over 1,500 children in 2024–2025 (UN Secretary General 2023, 9; UN Secretary General 2024, 9; UN Secretary General 2025, 8-9).

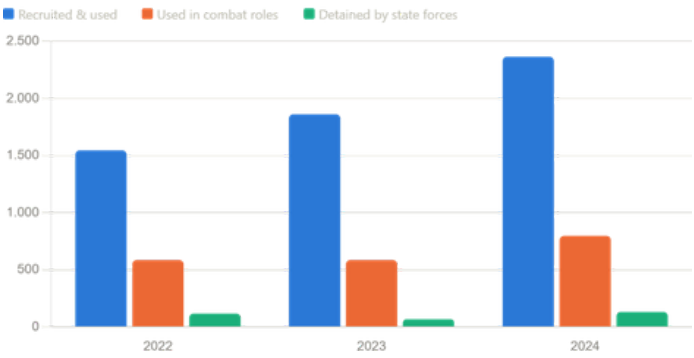


Figure 2: Verified cases of used/recruited children in the DRC (created with Claude, July 22, 2026).

International Humanitarian Law (IHL): The Prohibition of the Recruitment and Use of Children in Non-international Armed Conflicts

Children in armed conflicts are granted special protections by a comprehensive body of international legal provisions and norms. Despite Rwanda's involvement in the ongoing conflict in the eastern DRC, the conflict remains a non-international armed conflict under international law. Thus, Additional Protocol (II) to the Geneva Conventions (1977) and customary IHL apply to the case, as well as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol, specifically defining and protecting children's civil, social, political, health and economic rights (International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) 1977; United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) 1989; UNGA 2000).

Additional Protocol II sets out special protection for children, stipulating that "children who have not attained the age of fifteen years shall neither be recruited in the armed forces or groups nor

allowed to take part in hostilities […]" (Protocol II 1977, art. 4(3)(c)). Similarly, the DRC has ratified both the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol, with the first "prohibiting the recruitment of children below the age of 15" into State Parties' armed forces (UNGA 1989, art. 38 (3)). The latter differentiates between States (Article 3) and non-State armed groups (Article 4), setting the age limit for compulsory recruitment into State armed forces and direct participation in hostilities at the age of 18. However, they can accept voluntary enlistment from the age of 15. On the other hand, both compulsory and voluntary recruitment into non-State armed groups are prohibited, and State Parties are required to "take all feasible measures to prevent such recruitment and use" (ICRC n.d.).

Under Article 8 of the Rome Statute, recruiting children into armed forces or armed groups constitutes a war crime (Rome Statute 1998, art. 8(2)(e)(vii)). Earlier crimes committed between fall 2002 and summer 2003 in the DRC proved foundational to this body of law. The ICC's first-ever conviction for child recruitment as a war crime, delivered in 2012, was against Congolese militia leader Thomas Lubanga Dyilo for conscripting and using child soldiers in Ituri (ICC 2012). This translated the protections of Additional Protocol II and the Optional Protocol into binding criminal precedent, consolidating child recruitment as a prosecutable international crime. Where recruitment is accompanied by sexual violence, as documented against child recruits by M23 in the DRC, this conduct may be separately charged as rape or sexual slavery under either framework (Rome Statute 1998, art. 7(1)(g); art. 8(2)(e)(vi)).

UN Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) Mandate

The aforementioned legal and normative frameworks created obligations for the UN generally, and peace operations specifically, so that the UN Security Council (UNSC) included child protection in its wider peace and security agenda. Specifically, the UN CAAC mandate derives from a series of thematic resolutions, among others, resolution 51/77 (1996) and resolution 1261 (1999), the former establishing the mandate for the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG-CAAC) "as the (UN) system lead entity for the UNSC agenda on children and armed conflict," and the latter, recognizing the protection of children as a fundamental peace and security concern (DPKO, DFS, DPA 2017, 1-2). In this context, six grave violations against children in conflict were identified, namely, "recruitment and use, killing and maiming, sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals, abduction, and denial of humanitarian access" (United Nations, n.d.). Acting on the Secretary-General's behalf, the SRSG-CAAC leads UN advocacy for conflict-affected children and chairs the UN Headquarters Task Force on CAAC, the principal policy forum for implementing the UNSC's CAAC agenda. Moreover, UNICEF, given its global child-focused mandate, is a key partner in this effort and is responsible for operationalizing the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) at the country, regional, and headquarters levels (DPKO, DFS, DPA 2017, 17–18).

While there is a plethora of policies addressing the rights of children and their special protections in armed conflict, two frameworks

are most directly relevant for MONUSCO and its obligations in upholding IHL on child recruitment. First, the 2017 Policy on Child Protection in United Nations Peace Operations is the UN's own internal framework that reinforces "the obligation of all United Nations peace operations personnel to uphold and respect children's rights" (DPKO, DFS, DPA 2017, 2). Moreover, it sets out guiding principles requiring child protection to be mainstreamed across all operational decisions of UN peace operations, including mission planning, mandate implementation, and the overarching guidance documents for military, police, and civilian components alike. The Policy further emphasizes partnership, with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), the Department of Field Support (DFS), and the Department of Political Affairs (DPA) coordinating at headquarters level with actors such as the SRSG-CAAC, UNICEF, OHCHR, and UNHCR, and at field level with national authorities, humanitarian actors, local NGOs and communities. The aim is that each partnership is grounded in respecting the comparative advantage, mandate, and independence of the other actor (DPKO, DFS, DPA 2017, 3, 17).

Second, the 2017 Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers translate this internal UN policy into a set of political commitments for troop- and police-contributing Member States themselves. Endorsed by over 85 states, the Principles comprise 17 pledges spanning the full lifecycle of a peacekeeping operation, including but not limited to, embedding child protection provisions in Security Council mandates, prioritizing prevention in strategic and operational planning, identifying early warning signs of recruitment and appointing child protection focal points within military and police command structures. The Principles further commit states to holding their own personnel accountable for abuses, including sexual exploitation, prioritizing child soldiers in DDR processes, and pushing for child protection provisions in peace agreements and sanctions regimes (Global Affairs Canada 2017). Canada's 2019 Implementation Guidance operationalizes these commitments at the national level and explicitly situates MONUSCO within this framework, noting that the mission's Force Commander's Child Protection Directive, mainstreaming the child protection mandate throughout its Force component, was only signed in July 2017, making it one of just three UN peacekeeping operations with such a directive as of 2019 (Canada, Department of National Defence 2019, 9, 26).

Operationalization of Child Protection in MONUSCO

The document that translates MONUSCO's child protection mandate into concrete, actionable guidance for military personnel, the Force Commander's Directive on the Protection of Children, was only signed in July 2017, seven years after the mission's mandate was first established under Resolution 1925 (2010) with an explicit child protection mandate (Canada, Department of National Defence 2019, 9, 26). This delay fits into a wider academic and policy debate about whether a child protection mandate imposes binding legal obligations on a mission or merely authorizes it to act (Vicari 2023). In this context, this seven-year gap suggests that the responsibility lies with the mission and troop-contributing states in deciding when and how to operationalize a mandate that carries no

enforceable timeline or minimum standard. For a significant portion of MONUSCO's operational history, the formal legal mandate to prevent and respond to child recruitment existed on paper, stated in the aforementioned UNSC resolutions, without mission-specific standard operating procedures for identifying, reporting, and responding to recruitment for peacekeepers on the ground (Canada, Department of National Defence 2019, 26).

However, the increase of child recruitment, from 1,545 cases in 2022 to 2,365 in 2024, five to seven years after the Directive was signed, suggests that the earlier absence of formal guidance cannot alone explain the trajectory of the problem. (UN Secretary-General 2023; UN Secretary-General 2025). This points to deeper structural constraints that a directive, however well designed, cannot resolve. First, the resurgence of M23 and the proliferation of domestic armed groups such as Raia Mutomboki and various Mai-Mai factions have shifted the primary drivers of recruitment toward non-state actors operating largely outside relationships MONUSCO can leverage through its partnership with the Congolese government. That is, MONUSCO's traditional levers against recruitment, such as training, advising, and conditioning support to state security forces, have limited success with armed groups with which the mission has no formal relationship to condition or influence (Tabak et al. 2025). Second, the mission's ongoing withdrawal since 2023 has reduced its presence in the eastern provinces where recruitment is most acute, echoing the broader cross-mission finding that peacekeeping's protective effect is closely tied to physical presence and shrinks as missions transition or withdraw (Stimson Center 2026).

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that MONUSCO's structural limitations lie less in gaps of internal doctrine, which can in principle be corrected, but more in a fundamental mismatch between the tools available to a peacekeeping mission, namely, advisory relationships with state actors, monitoring and reporting mechanisms, DDR programming and a conflict environment increasingly driven by non-state actors operating beyond the practical reach of those tools.

Conclusion

MONUSCO's experience in the DRC demonstrates that the persistence of child recruitment cannot be explained by legal or normative gaps alone. Despite a comprehensive IHL framework and an increasingly detailed child protection framework, recruitment has continued to rise in the considered period between 2022 and 2024, revealing structural limitations operating on two levels. First, an uncertainty over the binding force of child protection mandates, and a deeper discrepancy between peacekeeping's advisory, state-centered tools and a conflict landscape increasingly dominated by non-state armed groups beyond the mission's practical reach. These findings suggest that upholding IHL obligations on child recruitment requires rethinking peacekeeping's structural capacities, not merely reinforcing its existing doctrine.

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These findings suggest that the persistence of child recruitment reflects not only gaps in implementation, but a deeper structural discrepancy between peacekeeping’s available tools and the actors driving the violation.

— **Mareike Warmboldt, Child Recruitment in the DRC**

PEACEKEEPING & CONFLICT PREVENTION



Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention in the Horn of Africa

How IGAD and the African Union Integrate Gender into Responses to Cross-Border Conflict

Sara Filali

About the Article

Both IGAD and the African Union have developed strong gender-sensitive frameworks, but institutional resistance, inadequate funding and coordination failures continue to limit their implementation.

About the Author

Sara Filali is a student majoring in International Studies and Diplomacy at Al Akhawayn University, with an exchange semester at Uppsala University. Her research focuses on international relations, diplomacy, and conflict prevention, with a regional focus on MENA. She has experience in policy research, cross-cultural projects, and writing, including fellowships with Climatic Peace and leadership at AIESEC in Ifrane.

Introduction

Cross-border conflict, displacement and contestation over resources continues to have a disproportionate impact on women and girls in the region of the Horn of Africa which is one of the most conflict-prone regions in the world. In the last 20 years, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the African Union (AU) have become more and more ambitious in introducing the inclusion of gender in peacebuilding and conflict prevention. Both organizations have developed strategies, action plans and institutional mechanisms which explicitly engage them with the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. However, the central question that this essay explores is not whether these organizations made these commitments, they clearly did but rather focuses on whether they have taken a step beyond their formal inclusion to actually include gender perspectives in their responses in practice. Based on primary institutional documents and scholarly analysis, this essay suggests that both organizations have built up very strong normative architecture but for each, there is a significant gap between vision and implementation, due to institutional resistance, lack of funding and coordination problems. In order to take this argument beyond policy documents, this essay repeatedly brings the cases of the region back to the ground: the war in northern Ethiopia, the current crisis in Sudan, and pastoralist regions like the Karamoja Cluster.

This question is especially relevant in the context of the Horn of Africa region. The area is home to some of the most entrenched and interlinked security issues in Africa, such as the ongoing conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia, the civil war in Sudan, the persistent instability in Somalia, and pastoralist violence across Kenya, Ethiopia, South Sudan and Uganda. Frequently these conflicts are transnational, involving refugee movements, competition over water, and cross-border movements of armed groups. Women and girls are particularly impacted by displacement, sexual and gender-based violence, as well as livelihood disruption and lack of access to peace negotiations. While women are key figures in the community-level peace processes and humanitarian responses in the region, women's participation in political representation and decision-making on Women, Peace and Security remains limited across the region (IGAD, 2023b)". Therefore, the issue of whether there has been an integration of gender concerns in IGAD and the AU's approach to conflict prevention is not only institutional but also directly related to the security and wellbeing of millions of women in conflict affected regions in the Horn of Africa.

Women, Peace and Security (WPS) is a UN agenda promoting women's participation in peace processes and their protection from conflict-related violence.

Conflicts in the Horn of Africa



Source: Sara Filali, based on the article text



Figure 1
Key Milestones in Gender, Peace and Security Frameworks in Africa (2000–2025)
Note. Figure created by the author using ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2026). Content adapted from IGAD (2023a), IGAD (2023b), Amani Africa (2025), and the African Union Peace and Security Council documentation.

The Normative Architecture: Substantial but Insufficient

There is no doubt about IGAD's and the AU's formal commitments to gender sensitive peacebuilding. Adopted at a Ministerial Meeting in November 2023 in Mombasa with support from the governments of Sweden and Canada and the UN Women, IGAD's Gender Equality Strategy 2023-2030 is an ambitious regional framework (IGAD, 2023a). In its fourth strategic priority, it formally encourages "the meaningful participation and leadership of women in peace building and conflict management at all levels of decision-making and protect women living in situations of conflict.". The strategy also commits IGAD to align its work in global agenda and frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals and AU's Agenda 2063,

Tracking WPS in the African Union

AU Continental Results Framework (CRF), 2018:

41	4	37
indicators	pillars	member states with NAPs (2025)

Source: Sara Filali, based on the article text (AU PSC, Oct 2025)

within which Aspiration 6 obligates that the development of Africa be "people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth.

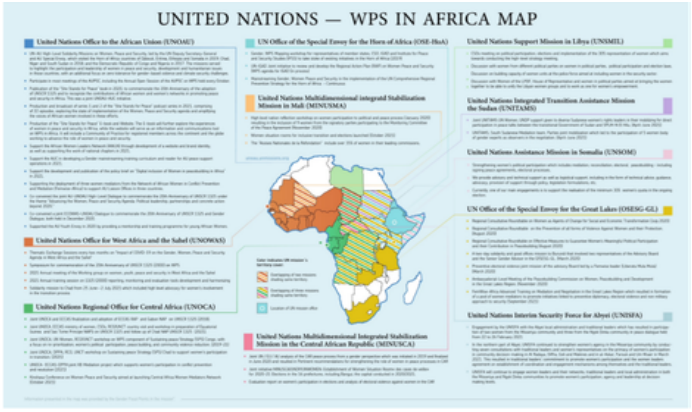
During the same 2023 Ministerial Meeting, IGAD has also adopted a Gender Strategy, in addition to a Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (RAP-WPS). The RAP explicitly recognizes that that "women's participation in peace processes remains low" across the region, that "financing and monitoring the implementation of National Action Plans remain weak," and that "implementation of most National Action Plans on WPS are not budgeted and hence their implementation is heavily dependent on donor funding" (IGAD, 2023b). These are institutional self-critical admissions of structural failure included in the same documents promising to fix them.

Similarly, at a continental level, the AU has built an equally multi-layered normative framework. A unanimous decision was taken at the 223rd meeting of the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) (established in 2004 and the key body responsible for conflict prevention, management and resolution on the continent) in March 2010 to institutionalize an annual debate on Women, Peace and Security. During that meeting, the PSC acknowledged that women are one of the most vulnerable groups in the context of armed conflicts and it resolved to step up its actions regarding women to ensure their equal representation in national and regional decision-making bodies and peace negotiations (AU, 2010 cited in Losekann and Santos, 2024). In 2018, the AU has developed the Continental Results Framework (CRF), the main monitoring tool to track the implementation of the WPS

agenda against 41 indicators, across four pillars: participation, prevention, protection and relief and recovery, of which member states and AU institutions are responsible. The PSC in its October 2025 session, commemorating 25 years of UNSCR 1325, discussed progress made on these various instruments, highlighting the increased prevalence of National Action Plans adopted by 37 member states, the expansion of FemWise-Africa as a women's mediation network and the activities of the AU Special Envoy on Women, Peace and Security, created in 2014 (Amani Africa, 2025).

"Both IGAD and the African Union have developed strong gender-sensitive frameworks, but institutional resistance, inadequate funding and coordination failures continue to limit their implementation."

Scholarly analysis demonstrates that this normative foundation is solid. The PSC's concept on the WPS agenda is more comprehensive than the UN model, which is based on a human security perspective that extends the protection of women beyond the state security/defense to socioeconomic development contexts, as proposed by Losekann and Santos (2024). The PSC has taken a different approach from the UNSC which has traditionally had a statist and realist perspective on the military aspects of the state, The PSC "considers a less-centered approach on the state's military dimension more appropriate to African realities,", and noting the factors that make women vulnerable, such as their structural position, poverty, displacement and resource scarcity. This normative division is important as it goes beyond a mere reflection of external frameworks and instead shows a local notion of gendered insecurity.



(United Nations – Women, Peace and Security (WPS) in Africa MAP | She Stands for Peace, n.d.)

The Implementation Gap: Structural and Political Failures

This strong normative architecture is not without its implementation problems, which are well documented in both institutions. In her 2017 analysis paper on the AU's performance in relation to the implementation of WPS, Cheryl Hendricks notes that while "progress has been made in relation to the development of frameworks, policies and strategies," the AU still has "a long way to go"' in terms of programmatic results, especially in peace negotiations and peace support operations (Hendricks, 2017). The programmes and activities undertaken seem "rather ad hoc and attempts at quick-fix measurable exercises.". More specifically, Hendricks argues that the WPS agenda has been limited to talking about the integration of women into peace and security institutions and processes without serious consideration of the implications of their inclusion, such as the risk of legitimizing "post-conflict patriarchal and

militarized orders" through performative inclusion.

This diagnosis is confirmed by IGAD's own institutional documents. The Gender Strategy 2023-2030 takes lessons from the previous strategy period (2016-2020) as "most project proposals have not included gender scrutiny at the design stage," "low support across divisions and resistance by programme leaders" was noted due to "long-held cultural biases," and "the capacity of the gender department remains low". As well as "a lack of A regional data sharing protocol and inadequate monitoring". The most telling statement on the peace and security aspect is the explicit recognition in the document that IGAD's Gender Department still has a wish to engage CEWARN, the Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism, in "Improving the gender responsiveness of its field monitoring system." Framing this as a future goal, not a current reality, is important: it shows that, although IGAD has formally committed to mainstreaming its primary conflict prevention mechanism, it has not yet done so substantially.

Losekann and Santos (2024) detect failures that are similar at the AU-level. Analysis of PSC activities reveals that most of the work being done by the body is on the participation pillar (training women mediators, deploying more women to peace operations), with less substantive work carried out on the prevention and reconstruction pillars. The socioeconomic inclusion of structural issues of post-conflict reconstruction are seldom tackled in a systematic way and "there is no systematic reference to translate them into practice.". The quantitative evidence confirms the pattern, the 30 per cent women participation in peace quota has not happened and even women trained in the FemWise-Africa initiative are "not even sent to conflict scenarios" when deployed.

This implementation gap is seen in recent conflicts in the Horn of Africa. Widespread conflict-related sexual violence has been documented by the United Nations during the war in northern Ethiopia (2020-2022), and it was reported that millions of people were displaced, including numerous women and children. Likewise, the current Sudanese situation has created one of the world's largest displacement crises and has left women vulnerable to increased threats of violence, exploitation and economic insecurity. While women have been adequately represented in informal discussions and mediation, they have not been sufficiently represented in formal negotiations and mediation processes, as demonstrated by the lack of women's specific inclusion in IGAD and the AU peace process and humanitarian response statements.

Delegations in the IGAD-led mediation tracks on Sudan, for instance, have been strongly male-dominated, with women's groups confined mostly to parallel civil society consultations rather than the negotiating table itself, which is a classic example of the formal-informal divide which IGAD's own Gender Strategy identifies as a recurring problem. The key paradox of gender-sensitive peacebuilding at the regional level is that political institutions are committed to inclusion, but women remain underrepresented in political processes that drive conflict resolution and post-conflict recovery.

A key structural reason for these failures is funding. According to Losekann and Santos

(2024), only 0.25 per cent of the AU Commission's budget is allocated to the WPS agenda, and it is not optimally allocated between the pillars. The Peace Fund does not make any specific allocations to activities related to gender. In general, over 90 per cent of the financial needs of the AU are fulfilled from external sources of funding. This consideration of donor dependency as an intervening variable is in itself an issue since it questions the extent to which WPS programming responds to regional priorities and needs, rather than to the perceptions and cycles of donor agencies. The very fact that the figure is 0.25 per cent indicates that such a level of resources is insufficient to allow for the sustained adoption and embedding of gender mainstreaming, shifting IGAD and AU towards project-based, donor-dependent programming, rather than building their own institutionalized capacities and funding mechanisms.

The resource issue is exacerbated by "Coordination Failures." In addition, although the AU and the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) have signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2008, and the PSC's guidelines have been implemented, there is still an element of ambiguity about the scope of the respective mandate of the two bodies when it comes to peace and security (Losekann and Santos, 2024). In IGAD, the gender responsibility is formally shared by various divisions and specialized offices, but inconsistencies and gaps in mainstreaming gender practices were noted internally during the 2024 institutional gender needs assessment, and a workshop in May 2025 for the revision and validation of the Gender Mainstreaming Toolkit (IGAD, 2025) was held.

Toward a Critical Assessment: between Inclusion and Transformation

While these situations might be administrative failures, they are also structural tensions which are inherent in the way both organizations approach their work. The core issue is gender equality interventions are enacted mostly in the form of inclusion, meaning including women into the institutions and processes, rather than transformation of the gendered institutions and processes that create insecurity in the first place, as pointed out by Hendricks (2017).

In this sense, inclusion would mean 'adding' women as members of mediation panels, monitoring bodies, or peace delegations that were conceived within a state-centered and militarized logic to secure 'the security of the state', leaving existing power structures untouched. True transformation would imply redesigning these institutions anew around the priorities and power relations that women set within their communities, for instance by formally incorporating community mediation and early warning systems as constitutive elements of peacemaking and conflict prevention in IGAD and AU member states. This is the nuance that makes Hendricks's (2017) take on inclusion without transformation all the more pertinent, as 'adding women' could very well entail embedding them as guests in "post-conflict patriarchal and militarized orders", without any transformation of structures, relations and distributions of power.

Expanding women's presence in peace delegations or conducting training for women as mediators is not enough to change the norms and practices that marginalize women in conflict governance, nor is it sufficient to tackle their

economic vulnerability, which they face in conflict settings. "Drawing up policies without the involvement of the local population tends to produce unsatisfactory results,", as Lewis, cited by Losekann and Santos (2024), notes, and full participation of local women in the peacekeeping process has proved counterproductive.

The limitations of an inclusion-centered approach are also extremely evident in the Horn of Africa. Women often have informal peacebuilding roles in pastoralist border areas like the Kenya-Ethiopia borderlands and the Karamoja Cluster, through community mediation, resource sharing, and early warning systems. But many of these contributions take place outside of formal regional peace and security processes. Local women have been found to have key knowledge in local resource conflicts, migration trends and community tensions that could be utilized in building conflict prevention capacity, according to research from the Rift Valley Institute and the United Nations Development Programme. However, the rules and procedures still favor the elite citizens of the political arena and the representatives of the State. A transformative process would entail integrating this local knowledge into IGAD's own architecture for conflict prevention, for example by enabling women's community mediation networks to have a formal role in reporting within IGAD's CEWARN, as opposed to calling on them as an informal resource on an ad hoc basis. As mentioned above, IGAD's Gender Strategy 2023-2030 still treats the gender responsiveness of IGAD's engagements with CEWARN as a future objective, indicating that IGAD is still far from this form of structural change. This leaves room for gender mainstreaming to become a 'bureaucratic exercise' instead of a process of building gender into the design of peacebuilding strategies, thus neglecting women's lived experiences.

This critique is particularly relevant for the region of the Horn of Africa, where pastoralist inter-border violence, insecurity due to resource scarcity, and weak state institutions, are often the cause of gender-based violence. IGAD's Gender Strategy 2023–2030 recognizes that, violent conflict and fragility impacts men, women, boys and girls differently, which is often not recognized and not acted upon in the mainstream policies and programmes on conflict and reconstruction" and that "contextual factors in each country in IGAD Member States require different operational approaches." However, the overall implementation architecture of the strategy continues to be based on a top-down approach of coordination at the national level (national focal points) and monitoring at the secretariat level, which the strategy itself describes as inadequate at other times.

Amani Africa's review of UNSCR 1325's 25th anniversary (2025) reached the same conclusion as this analysis not that there is a lack of normative and institutional frameworks, but an issue in "converting commitments into measurable results". In its March meeting, the PSC noted "the need to establish clear indicators and robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms" which should have been formally addressed much earlier than the second decade of the agenda. A basic accountability infrastructure is still far from being mature, as evidenced by the need for a simplified digital reporting tool and biennial reporting and feedback loops that were recommended for the

Continental Results Framework at a workshop in June 2025 (Amani Africa, 2025).

Conclusion

At the normative level, both IGAD and the African Union have developed regional gender-sensitive peacebuilding architectures, which are one of the most advanced in the world. Women's commitments in IGAD's Gender Strategy and Regional Action Plan on WPS and the AU's Continental Results Framework as well as the PSC's institutionalized reflection on women, peace and security are real and meaningful. However, there are structural, enduring, and documented differences between the frameworks and their reality, as evidenced by the institutions. Formal inclusion is often unachievable due to a range of institutional resistances, lack of funding, reliance on external donors, coordination problems between secretariat and member states, and limited incorporation of gender into core mechanisms.

Recent wars in Ethiopia and Sudan confirm that the problem is not a lack of gender sensitive frameworks but how the frameworks are being translated into meaningful influence over conflict prevention, mediation and post, conflict reconstruction on the regional level. The absences of the Horn of Africa's women, who are affected by the cross-border conflicts which these organizations are supposed to manage, are not necessarily due to their absence in strategy documents but to the political and resource dynamics that need to be put in place to ensure they are present on the table for peace to be made.

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PEACEKEEPING & CONFLICT PREVENTION



Beyond Traditional Peacekeeping: NATO's Inclusive Security Agendas in Iraq

NATO's WPS & Human Security, the Evolution of Inclusive Peacekeeping: NATO Mission Iraq

Valerio Borgo

About the Article

The future of peacekeeping lies not in replacing military power, but in integrating it with inclusive security, resilient institutions, and local ownership.

About the Author

Valerio Borgo is an aspiring security and defence policy professional with a background in European Studies, International Relations and Diplomacy. He completed a MA in European Policy, specialising in EU external relations and conflict resolution. His research interests include EU security cooperation, crisis management, and gender perspectives in conflict environments. He aims to contribute to evidence-based policy research advancing resilience, peacebuilding and international cooperation.

NATO's Woman Peace and Security & Human Security agendas, the Evolution of Inclusive Peacekeeping: Lessons from the NATO Mission Iraq

Keywords: NATO; Women, Peace and Security (WPS); Human Security; Peacekeeping; Conflict Prevention; Intersectionality; the NATO Mission to Iraq (NMI); Security Governance; Inclusive Security and LGBTQ+ inclusion.

Research Question: What is the extent to which NATO's Women, Peace and Security and Human Security initiatives reflect the wider shift in its peacekeeping and conflict prevention strategies towards more inclusive and intersectional security frameworks?

Answer to RQ: NATO's WPD and Human Security initiatives show a step-by-step move away from the traditional approach to security that focused on the state towards more inclusive frameworks for peacekeeping and conflict prevention, even though there are still substantial institutional and operational limitations when it comes to implementing these in an intersectional manner.

Methodology: The article uses a qualitative case study method in order to look at the way NATO's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Human Security initiatives have been put into practice by means of the example of the NATO Mission in Iraq (NMI). The analysis is based on NATO's strategic documents, policy frameworks, mission publications, United Nations (UN) resolutions, and appropriate academic literature concerning peacekeeping, Human Security, and security sector reform. NMI has been chosen as the main case since, as a non-combat advisory and capacity-building mission, it offers a very appropriate setting in which to examine how the principles of inclusive security are implemented in the context of defence institution building. The article evaluates to what extent NATO's developing strategic commitments have led to real changes in current peacekeeping practice by combining an institutional analysis with an operational case study.

Abstract

International peacekeeping has moved from a main focus on states to more thorough approaches which stress the protection of individuals and communities as well as the usual security goals (Bellamy & Williams, 2021; de Coning, 2018). In NATO, this shift is shown by the incorporation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Human Security initiatives into strategic planning and operational activities (NATO, 2022, 2024a, 2024b). Taking NATO Mission Iraq (NMI) as a qualitative case study, the article looks at how these frameworks show the wider changes taking place in modern peacekeeping and conflict prevention. It maintains that although NATO has increased its institutional dedication to inclusive security, the implementation is still uneven because of political, organisational, and contextual limitations. The analysis shows that incorporating gender perspectives, civilian protection, local ownership, and Human Security factors can help improve security sector reform, boost institutional resilience, and enhance engagement with local communities (NATO Mission Iraq, 2024; Shepherd, 2016). Yet there remains the difficulty of turning these principles into consistent operational practice (de Coning, 2018; Richmond, 2011). The article concludes that inclusive security should not be seen as a substitute for military effectiveness, but rather as

an ever more important element of current peacekeeping that complements traditional military capabilities and contributes to more sustainable conflict prevention.

1. Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War the character of international peacekeeping has changed considerably. In the early days peace operations mainly concentrated on monitoring ceasefires, separating the belligerent forces and preserving state sovereignty, but in current conflicts there is a greater involvement of non-state armed groups, terrorism, organised crime, weak governance and widespread violence against civilians (Bellamy & Williams, 2021; Fortna, 2008). This has shown the shortcomings of conventional military methods, demonstrating that sustainable peace cannot rely merely on territorial security but also requires resilient institutions, legitimate governance and the protection of civilians (de Coning, 2018; Richmond, 2011).

As a result, international organisations have become more inclined to adopt inclusive methods of dealing with security. The idea of Human Security extended the notion of security beyond military threats by focusing on the protection and empowerment of individuals and communities (UNDP, 1994; Kaldor, 2007), and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, which was established by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, stated that meaningful participation, gender-responsive institutions, and protection from conflict-related sexual violence are all essential for sustainable peacebuilding (UNSC, 2000; Shepherd, 2016; Davies & True, 2019).

NATO has always generally been considered a collective defence alliance, but its strategic perspective has changed as it has become more involved in crisis management and capacity-building operations. The Alliance has step by step incorporated the WPS principles and embraced a Human Security Approach, showing a greater awareness of the fact that military effectiveness is closely connected to the political, social, and human aspects of conflict (NATO, 2022, 2024a, 2024b).

Women, Peace and Security (WPS): The UN framework recognising that women's participation, protection, and leadership are essential to sustainable peace and security.

This article uses NATO Mission Iraq (NMI) as a qualitative example to look at the way NATO's WPS and Human Security initiatives show wider changes in modern peacekeeping and conflict prevention. It contends that although these frameworks do indicate a significant move towards more inclusive security, their actual application is still inconsistent because of political, organisational, and contextual limitations. The article then considers whether NATO's recent strategic adjustments amount to a real transformation in peacekeeping or merely represent an evolution of its institutional policy (de Coning, 2018; Richmond, 2011).

2. A Shift From Traditional Peacekeeping to Inclusive Security

Over the last thirty years, international peacekeeping has shifted alongside changing concepts of conflict and security. During the Cold War, state-centric operations focused on

monitoring ceasefires, separating forces, and respecting state sovereignty based on consent, impartiality, and limited force. Post-Cold War conflicts, however, increasingly involve non-state actors, violent extremism, organized crime, and complex humanitarian crises that blur military, political, and social lines.

Because military force alone cannot secure sustainable peace, peacekeeping has moved toward tackling underlying structural causes like weak institutions and political exclusion. This evolution fostered the concept of human security, which places individuals and communities rather than just the state at the center of security policy. While critics warn that its broad scope lacks analytical clarity, international organizations continue refining it into practical operational frameworks.

"The future of peacekeeping lies not in replacing military power, but in integrating it with inclusive security, resilient institutions, and local ownership."

A similar development took place when United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) (UNSC, 2000) was adopted. In addition to promoting gender equality, the WPS agenda acknowledged that conflicts have different effects on various populations and that meaningful participation by women contributes directly to conflict prevention and to the achievement of sustainable peacebuilding. Later resolutions extended this framework to include participation, protection, prevention, relief and recovery, and accountability (UNSC, 2008, 2015). More and more scholars have maintained that WPS should be understood not merely as a

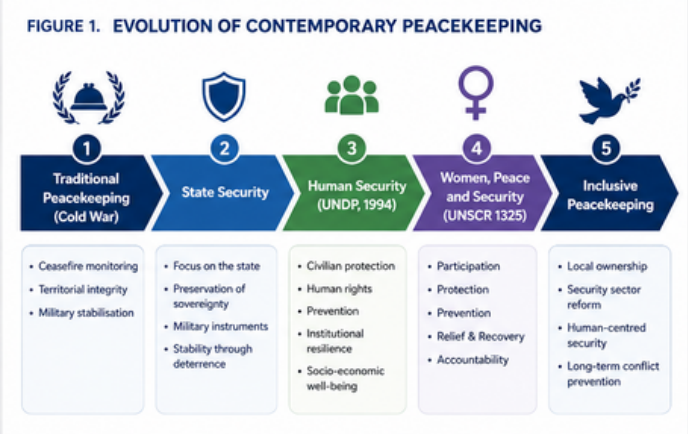
Normative commitment can, however, be used as an operational framework in order to improve situational awareness, strengthen institutional legitimacy, and enhance mission effectiveness (Shepherd, 2016; Davies & True, 2019). Furthermore, empirical evidence indicates that peace processes which involve women are linked to more durable peace agreements (O'Reilly et al., 2015).

Modern scholarly work has added to these discussions by means of the concept of intersectionality. This idea, which was first introduced by Crenshaw in 1989 and 1991, shows how overlapping aspects of identity such as gender, ethnicity, age, disability, displacement, and socioeconomic status influence different experiences of insecurity. In the field of peacekeeping, this approach questions standard methods of protecting civilians by stressing the need to make vulnerability assessments that are specific to the context (Hudson, 2005; Pratt & Richter-Devroe, 2011). Although NATO's Human Security framework now recognises the existence of different kinds of vulnerability, it still provides only limited explicit guidance concerning LGBTQ+ communities, the inclusion of such groups being dealt with mainly through general principles of non-discrimination and intersectionality rather than through specific operational mechanisms (NATO, 2024b).

Even though there is increasing support for Human Security and the WPS, significant debates still exist about how these initiatives should be put into practice. It is claimed that

inclusive security could end up being mostly rhetorical unless political commitments are accompanied by sufficient resources, institutional capacity, and tangible results (Paris, 2001; Shepherd, 2016). There is also concern that constantly broadening the scope of peacekeeping might confuse the military's responsibilities and lead to unrealistic expectations about what security organisations are able to achieve (Richmond, 2011). Such criticisms are especially pertinent to NATO, since the organisation's main obligation is still collective defence.

In light of this, the fact that NATO has adopted the Women, Peace and Security and Human Security agendas should not be seen as merely isolated policy initiatives but rather as part of a wider evolution in international peacekeeping. These agendas show the growing awareness that military effectiveness, civilian protection, institutional resilience, and inclusive governance are becoming more and more interlinked. The main question as to whether or not these institutional commitments have resulted in real operational practice is the one that is examined in the following sections via NATO's developing strategic framework and the example of the NATO Mission Iraq.



Source: Bellamy and Williams (2021); UNDP (1994); UNSCR 1325 (2000).

3. NATO's Institutional Response: Embedding WPS and Human Security

The development of NATO's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Human Security initiatives is an indication of the Alliance's wider adjustment to a more complicated security situation. Even though collective defence remains NATO's main responsibility, the organisation's increasing participation in crisis management, stabilisation operations, counterterrorism and defence capacity-building has shown the shortcomings of relying solely on military capabilities. Today's conflicts are influenced not just by armed struggle but also by governance failures, social fragmentation, harm to civilians and a falling level of institutional legitimacy. As a result, NATO has step by step come to the conclusion that military effectiveness requires an understanding of the political, social and human aspects of conflict as well as the traditional security threats (NATO, 2022; Yost, 2010).

Rather than representing a departure from NATO's traditional mandate, the WPS and Human Security agendas should therefore be understood as institutional adaptations to the

The nature of today's conflicts is changing. In order to improve the effectiveness of its missions, boost the resilience of its institutions, and enhance its interaction with local populations, NATO has incorporated gender perspectives, the protection of civilians, and wider human security issues into its operational planning (NATO, 2024a; NATO, 2024b). However, there is still debate as to how far these institutional commitments have been reflected in actual operational practice.

3.1 The Development of NATO's Women, Peace and Security Agenda

Since the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1325 in 2000, NATO's involvement with the Women, Peace and Security agenda has developed considerably. At first it was concerned with integrating a gender perspective into military planning, but it has since broadened its approach through a series of policy frameworks, such as the 2016 WPS Policy, the 2021–2025 Action Plan, and the 2024 NATO Policy on Women, Peace and Security (NATO, 2016, 2021, 2024a). The various documents now treat gender not as a separate equality issue but as an operational factor that can enhance strategic decision-making and the effectiveness of missions.

There is a wider change taking place in the academic literature. Instead of seeing the WPS only as a normative obligation to promote gender equality, scholars are now more likely to claim that gender analysis improves operational effectiveness by increasing situational awareness, helping in engagement with local communities, and enabling the identification of security factors which would otherwise go unnoticed (Shepherd, 2016; Davies & True, 2019). Moreover, empirical research indicates that inclusive peace processes lead to more sustainable peace agreements and greater institutional legitimacy, thus underscoring the strategic importance of genuine participation beyond its normative aspect (O'Reilly et al., 2015).

To put these principles into practice, NATO has appointed Gender Advisors (GENADs) and Gender Focal Points (GFPs), incorporated gender analysis into its operational planning, and made pre-deployment training a requirement (NATO, 2024a). The intention of these measures is to make sure that commanders take into account the different effects of conflict on various population groups, with the result that civilian engagement is improved, unintended consequences are reduced, and operational planning is strengthened.

Yet there is still an unevenness in turning institutional commitments into action. The success of gender integration still relies to a large extent on political support, on organisational culture, on leadership commitment, and on the authority given to gender advisers in the command structure. As Shepherd (2016) points out, the fact that an institution adopts a policy does not necessarily lead to organisational change. Likewise, Davies and True (2019) observe that the mere existence of WPS policies will not ensure their meaningful implementation if gender expertise remains only marginal in operational decision-making. Although NATO's institutional framework has expanded considerably, questions still exist as to how consistently these principles affect military practice.

3.2 Human Security: Expanding NATO's Understanding of Security

NATO's adoption of a Human Security framework marks a major institutional evolution. Formally established as a cross-cutting element in the 2022 Strategic Concept, Human Security expands traditional defense priorities by recognizing that civilian protection, institutional resilience, and social stability directly impact mission success (NATO, 2022). The framework focuses on systematic attention to civilian protection, conflict-related sexual violence,

children in conflict, human trafficking, and cultural property protection (NATO, 2024b). This aligns with broader literature arguing that sustainable peace requires addressing root causes of societal insecurity rather than just military threats (Kaldor, 2007; UNDP, 1994).

Drawing lessons from Afghanistan and the Western Balkans—where military victories failed to guarantee political stability—NATO integrated human security into operational planning, military education, and pre-deployment training (NATO, 2024b; de Coning, 2018). However, practical implementation remains challenging. Human security outcomes are inherently difficult to measure, and responsibilities are often fragmented across national contingents. Furthermore, balancing conceptual ambition with practical feasibility remains an ongoing hurdle when translating broad principles into military operations (Paris, 2001).

3.3 Going Beyond Policy: Institutional Adaptation or Operational Transformation?

The combination of NATO's Women, Peace and Security and Human Security initiatives shows a marked move beyond the traditional view of security which is centred on the state. Since it has incorporated gender perspectives, the protection of civilians and societal resilience into its strategic doctrine, the Alliance is coming to realise that military effectiveness depends not just on conventional capabilities but also on inclusive methods of conflict prevention and stability (NATO, 2022).

Nevertheless, the degree of this transformation is still disputed. Although NATO's strategic framework places a greater emphasis on inclusion, local ownership, and resilience, the way it is put into practice still differs from one mission to another depending on political priorities, institutional capacity, the resources available, and cooperation from the host state (Richmond, 2011; Shepherd, 2016). It follows that institutional innovation does not always lead to uniform operational practice.

The fact is especially clear in advisory and capacity-building missions since long-term success relies on strengthening national institutions and on supporting reforms that are owned at the local level. The NATO Mission to Iraq (NMI) therefore offers a good example for assessing

Whether or not the strategic commitments of NATO have resulted in real operational changes or whether substantial gaps still exist between policy and practice.

FIGURE 2. NATO'S INCLUSIVE SECURITY FRAMEWORK



Source: NATO 2022 Strategic Concept; NATO Policy on WPS(2024); Human Security Approach and Guiding Principles (2022). NATO officially defines Human Security around protection of civilians, conflict-related sexual violence, trafficking in human beings, children and armed conflict, and cultural property protection.

4. Testing Inclusive Security: The Case of the NATO Mission Iraq

NATO Mission Iraq (NMI) is a particularly pertinent example when evaluating whether the Alliance's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Human Security initiatives have moved from being institutional commitments to being put into practice in actual operations. The mission was set up in 2018 at the request of the Iraqi government after the territorial defeat of Da'esh, and it is different from conventional peacekeeping operations. Instead,

The mission's aim is preventive not coercive and it seeks to reduce the structural causes of instability by improving the effectiveness, accountability and inclusiveness of Iraq's security institutions; it focuses on advising Iraqi security institutions, strengthening defence governance and supporting long-term resilience (NATO, 2024c).

NMI is therefore an especially valuable example to study. Unlike typical military operations, its success is based on continuous cooperation with national institutions, on possessing political legitimacy and on having trust established between the security providers and the local communities. As a result, elements such as institutional governance, civilian involvement, and social inclusion become essential for the effectiveness of the mission (de Coning, 2018). It thus provides a chance to examine whether NATO's developing approach to inclusive security has led to real operational changes.



Source: Valerio Borgo, based on the article text (NATO, 2024c)

4.1 Women, Peace and Security in Security Sector Reform

NATO has mainly pursued the incorporation of WPS principles into NMI through security sector reform (SSR) rather than by concentrating solely on increasing the number of women in the Iraqi security institutions. By integrating a gender perspective into professional military education, defence planning, organisational reform and leadership development, NATO reflects its wider view that inclusive institutions lead to both operational effectiveness and long-term stability (NATO, 2024a).

A key element of this method involves the work of Gender Advisors (GENADs) and Gender Focal Points (GFPs), who assist commanders in integrating gender analysis into their operational planning and training. In the NATO Mission Iraq (NATO Mission Iraq, 2024), training programmes have focused on gender-responsive leadership, conflict-related sexual violence, and the implementation of UNSCR 1325, while also urging Iraqi defence institutions to think about the impact of their security policies on different sections of the population. Instead of acting merely as compliance measures, these initiatives aim to enhance decision-making by improving situational awareness and promoting more effective interaction with local communities.

In terms of operational effectiveness, this shows a wider change in the way legitimacy is viewed as part of security sector reform. As Shepherd (2016) points out, taking a gender perspective leads to greater operational effectiveness since it improves an understanding of the dynamics of conflict which might otherwise be ignored. Likewise, Davies and True (2019) assert that inclusive institutions are more likely to win public

confidence and thus to strengthen state legitimacy. In Iraq, a country where decades of conflict have damaged the trust between citizens and the security institutions, achieving these aims is directly connected with preventing conflict rather than involving just symbolic commitments.

Yet the mission also shows the extent of the limits of reform supported from the outside. Progress is largely due to continuous political commitment within the Iraqi institutions, to the presence of specialised expertise, and to wider social and cultural factors. As a result, even though the NMI has managed to incorporate the principles of WPS into its advisory work, the long-term effect of these initiatives will eventually come down to whether national actors carry on with the reforms after external support has decreased.

FIGURE 3. FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE: NATO MISSION IRAQ



Source: NATO's official NMI description. It identifies NMI as a non-combat advisory and capacity-building mission supporting sustainable, transparent, inclusive, and effective Iraqi security institutions.

4.2 Operationalising Human Security

NMI also shows the way in which NATO has aimed at putting Human Security into practice through its defence capacity-building efforts. Instead of viewing civilian protection as a separate humanitarian issue, the mission integrates Human Security factors into military education, strategic advice, and institutional reform and thus encourages Iraq's security institutions to see civilian protection as an essential part of operational effectiveness (NATO, 2024b).

The fact that this method shows that NATO believes security institutions gain their legitimacy not just because they can deal with military threats but also because they are able to protect civilian populations, maintain professional standards, and keep the public's trust is reflected in the way the NMI deals with a number of issues such as the protection of civilians, conflict-related sexual violence, trafficking in human beings, and the protection of cultural property as part of its advisory functions (NATO Mission Iraq, 2024). The aim of these considerations is to reduce harm to civilians, enhance institutional accountability, and improve the relationships between security providers and the communities they serve.

The fact that Human Security is given such emphasis also shows a significant change in the way mission success is conceived. Instead of assessing progress only by means of traditional indicators like the number of personnel trained or the capabilities developed, the NMI is now more aware that sustainable security relies on enhancing institutional resilience and public confidence. This is in agreement with de Coning's (2018) view that peacebuilding should be seen as an adaptive process in which resilient national institutions, not external actors, should act as the main guarantors of long-term stability.

It is inherently difficult to measure these outcomes since improvements in institutional legitimacy, community trust, and civilian

resilience almost never lead to immediate or easily quantifiable results and thus make it hard to assess the practical effect of Human Security initiatives. As Paris (2001) warns, there remains one of the main challenges facing Human Security in practice when it comes to turning broad conceptual frameworks into measurable operational objectives.

4.3 Local Ownership and Institutional Resilience

Perhaps the clearest illustration of NATO's evolving approach to conflict prevention is NMI's emphasis on local ownership. Unlike earlier intervention models characterised by extensive international control, NMI operates exclusively at the invitation of the Iraqi government and seeks to strengthen national institutions rather than replace them (NATO, 2024c). Iraqi authorities retain responsibility for determining reform priorities, while NATO advisers provide technical expertise, professional education, and institutional support.

This method is in line with current scholarship in the field of peacebuilding. As Richmond (2011) points out, sustainable peace cannot be imposed from outside and must instead arise from legitimate domestic institutions which are able to preserve public confidence and ensure political accountability. In the same way, Call and Wyeth (2008) stress that reforms which are pushed from outside tend to be unsustainable if national actors do not take genuine ownership of the reform process. That is why NMI sees NATO's role as that of a promoter of institutional development rather than as a direct source of security.

At the same time, the model necessarily restricts outside influence since the implementation will in the end rest on the domestic political will of the country and therefore NATO has only limited power to bring about reforms or to speed up institutional change. Progress may therefore be hindered even in the face of ongoing international support due to political instability, competing priorities and fluctuations in Iraq's security situation. NMI thus shows one of the main problems facing modern peacebuilding, namely that while international organisations can help to achieve reform they cannot take the place of a continuous national commitment.

4.4 From Commitment to Institutional Reality

When looked at as a whole, NMI shows that NATO has gone beyond viewing the WPS and Human Security as simply normative obligations. Gender considerations, the protection of civilians, institutional resilience, and local ownership have become more and more incorporated into its advisory work and defence capacity-building, indicating that inclusive security is now starting to influence operational practice rather than staying limited to strategic doctrine.

The mission also shows the extent to which this transformation is limited. The success of inclusive security still relies on political commitment, the organisational capacity, the resources available, and the cooperation of the institutions of the host state. Furthermore, many of the intended results – such as increased legitimacy, better community trust, and greater institutional resilience – remain hard to measure and usually only appear after a long period of time. It therefore follows that turning institutional

aspirations into actual operational changes is not automatic and does not take place in a straight line.

NATO's Mission in Iraq is not an example of a finished transformation but rather shows an ongoing process of organisational adaptation. It indicates that inclusive security can contribute to conflict prevention by strengthening governance, increasing institutional legitimacy, and promoting civilian engagement, although it also shows that such approaches are only effective when they are backed by continuous political commitment and local ownership. It therefore provides significant evidence that the future of peacekeeping does not lie in replacing traditional military capabilities but in combining them with more people-centred approaches to security.

5. Discussion: What Does NATO Reveal About the Future of Peacekeeping?

The example of the NATO Mission in Iraq (NMI) shows a wider shift in modern peacekeeping. Instead of merely taking on new policy frameworks, NATO's incorporation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Human Security initiatives shows an increasing awareness that sustainable peace depends not just on military capabilities but also on political legitimacy, the protection of civilians, and on strong institutions (de Coning, 2018; NATO, 2022). Since today's conflicts tend to involve armed violence together with failures in governance and social fragmentation, security organisations have had to develop more comprehensive methods of conflict prevention.

The results indicate that the major change is not the substitution of traditional security with approaches that are focused on people, but rather their integration. NATO has gradually come to realise that the effectiveness of military operations is influenced by the broader political and social environment in which they take place. Within this context, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda and the concept of human security should be seen as more than just normative commitments; they should be regarded as operational frameworks. This can help to strengthen institutional legitimacy, improve interaction with local communities, and enhance the effectiveness of the mission (NATO, 2024a, 2024b).

NMI also points out a more general evolution in the role of international organisations. Instead of mainly functioning as external providers of security, missions are now working to enhance national institutions by offering advisory assistance, helping with defence reform, and building up capacity. This is in keeping with current peacebuilding research, which stresses that sustainable peace relies on legitimate and resilient domestic institutions rather than on long-term external intervention (Richmond, 2011; Call & Wyeth, 2008).

At the same time, the results warn against assuming that institutional innovation is the same as operational transformation. Even though NATO has developed ever more comprehensive strategic frameworks, implementation still relies on political priorities, organisational capacity, the resources available and on continued cooperation with partner governments. The experience of NMI thus lends support to the broader criticisms that ambitious

policy frameworks often face major difficulties when turned into complex operational situations (Paris, 2001; Shepherd, 2016).

FIGURE 4. FROM TRADITIONAL SECURITY TO INCLUSIVE PEACEKEEPING

DIMENSION	TRADITIONAL SECURITY	INCLUSIVE PEACEKEEPING
Focus	State-centric	Human-centred
Primary Objective	Military deterrence	Conflict prevention
Approach	Peace enforcement	Building resilience
Method	External intervention	Local ownership & partnership
Measure of Success	Operational success	Sustainable peace

Source: de Coning (2018), Richmond (2011), and NATO (2022), presented explicitly as an analytical synthesis.

6. Conclusion

The article has looked at the way NATO's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Human Security initiatives reflect the wider changes taking place in contemporary peacekeeping, using the example of the NATO Mission in Iraq (NMI). It has maintained that NATO has gradually gone beyond its earlier focus on the state when incorporating civilian protection, local ownership, and institutional resilience into its strategic approach (NATO, 2022, 2024a, 2024b). Instead of abandoning its main defence responsibility, the Alliance has modified its framework to meet the growing complexity of security situations in which military, political and societal factors are closely interlinked.

The analysis shows that this evolution is clearly seen both at an institutional and an operational level. NATO has incorporated WPS and Human Security principles into its strategic doctrine and advisory activities, and NMI shows how these frameworks can be used to support security sector reform, defence institution building, and long-term conflict prevention (NATO Mission Iraq, 2024). Meanwhile, the findings indicate that institutional adaptation does

It does not automatically translate into operational transformation; the effectiveness of inclusive security still relies on political commitment, organisational capacity, and continued cooperation with national partners (Richmond, 2011).

The study ultimately indicates that the future of peacekeeping will not involve a decision between traditional military capabilities and people-centred approaches, but rather the effective integration of the two. Experience gained by NATO shows that inclusive security can complement conventional military capabilities by enhancing the legitimacy of institutions, improving interaction with local communities, and helping to achieve more sustainable conflict prevention (Shepherd, 2016; de Coning, 2018). It would be worthwhile for future research to investigate whether similar patterns of institutional adaptation are appearing in other international organisations and in different operational contexts, so as to allow for a wider comparative evaluation of the development of modern peacekeeping.

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PEACEKEEPING & CONFLICT PREVENTION



UN Peacekeeping as a Site of Contestation

China and the Reshaping of the Global Order

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About the Article

China uses UN peacekeeping not to abandon the multilateral system, but to challenge Western dominance from within by prioritizing state-centred sovereignty and development-first sequencing.

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Introduction: China's Rise in Peacekeeping and the Reshaping of International Order

UN peacekeeping is a dynamic global network that goes beyond individual missions. As a political, security and social assemblage, it reconfigures relationships among actors and functions as a form of power through which competing visions, values and ideas shape how international order is contested and reshaped.

A strategy where rising powers use international institutions to contest, reinterpret, and reshape liberal norms and governance priorities from within rather than exiting them.

In this sense, China's growing role within the United Nations system deserves renewed attention. China is currently the second largest assessed contributor to both the UN regular budget and UN peacekeeping, with assessment rates of around 20% and 18.69% respectively (United Nations, 2025). As a permanent member of the Security Council, China participates directly in the authorisation, renewal, and shaping of UN peacekeeping mandates, having a direct impact over the future of the 11 current UN peacekeeping operations. Furthermore, with over 1,600 troops and other personnel now serving UN peacekeeping operations, China has become now the eighth-largest provider of UN Peacekeeping personnel globally, exceeding the rest of the Security Council (P5) (United Nations, 2026).

This article asks how China's recent engagement with UN peacekeeping illustrates broader contestation over the norms and hierarchy of the international order. While China is often portrayed as a systemic challenger to liberal peacekeeping, this article argues that, without seeking to abandon or undermine the UN system, China uses its position to advance alternative priorities and challenge Western dominance from within. UN peacekeeping is therefore treated as a window into the emerging multipolar order, where competing visions are increasingly being renegotiated, allowing us to understand not only the future of UN operations but also the reconfiguration of the international order.

UN Peacekeeping, Liberal Peace and Global Order Contestation

UN peacekeeping originated during the Cold War as an ideologically neutral tool based on host-state consent, impartiality and the use of force only in self-defence. From the mid-1960s onwards, operations were mainly based on ceasefire monitoring and were not aimed at altering state institutions or addressing the root causes of conflict (Coleman & Job, 2021).

After the end of the Cold War, liberal assumptions became increasingly embedded in UN peacekeeping. Peace operations began to reflect an "obvious connection between democratic practices (…) and the achievement of true peace and security" (Coleman & Job, 2021, p. 1453). Mandates expanded to include electoral support, post-conflict peacebuilding, human rights monitoring and related tasks. This transformation reinforced Western dominance, with the P3 shaping Security Council resolutions, while industrialised liberal democracies assumed

most peacekeeping costs and retained influence within UN structures.

From the mid-1990s onwards, however, this liberal model began to show signs of fragility. Western states increasingly avoided UN peacekeeping in strategically important crises, preferring NATO-led operations or ad hoc coalitions. Its liberal ambitions were weakened by contradictions such as externally promoted elections, limited local participation and selective responses to authoritarian practices. By the 2010s, peacekeeping increasingly prioritised civilian protection, stabilisation and counterterrorism, sharpening tensions between mandate designers, funders and personnel contributors.

2.1 Norm Contestation and Order Making: The Ambiguity of UN Peacekeeping

Even if the chronology of events seems to point to a crisis of the liberal system, Hofmann (2024) offers a more nuanced interpretation: in peacekeeping and crisis management, the liberal order has never been fully consolidated. What emerged after the Cold War was a "liberal moment", in which actors from the Global North attempted to make their interpretation of peace and security hegemonic.

However, this liberal moment did not lead to a stable liberal order. After the 1990s, other visions of order reappeared, showing that liberalisation was always accompanied by resistance, reinterpretation and competing ordering attempts. Kosovo illustrates this ambiguity: NATO justified its 1999 intervention on humanitarian grounds without Security Council authorisation, while Russia and China framed it as a violation of the UN Charter. Yet, actors later returned to the UN framework (Coleman & Job, 2021).

In this sense, the international system has been shaped by the coexistence of liberal, partially liberal and non-liberal visions of order, made possible by the ambiguity of the UN Charter and the system itself. Since norms remain open to interpretation, actors can pursue competing projects in the same institutional framework. Hofmann (2024) defines this as "dialectical ordering": not a stable and closed order, but a continuous process of order-making through contestation.

"China uses UN peacekeeping not to abandon the multilateral system, but to challenge Western dominance from within by prioritizing state-centred sovereignty and development-first sequencing."

Norm contestation, defined as the "discursive or non-discursive disapproval of a norm by relevant actors" (Yuan, 2022, p. 1801), helps explain this process. It may target procedure, content, validity or application, generating disagreement over meaning and scope. However, contestation does not necessarily imply erosion; it may clarify meaning, redefine application or strengthen acceptance.

Applied to peacebuilding, this means that the field is structured by norms that can themselves be contested. Yuan (2022) identifies three dimensions. First, peacebuilding rests on a (1) normative basis that defines why a problem should be addressed internationally. In liberal peace, this basis is rooted in sovereignty as responsibility (SAR) and the responsibility of the

international community (RIC), which may legitimise international action in cases of massive human rights violations or security threats. Contesting these assumptions constitutes validity contestation.

Second, peacebuilding includes (2) content norms, which define the actions to be undertaken and the outcomes considered desirable. Within liberal peace, lasting peace is associated with liberal democracy, free-market economy, rule of law, human rights, institutional reform, civil society, democratisation, and "decent governance". Disputing these priorities without rejecting international intervention would constitute content contestation.

Third, peacebuilding relies on implementation principles, which guide how these actions are operationalised. Yuan argues that liberal peace has relied on intrusive tools, including financial conditionality, imposed reforms, externally designed peace agreements, quasi-governmental functions and force. Although the "local turn" has softened this approach, international actors often still decide which local actors and proposals are legitimate. Challenging these implementation practices constitutes application contestation.

2.2 From Norm Contestation to Power Shifts in UN Peacekeeping

In this sense, contestation may produce power shifts within the United Nations system that are not measured only through institutional reforms, military capabilities, or economic resources, but through an actor's capacity to influence others and achieve specific outcomes. Accordingly, Barnett and Duvall's power framework (2005) distinguishes four forms of power: compulsory, institutional, structural, and productive.

(1) Compulsory power refers to the direct capacity of an actor to shape the behaviour of others through pressure, coercion, material resources, etc. In the UN context, this includes veto power, financial pressure, diplomatic lobbying, or efforts to block or redirect resolutions. (2) Institutional power operates more indirectly through rules, procedures, funding arrangements, bureaucratic structures, and agenda-setting mechanisms. Rather than forcing actors to behave in a certain way, it shapes the conditions under which decisions are made. (3) Structural power refers to the position an actor occupies within broader relations of hierarchy and authority, such as developed and developing states, donors and recipients, or those who authorise, finance, and implement international action. (4) Productive power concerns the ability to shape meanings, affecting how security, development, sovereignty, human rights and peace are defined (Haug, Foot & Baumann, 2024).

Power shifts are relevant to UN peacekeeping because they affect not only resources, but also the authority to define mandates, priorities and meanings. Norm contestation and power shifts therefore operate at different but complementary levels. Contestation is one mechanism through which power shifts occur, since actors challenge or reinterpret the norms guiding peacekeeping mandates and practices, making peacekeeping both operational and normative.

This connection resonates with Hofmann's (2024) idea of dialectical ordering. If international order is continuously made through contestation,

power shifts unfold through the reinterpretation of that order from within. Ambiguity allows the same institutions to accommodate competing visions of peace, security, sovereignty and intervention, enabling actors to reshape existing hierarchies rather than acting outside or against the UN framework.

DIALECTICAL ORDERING: CONTINUOUS ORDER-MAKING THROUGH CONTESTATION				
NORMATIVE STRUCTURE	CONTESTATION	WHAT IS CONTESTED	IMPACTS ON POWER SHIFTS	HOW IT OPERATES IN UN PEACEKEEPING
Normative basis	*Validity Contestation*	The legitimacy of international intervention	Compulsory Institutional Structural	Through Security Council authorisation, vetoes, abstentions and mandate negotiations, actors define whether intervention is legitimate and under what conditions missions can operate.
Content	*Content Contestation*	The priorities of peacekeeping	Productive Institutional Structural	Through mandate language, mission priorities and budget debates, actors decide whether peacekeeping prioritises liberal reform, stabilisation, development, security or state capacity.
Implementation Principles	*Application Contestation*	The implementation of peacekeeping	Institutional Compulsory Structural	Through operational planning, funding, training and ownership debates, actors determine how norms are applied and who counts as a legitimate local partner.

Figure 1. Matrix of Norm Contestation, Power Shifts and Dialectical Ordering in UN Peacekeeping.

China's Engagement with UN Peacekeeping: Contestation Within Order

Contrary to a simplistic view of China as merely rejecting liberal peace, China has generally accommodated part of its normative basis since the 2000s. Although its foreign policy continues to revolve around sovereignty and non-intervention, the 2005 Position Paper on UN Reforms recognised that large-scale humanitarian crises may be a legitimate international concern (Yuan, 2022). The 2020 White Paper further confirms China's formal commitment to international peace and UN-authorised peacekeeping (Kim, 2024). Thus, China does not fully reject peacebuilding's normative basis, but tactically reinterprets non-intervention by restricting when, where and how international action is legitimate.

Darfur, East Timor and Syria illustrate this selective accommodation. In Darfur, China accepted an AU-UN hybrid operation once host-state consent and regional involvement were secured. East Timor also shows China's acceptance of UN-authorised intervention when it does not create a broader right to external intervention (Gill & Huang, 2009). Syria, by contrast, marks the limits of this accommodation, as China blocked resolutions perceived as enabling regime change, bypassing sovereignty or expanding coercive intervention, including P3 resolutions calling for Al-Assad to step down (Sun, 2014).

This is where China's power shifts become particularly visible. As Foot (2024) argues, China's clearest power shift has occurred through compulsory power, especially through the actual or anticipated use of the veto. With it, China not only expresses normative disagreement, but also directly constrains the Security Council's capacity to act, making China's validity contestation consequential.

However, China's main contestation does not lie in the normative basis of peacebuilding, but rather in its content and application. Regarding content, China does not deny the need for peacebuilding, but challenges the priorities attached to it. It promotes an alternative agenda based on two elements: the democratisation of

the international system and the sequencing of development and stability before democratic institution-building (Yuan, 2022).

3.1 The Democratisation of the International System: Sovereign Equality, Global South Representation and Cooperative Security.

First, China considers that the unequal and exclusive nature of the international system often nourishes conflict, and as claimed by President Xi Jinping: "All countries have the right to participate in international and regional security affairs on an equal footing." (quoted in Yuan, 2022, p. 1807) This perspective challenges Western dominance and relocates part of the explanation for conflict from the domestic to the international level.

A clear example of China's democratising efforts can be found in its relationship with Africa. Africa is the largest troop-contributing region in UN peacekeeping and the continent where most missions are deployed, making its role central to the future of the UN system. These dynamics are linked to Xi Jinping's Global Security Initiative, which promotes China's vision of cooperative international security governance (Kim, 2024).

Although China and African actors do not have identical interests, their priorities are sufficiently complementary to reorient aspects of UN peacekeeping. The Rwandan genocide promoted the African principle of non-indifference, which supports the use of force to protect civilians. China partially supports this position if host-state sovereignty is not questioned. South Sudan and Mali illustrate this synergy: in both UNMISS and MINUSMA, China accepted more robust peacekeeping when framed around stabilisation and state security.

Both actors also challenge Western predominance; however, African states have significant operational relevance but limited formal power, since their financial contribution is reduced and they lack permanent representation on the Security Council. This is where complementarity appears again: by supporting African demands, China can weaken the dominant position of the P3 while reinforcing its own influence within the UN system (Coleman & Job, 2021).

Through the democratisation of the international system, China seeks to become a leading security actor of the complex Global South, understood not only as a geographical or economic category, but also as a political one. However, the Global South is not monolithic: its actors pursue different interests. By supporting them, China promotes an alternative security discourse and builds a wider support base (Kim, 2024).

Through content contestation, China shifts the focus of UN peacekeeping towards sovereign equality, cooperative security, development, stability and host-state authority. This challenge may translate into institutional, structural and productive power shifts. Institutionally, China uses its Security Council position, contributions, peacekeeping engagement and diplomacy to shape agendas. Structurally, China's support for ownership by Global South countries challenges the hierarchy between those who design and finance mandates and those who implement or host missions. Productively, China seeks to redefine security governance by contesting the

liberal vocabulary through which UN peacekeeping has traditionally been understood (Foot, 2024).

3.2 Development First: Alternative Sequencing, National Ownership and State-Centred Peace.

Secondly, regarding alternative sequencing, from the Chinese perspective, the rights to subsistence and development prevail over civil and political rights. When it comes to application, China defends national ownership and rejects externally imposed solutions. However, its understanding of ownership is strongly state-centred. For China, "local actors" usually means the host state and its institutions, rather than civil society, communities or non-state actors. China contests the externally driven implementation of liberal peace, but it does not necessarily promote a participatory or bottom-up model. Instead, it reinforces a model in which the state remains the primary actor.

In practice, China's bilateral programmes in conflict-affected settings are mainly economic, with infrastructure projects that "offer a practical approach to reconciliation" (Yuan, 2022, p. 1808). Yuan (2022) identifies three main mechanisms: demonstration, non-conditional aid and small-scale knowledge transfer.

These mechanisms can be applied to UN peacekeeping through China's institutional support for capacity-building. The China–UN Peace and Development Trust Fund is the clearest example (United Nations, n.d.). It works as a demonstration by presenting China's development- and security-oriented approach as a practical contribution to peace; as non-conditional aid because its support is channelled through UN mechanisms and is not formally tied to democratisation, civil society-building or imposed governance reforms; and as small-scale knowledge transfer through technical training, operational readiness, field medical procedures and peacekeeper security. UNPDF-funded training for Formed Police Units illustrates this logic. By focusing on technical standards, operational preparedness and trainer certification rather than political reform, it shows how China's alternative sequencing enters UN peacekeeping practice through capacity, security and operational effectiveness (United Nations, 2021).

Taken together, China's alternative sequencing and state-centred understanding of national ownership operate as content and application contestation. They contest liberal priorities and implementation practices such as conditionality, imposed reforms and intrusive intervention. This also connects to institutional and productive power shifts. Institutionally, China uses voluntary funding, the China–UN Peace and Development Trust Fund and Security Council agenda-setting to promote development-centred approaches to peace. Productively, China reframes peace as the result of development, stability and state capacity rather than democratic transformation and human rights promotion (Foot, 2024).

Three mechanisms (Yuan, 2022)

Applied through the China–UN Peace and Development Trust Fund:

Demonstration	practical contribution to peace
Non-conditional aid	not tied to democratisation
Knowledge transfer	technical training, operational readiness

Source: Irene Olivo Garcia, based on the article text

CHINA'S DIALECTICAL ORDERING: CONTEST AND RESHAPE FROM WITHIN					
NORMATIVE STRUCTURE	ACCEPTANCE	CONTESTATION	WHAT IS CONTESTED	IMPACTS ON POWER SHIFTS	HOW IT OPERATES IN UN PEACEKEEPING
Normative basis	Partially	*Validity Contestation*	Scope of international intervention	*Compulsory Institutional Structural*	China uses Council debates, abstentions, vetoes and threatened vetoes to condition mandates around sovereignty, host-state consent and resistance to regime change.
Content	No	*Content Contestation*	Liberal democratisation	*Institutional Structural Productive*	China uses mandate debates, diplomatic discourse and Global South partnerships to redirect peacekeeping priorities towards development, stability, state capacity and sovereign equality.
Implementation Principles	No	*Application Contestation*	Conditionality Imposed reforms External mandate design The role of civil society	*Compulsory Institutional Structural*	China uses voluntary funding, UNPDF projects, peacekeeper training and capacity-building to promote technical readiness and state-centred ownership over political reform.

Figure 2. Matrix of China's Contestation Within UN Peacekeeping.

Conclusion: From Liberal Peacekeeping to Contested Multilateralism?

At a time when peace has become an increasingly scarce and contested good, UN peacekeeping offers a lens through which to observe international transformation. In an emerging multipolar system, China presents itself as a responsible power that contests the existing order from within. It does not reject peacekeeping or multilateralism but selectively contests post-Cold War liberal priorities and hierarchies.

China has not fully transformed UN peacekeeping, but it has made it more contested. It has been most successful in limiting interventionist practices perceived as threatening sovereignty or enabling regime change through the use or threat of veto. It has gained institutional influence through financial contributions, peacekeeping participation, voluntary funding and support for Global South representation. Discursively, China promotes development, stability, state capacity and national ownership as alternatives to democratisation, human rights and externally driven reform.

However, this transformation remains partial. Western actors play a central role in financing, designing and authorising mandates, while liberal norms such as civilian protection, human rights and individual security remain embedded in the UN framework. Yet Western predominance is less secure. Declining resources, reduced budgets and reluctance to sustain ambitious operations have created space for other actors. China's rise is part of contested multilateralism, in which emerging powers and Global South actors seek to redefine priorities from within.

Therefore, UN peacekeeping does not signal the collapse of the existing order, but its renegotiation within multilateral institutions. Its mandates and practices help define peace, sovereignty and legitimate authority, while reflecting the distribution of power within the international system. In this sense, peace is not a fixed or neutral concept, but a politically contested category, showing how changes in peacekeeping mirror broader transformations in global order.

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China has not fully transformed UN peacekeeping, but it has made it more contested.

— **Irene Olivo Garcia, UN Peacekeeping as a Site of Contestation**

PEACEKEEPING & CONFLICT PREVENTION



From Intervention to Withdrawal

How did the end of Operation Barkhane demonstrate changing patterns in international peacekeeping approaches in the Sahel?

Hansika Baldwa

About the Article

Peacekeeping in the Sahel shifted from a French-led intervention model to a sovereignty-first, multipolar security order.

About the Author

Hansika Baldwa is an MSc Political Economy student at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and an honours graduate (cum laude) in Political Science from Leiden University. With a strong background in international relations and diplomacy, she has held several leadership roles within the Leiden Model United Nations Foundation, including President and Vice President. Her experience also includes academic representation and managing community development projects.

Key Takeaways

- Operation Barkhane demonstrated to the wider international community the importance of legitimacy for foreign interventions to achieve their aims.
- Barkhane's withdrawal revealed the limitations of military superiority to produce sustainable peace in the Sahel.
- There has been a clear shift in international peacekeeping approaches with the emergence of multipolar security partnerships.

Operation Barkhane (2014–2022) was the largest overseas French military operation, comprising over 5,000 troops across the Sahel Region, including Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania, often known as the G5 Sahel. The Operation aimed to neutralise "the terrorist environment present in the Sahel region", targeting Al-Qaeda structures in the Islamic Maghreb (Olech, 2023, p 1). The scale of the deployment reflected the scale of the ambition: rather than defending a single capital or a single front line, the operation set out to counter armed groups across a vast area of desert, borderlands and weakly governed territory. The French military initially intervened in Mali in 2013 during Operation Serval: Mali's former interim president Dioncounda Traoré requested French assistance against a coalition of al-Qaeda extremists that had captured key cities in the north such as Konna and advanced on the capital city, Bamako (Flood, 2013). France deployed 4,500 combat troops, successfully repelling the advance. In 2014, owing to the success of Operation Serval,

"Peacekeeping in the Sahel shifted from a French-led intervention model to a sovereignty-first, multipolar security order."

François Hollande, then-President of France, transformed the intervention into a "regional and open-ended military initiative called Operation Barkhane" (Erforth & Tull, 2022).

The transition from Serval to Barkhane was more than a change of name. Serval had been a limited intervention with a clear request from the Malian authorities and an immediate objective: stopping the advance on Bamako. Barkhane, by contrast, extended the French presence across five states and gave it no fixed end point. What had begun as a response to an urgent call for help became a permanent feature of the regional security landscape. This shift would later prove significant, because the basis on which the intervention had first been accepted was not the same as the basis on which it was expected to continue.

Operation Barkhane wasn't the only mission launched; several other international missions launched in the Sahel soon after including the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), The European Union training missions (EUTM Mali, EUCAP Sahel), as well as the G5 Sahel Joint Force, all of which sought to support the Malian Armed Forces, and further beyond in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger to combat terrorism and cross-border crime (Chikhachev, 2025, p. 385-386; Erforth & Tull, 2022; Sandnes, 2021, p. 2).

The result was a layered model of international engagement. French forces focused on counterterrorism operations, the UN on stabilisation and the protection of civilians, the EU on training and advising national security forces, and the G5 Sahel Joint Force on regional cooperation between the states themselves. In principle, these missions were meant to complement one another. In practice, their mandates overlapped, their priorities did not always align, and the sheer number of external actors made the Sahel one of the most crowded intervention theatres in the world. Even the G5 Sahel Joint Force, conceived as a regional answer to regional threats, remained heavily dependent on external funding and support, which limited its ability to act as a genuinely independent pillar of security. For local populations, the distinctions between these missions were often far less visible than they were in the capitals that designed them.

However, as underscored by Chikhachev (2025, p. 386), it was France that "assumed a pivotal role as the 'backbone, the supporting structure' of any military presence in the Sahel and West Africa". Operation Barkhane eventually concluded in November of 2022 when French troops withdrew from Mali and Burkina Faso. The end of this decade-long operation ushered in a new era in international peacekeeping, shifting away from long-term, large-scale interventions towards regionally driven, diversified security partnerships, with its conclusion marking the failure of Western powers to curb jihadist groups in Africa and inviting the Wagner Group to the forefront of security in the Sahel (Chikhachev, 2025, p. 388, 392; Erforth & Tull, 2022). The arrival of the Wagner Group marked a particularly sharp break with the previous model.

Where Barkhane had been embedded, at least formally, in a framework of multilateral cooperation and public accountability, the new arrangements were largely bilateral and far less transparent, raising questions about oversight and the protection of civilians that the previous model, for all its shortcomings, had at least claimed to address.

France's central role also created a structural dependency. Other international missions relied, directly or indirectly, on French capabilities, intelligence and logistics, which meant that the wider architecture of international engagement rested to a large extent on a single actor. When that actor lost its standing, the entire model was weakened with it.

This article therefore asks what the end of Operation Barkhane reveals about broader changes in international peacekeeping. It argues that the withdrawal was not simply the end of one national mission, but a turning point in three respects: it exposed the importance of political legitimacy for foreign interventions, it revealed the limits of military superiority in producing sustainable peace, and it opened the way for a more fragmented, multipolar security order in the Sahel. Each of these is examined in turn below, before drawing broader conclusions.

The Decline in Political Legitimacy

Initially, France pursued a policy of internationalising the intervention, claiming collaboration and French leadership simultaneously. This served both to share the burden and legitimise intervention, working through the UN (MINUSMA), the EU (EUTM, EUCAP Sahel), and bilateral European partners.

(Erforth & Tull, 2022). But as Chikhachev (2025) argues, Barkhane increasingly faced rejection because it was seen as "preserving the Françafrique order" (p. 388). Françafrique has come to be known as a pejorative term to describe France's sphere of influence over its former colonies, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa (Bovcon, 2013, p. 5). The term matters because it shaped how French actions were interpreted. A foreign military presence in a former colony is rarely judged only by its stated objectives; it is also read against a long history of political, economic and military influence. Each setback, each civilian casualty and each perceived interference in domestic politics could therefore be absorbed into an existing narrative, regardless of the intentions behind it. These neocolonist accusations lost the French "support on the ground", and with the French position weakening, non-Western players had the opportunity to expand into the Sahel (Chikhachev, 2025, p. 388, 392).

The French experience illustrates that legitimacy operates on two levels. Internationalisation secured legitimacy among partners abroad: it brought UN mandates, European participation and diplomatic support. It did far less to secure legitimacy among the populations and governments in whose territory the intervention took place. An operation can be fully authorised in international forums and still be rejected at home, and it is the second form of legitimacy that ultimately determines whether an intervention can be sustained.

Time also played a role. An intervention that is welcomed as a response to an emergency is judged differently once it has lasted for years without bringing the expected improvement in security. As Barkhane continued, the initial sense of rescue gave way to growing questions about why a foreign military presence was still needed, what it had achieved and whose interests it ultimately served. The open-ended character of the operation, which had been intended to provide flexibility, thus made it increasingly vulnerable to these questions.

This legitimacy crisis was reinforced by French military conduct, especially the Bounti airstrike in Mali, which killed 19 civilians, alongside 3 members of al-Qaeda-linked Katiba Serma. French authorities' denial of civilian casualties despite MINUSMA verification deepened distrust of French intervention (Staff and agencies in Bamako, 2021). The incident shows that legitimacy depends not only on avoiding harm, but also on how harm is acknowledged when it occurs. Denial in the face of independent verification suggested that accountability applied unevenly, which undermined the very principles of protection and rule of law that international engagement claimed to promote. It also affected international organisations such as MINUSMA, which faced violent protests in 2022 and was increasingly framed as a "vestige of colonial occupation", allowing Russia and the Wagner Group to portray themselves as alternative security partners (Cope, 2024). This was a striking development, because MINUSMA operated under a distinct UN mandate and was composed largely of contingents from countries outside Europe. That it was nonetheless associated with the colonial past shows how far the crisis of legitimacy had spread beyond France itself. Once international engagement as a whole was seen through this lens, the line

between a French operation and a multilateral mission became increasingly blurred in public perception. New partners were able to present themselves as free of this history, offering security assistance framed as respect for sovereignty rather than as external tutelage. Russia, in return, blocked UN resolutions aimed at investigating human rights abuses by Malian security forces and Wagner operatives (United Nations, 2023).

The contest over legitimacy thus became part of a wider geopolitical competition. Once international missions were portrayed as extensions of Western influence, the mechanisms meant to hold all security actors accountable were themselves drawn into that competition. The consequence was not only a loss of trust in France, but a weakening of the multilateral framework through which abuses by any actor could be investigated.

The Shift Towards Multipolar Security

Despite significant success through the elimination of Islamic militant leaders Abdelmalek Droukdel in 2020 and Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi in 2021 (Marot, 2020; Ahmed, 2022), political violence persisted across the Sahel (Alexander, 2024). These operations demonstrated considerable military capability, yet they did not translate into lasting security. Armed groups were able to replace their leaders and adapt their structures, and the conditions that allowed them to recruit remained largely in place. Tactical success, in other words, did not amount to strategic success. Military coups seized the Sahel region, including Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, and Niger, and without parallel institutional reforms guaranteeing legitimate governance, external security alone could not secure the region (Muvunyi, 2023; Usman, 2023).

The coups are significant for the argument of this article because they show that the central problem in the region was not only one of security, but of governance. Where state institutions lacked credibility, external military support could not substitute for it. In several cases, the new military governments were also able to draw on growing frustration with the French presence, turning the question of foreign intervention into a question of national sovereignty.

While Barkhane disrupted terrorist networks, this proved to be a temporary solution to systematic governance failures, including corruption and high unemployment, ultimately exacerbating conflict, with fatalities reaching the tens of thousands and 2.5 million people displaced (Alexander, 2024).

These figures point to the central limitation of a primarily military approach. Counterterrorism operations can disrupt armed groups, but they cannot by themselves address the grievances that sustain them. Where corruption, unemployment and the absence of state services persist, the space for armed groups to operate remains, and military pressure in one area may simply displace violence to another. A sustainable response would have required security operations to be matched by investment in governance, justice and economic opportunity, areas in which the international presence was far less visible and, in the eyes of many residents, far less effective. This imbalance

between military and civilian engagement helped to reinforce the perception that the intervention served external priorities rather than local needs.

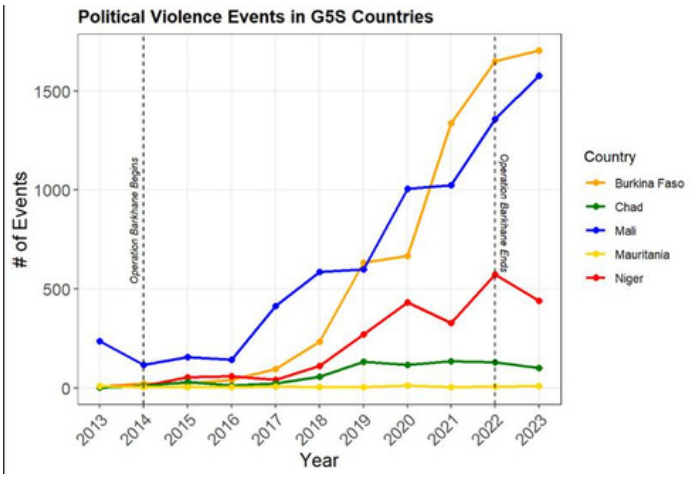


Figure 1. Increasing trend of political violence in the G5S states (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger), 2013–2023. Note. Reproduced from The French War on Terror in Africa, Alexander, T. (2024, February 26), Onero Institute.

The trend shown in Figure 1 is striking because the increase in political violence took place during the period in which international engagement in the Sahel was at its most intensive. This does not establish that international missions caused the rise in violence, but it does indicate that their presence was not sufficient to reverse it.

As Chikhachev (2025, p. 391) concluded, "Operation Barkhane had undermined France's principal asset in the Sahara-Sahel region and in Africa as a whole — its role as an efficient security guarantor". The judgement is significant because France's influence in the region had long rested on its ability to provide security when partner governments requested it. Once that ability was called into question, the political justification for its presence weakened as well. Operation Barkhane's years of intervention have made the region more violent and less stable. In February of 2022, Mali ordered French troops to leave, ending Barkhane's presence. MINUSMA's withdrawal followed soon after, leading to regional governments diversifying their security arrangements with various global actors, including Russia, Turkey, Iran, and China (Alexander, 2024; Cope, 2024; Chikhachev, 2025, p. 388, 392; Wilén, 2025).

The departure of both French forces and the UN mission left a gap that regional governments sought to fill on their own terms. Rather than relying on a single dominant partner, they turned to a range of external actors, each offering different forms of support. For the governments concerned, this diversification was presented as an expression of sovereignty: the freedom to choose partners rather than to accept those inherited from the past.

Peacekeeping in the Sahel shifted from a French-led intervention model to a sovereignty-first, multipolar security order. The old model of international peacekeeping that had consisted of Western-led actors has come to an end. In the sovereignty-first model, host governments set the terms of external support themselves, choosing which partners to work with and on what conditions. External actors are no longer expected to define the objectives of an intervention, but to support goals determined by the governments they work with. The new partners also differ considerably from one another in their interests and methods, which means that the post-Barkhane order is not a single alternative model, but a patchwork of bilateral arrangements. The Post-Barkhane peacekeeping model instead sees the Wagner Group and the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), a

tripartite confederation between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, fragmenting the landscape of international security (Osuchukwu et al., 2025, p. 28).

Whether this new order will prove more effective remains an open question. Replacing one external security provider with several does not in itself address the governance failures that allowed armed groups to expand. A more fragmented landscape may also make coordination more difficult and accountability harder to secure, particularly where some partners show little interest in transparency or in the protection of civilians. The humanitarian consequences of continued insecurity, reflected in the scale of displacement across the region, make these questions all the more pressing. At the same time, the emergence of the AES reflects a genuine demand among regional governments for greater control over their own security. The challenge for the international community is therefore not to restore the old model, but to find forms of engagement that respect this demand without abandoning the principles of accountability and civilian protection.

Conclusion

To conclude, the end of Barkhane encapsulated a broader change in international peacekeeping approaches. Previously, international support utilised long mandates and foreign intervention in the assumption that once the region was stabilised, governance would thrive. However, as Barkhane illustrated, international actors are no longer willing or able to sustain the costs of unilateral campaigns when intervention is seen as part of the problem. The assumption that stabilisation would naturally lead to good governance did not hold. Security gains remained fragile because they were not accompanied by credible political institutions, and the longer the intervention lasted, the more it became associated with the very problems it was meant to solve.

The three developments examined in this article are closely connected. The decline in political legitimacy weakened the foundation on which Barkhane rested; the limits of military superiority meant that tactical successes could not compensate for that loss; and the resulting vacuum opened the way for new actors and a multipolar security order. Together, they mark the end of a model in which a single Western power, supported by multilateral missions, served as the guarantor of security in the region.

Several lessons follow for future international engagement. First, legitimacy must be built and maintained among the populations and governments directly affected, not only secured through international mandates. Second, military operations can create space for political solutions, but they cannot replace them; security efforts that are not matched by progress on governance, accountability and economic opportunity risk being temporary at best. Third, the way in which harm is acknowledged and addressed is itself part of an intervention's credibility. Finally, international actors will increasingly need to act as partners supporting regionally owned approaches rather than as leaders defining the terms of engagement.

This has implications for the multilateral missions that remain active elsewhere. The

experience of MINUSMA shows that even a UN mission with a distinct mandate can lose its standing when it becomes associated with an external power that has lost local support. Future missions will need to demonstrate their independence and value to host populations more clearly, to communicate openly about their objectives and limitations, and to show that they are accountable for their own conduct. Without this, the shift away from large-scale interventions may not be followed by more effective forms of engagement, but by a retreat from engagement altogether.

The post-Barkhane Sahel thus raises a question that extends well beyond the region: whether the rise of the Alliance of Sahel States represents greater African ownership of security, or a fragmentation of regional cooperation. The answer will shape not only the future of the Sahel, but also the future of international peacekeeping more broadly. It will depend, above all, on whether security arrangements in the region can earn the legitimacy that Barkhane ultimately lost.

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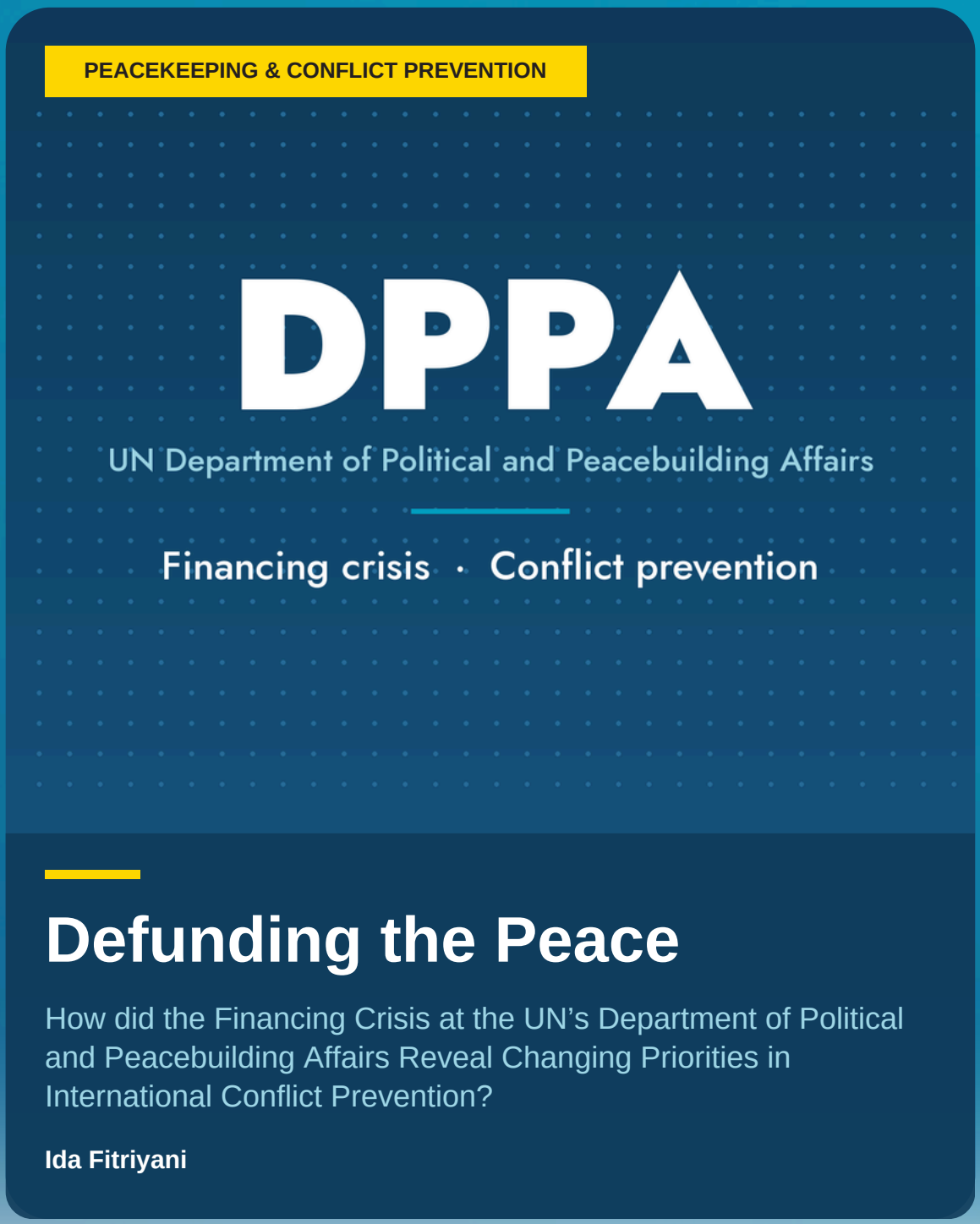
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PEACEKEEPING & CONFLICT PREVENTION



Defunding the Peace

How did the Financing Crisis at the UN's Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs Reveal Changing Priorities in International Conflict Prevention?

Ida Fitriyani

About the Article

Reactive spending is budgeted as a non-negotiable national priority, while preventive diplomacy spending continues to be treated by the international community as discretionary and voluntary.

About the Author

Ida Fitriyani is a graduate student in European Studies with a background in international relations, specializing in evidence-based policy analysis and institutional governance. Their work applies qualitative and quantitative methods to EU external action, development cooperation, and EU–ASEAN relations. With experience at Kartu Prakerja, the Indonesian Embassy in Türkiye, and EPIS Think Tank, they possess strong skills in policy evaluation, structured analysis, and stakeholder engagement.

Key Takeaways

- DPPA's repeated failure to meet its own funding target shows that voluntary financing leaves preventive diplomacy structurally more exposed than reactive diplomacy, and that assessing military and peacekeeping spending is difficult.
- The modest shortfalls have consequences, constraining mediation deployment and liaison presence in active crises such as Sudan and Ukraine, despite the department's budget being a fraction of individual national defense line items.

The Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) is the United Nations body most directly responsible for preventive diplomacy, mediation and early warning of conflict. Unlike peacekeeping operations, which have fixed budgets funded through mandatory assessed contributions billed to member states, DPPA relies on the voluntary Multi-Year Appeal (MYA) to fund its core conflict prevention and rapid-response infrastructure (UN DPPA, 2026). This difference matters. Assessed contributions are predictable, whereas voluntary pledges depend on donors' willingness to give and the timing of their decisions.

The MYA was established to bypass the delays of the regular budget and respond quickly to emerging political crises. In principle, this allows the department to deploy mediators and early warning capacity as a situation deteriorates, rather than waiting for the next budget cycle. Yet the design carries a clear tension. A mechanism intended for speed

"A gap of this kind has no obvious owner, and that is precisely what makes it so persistent."

depends on funding that is not guaranteed, so the flexibility that makes it useful also makes it vulnerable.

The evidence points to this vulnerability. The MYA has missed its own target in each of the last two years for which data are available. Such a pattern suggests a structural feature of voluntary financing rather than a one-off event. Shortfalls of this kind would constrain the infrastructure DPPA can maintain in advance, reducing its capacity to act when early intervention is most valuable.

In 2023, DPPA appealed for $41 million and received $31.1 million, a shortfall of 24%. In 2024, the appeal rose to $42 million, but receipts fell to $28.9 million from 35 partners. That was 8% less than in 2023 and again well below target (UN DPPA, 2026). The appeal now stands at $43 million, so the gap between what DPPA seeks and what it receives has not yet closed.

To put the sums in perspective, consider the 2024 shortfall of roughly $13 million. That figure is less than the flyaway cost of a single F-35A fighter jet, which runs at approximately $82.5 million before its engine is added (Air & Space Forces Magazine, 2025). The comparison shows the scale of the problem. DPPA's entire annual appeal is a rounding error set against individual line items in the national defence budget. On these numbers, the size of the appeal alone

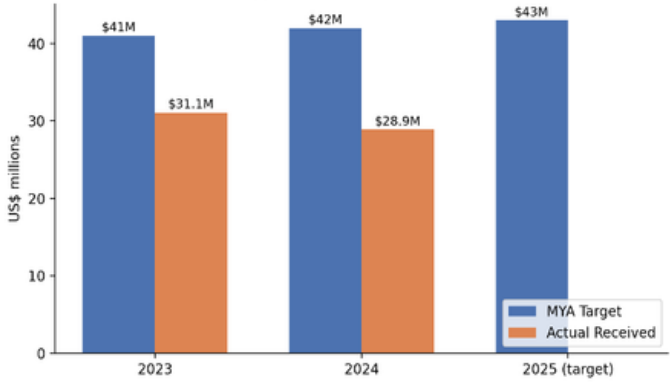


Figure 1: DPPA Multi-Year Appeal target versus actual funding received in 2023-2025.

does not explain the gap. Yet the department has missed its own modest target in back-to-back years. The question this raises is therefore not whether the sums could be found, but why a relatively small target has proved difficult to meet twice in succession. Put differently, the obstacle is unlikely to be one of affordability. It is more plausibly one of priority, and of the way contributions to prevention are decided. A funding model that depends on member states choosing, year after year, to contribute is exposed to every shift in their domestic agendas. Small sums are also easy to postpone, because no single contributor needs to feel responsible for the gap as a whole. The 2024 figures illustrate this. Receipts of $28.9 million came from 35 partners, which means the shortfall was not the result of one donor withdrawing, but of many contributions that together fell short. A gap of this kind has no obvious owner, and that is precisely what makes it so persistent.

These shortfalls are real and factual, and their consequences are concrete. When funding falls short, the effects reach the field directly: diplomatic deployments are cancelled, the recruitment of thematic experts is delayed, and the operational scope of the regional political mission is constrained (UN DPPA, 2026). These effects compound one another, because each cancelled deployment or unfilled post reduces the capacity available for the next task. The result is not a single dramatic failure but a gradual erosion of readiness. A deployment that does not take place today may mean that the relationships and local knowledge needed for the next crisis are never built. A thematic expert who is not recruited cannot be called upon when a request arrives. In this sense, the cost of a shortfall is not limited to the year in which it occurs; it is carried forward into the following years in the form of capacity that was never developed.

Each of these effects may appear minor when viewed in isolation. A cancelled trip or a vacancy left open for a few months rarely attracts attention outside the department itself. Taken together, however, they shape what the UN is able to do when a political crisis begins to unfold. Preventive diplomacy depends on being present early, on knowing whom to call and on having the expertise ready to support a process before positions harden. It is exactly this kind of groundwork that is most easily cut when funds run short, and exactly this groundwork that is hardest to replace at short notice.

The strain on shared capacity is visible in the work of DPPA's Standby Team of Senior Mediation Advisers. This team, which can deploy within 72 hours, carried out 148 operational support assignments in 2024 alone. That workload depletes MYA resources precisely when they are needed most (United Nations Peacemaker, 2026). Support given to one assignment is therefore support unavailable for another. The figure of 148 assignments also says something about how the department works.

Much of its value lies in being able to respond at short notice, sending experienced advisers to support negotiations or political processes as they unfold. That kind of responsiveness depends on resources being available before a request arrives, not raised afterwards. When the same pool of funding must cover a growing number of assignments, each new request competes with the others, and the department risks being pushed towards choosing which processes to support rather than responding to all that ask.

Demand, meanwhile, is rising faster than funding. In 2024, DPPA received 28 new requests for technical electoral assistance, a 75% increase over 2023, even as the money available to meet that demand fell (UN DPPA, 2026). Growing need set against shrinking resources explains why these shortfalls amount to a structural constraint on the mission's work rather than a temporary inconvenience. A temporary inconvenience can be absorbed by postponing activities until funds arrive. A structural constraint cannot, because the demand does not wait. Electoral timetables, ceasefire talks and political transitions follow their own calendars, and support that arrives late may arrive too late to matter. For a department whose purpose is to act early, that difference is decisive.

Not just a budget line, but a Mismatch in priorities

Global military expenditure reached an estimated $2.9 trillion in 2025, its eleventh consecutive year of growth (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 2025). Over the same period, funding for the UN body most directly responsible for preventing conflict before it starts has declined. Taken on its own, this trend is not evidence that preventive diplomacy has failed, nor that underfunding it is the cause of rising global instability. That would be a harder causal claim than the evidence supports. The more precise conclusion is that the two trends point to a mismatch in how the international community allocates its resources. Reactive spending is treated as a non-negotiable national priority. Military budgets are defended in legislatures, protected in fiscal planning and renewed year after year as a matter of course. Preventive spending, by contrast, is commonly regarded as discretionary and voluntary, so it is the first to be trimmed when budgets tighten. This asymmetry matters because the costs of inaction are delayed and diffuse, whereas the benefits of prevention are, by definition, largely invisible: a crisis that never occurs leaves no record of its own. Institutions that work well are rarely credited for the disasters they avert, which makes them difficult to justify in budget debates. Recognising this bias is the first step towards correcting it. The question is therefore not simply how much the international community spends, but how it chooses where that spending goes, and whether those choices reflect a realistic assessment of where security is most cheaply secured.

The comparison with military spending is not meant to suggest that the two should be weighed directly against each other, or that resources should simply be moved from one to the other. Defence and diplomacy serve different purposes, and both have a place in a realistic security policy. The point is narrower: what states are willing to commit when security is framed as defence stands in sharp contrast with what they are willing to commit when it is framed as

prevention. Against expenditure measured in trillions, the sums needed to meet DPPA's target are marginal, and it is precisely this contrast that makes the repeated shortfall so revealing.

The same asymmetry is visible within the UN system itself. Peacekeeping operations are financed through mandatory assessed contributions, which member states are billed for and which give missions a predictable budget. DPPA's core conflict prevention work, by contrast, depends on voluntary pledges to the MYA. The organisation therefore funds the management of conflicts that have already broken out on a firmer basis than the work intended to stop them from breaking out in the first place. This is not necessarily the result of a deliberate choice, but it reflects the same pattern: what is reactive is treated as an obligation, while what is preventive is treated as optional.

Two more examples illustrate what that mismatch costs in practice. In Kyiv, DPPA's liaison office has fed field assessment directly into more than 100 Security Council briefing papers in a single year, showing how on-the-ground analysis can reach the Council when staff are in place to gather and transmit it. Such analysis matters because Council members rarely have their own independent view of developments in the field, and decisions taken in New York are only as good as the information on which they are based. The situation in Sudan shows the cost of losing that capacity. When the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission (UNITAMS) closed abruptly in 2023, MYA funding enabled the Secretary-General's Special Envoy to retain staffing and analytical capacity to continue mediating between factions. The alternative was a complete withdrawal of the UN's political presence from an active crisis, so funding determined not merely how efficiently the UN worked but whether it remained engaged at all. Flexibility is what allows such decisions to be made quickly. Around 70% of MYA funding is unearmarked, which gives DPPA the freedom to redirect resources to wherever a crisis emerges next (UN DPPA, 2026). Because unearmarked money cannot be assigned in advance to a single mission, it can follow priorities as they change. That freedom is easy to overlook when funds are plentiful, yet it is precisely what makes a rapid response possible. The implication is straightforward: as the funding pool shrinks, so does that flexibility, leaving less room to respond to emerging crises. Earmarked contributions still have value, but they tie resources to purposes defined in advance by donors. When the overall pool contracts, the share that can be moved freely is the part the department can least afford to lose.

Both cases point to the same lesson: political presence, once lost, is difficult to rebuild. Staff who understand the actors, the history and the dynamics of a conflict represent an investment that cannot easily be replaced once they are withdrawn. Maintaining that presence through periods of uncertainty is therefore not a secondary administrative matter but a precondition for the UN to play any role at all when an opening for mediation appears. Seen this way, flexible funding is not a luxury but the mechanism that allows the department to stay engaged where it matters, and for as long as it matters.

A realistic critique deserves serious attention. Successful diplomacy often produces an absence of events, and a crisis that never escalates leaves

little visible evidence of the work that prevented it. For that reason, the return on investment in preventive diplomacy is inherently hard to demonstrate. The critique goes further: the effectiveness of DPPA is in any case bounded by Security Council consensus, and no amount of funding can buy political space that a veto-wielding power is unwilling to grant. Money cannot substitute for political will among those who hold the decisive votes. This objection is well founded and should not be dismissed. A well-funded department working without political backing will still struggle to influence the course of a conflict, and additional resources cannot resolve divisions among the permanent members of the Security Council.

Yet this limitation applies mainly to the political dimension of the work, not to its economic rationale. Set against the critique is the joint study Pathways for Peace by the World Bank and the United Nations, which estimates that a coordinated global increase in preventive diplomacy could save $5-70 billion per year in post-conflict clean-up, humanitarian response and reconstruction costs (United Nations & World Bank, 2018). The range is wide, and its precision should be treated with caution, but even its lower bound points in one direction: the cost of prevention is small when compared with the sums that follow when conflicts become entrenched. Whatever the political limits on DPPA's effectiveness at the margins, the financial case for funding its core work is not seriously in dispute. Recognising both points allows a more honest debate, one focused less on whether prevention pays than on how political constraints can be navigated so that funding is converted into results. The two arguments should therefore not be played off against each other. The political limits on prevention are a reason to use resources carefully and strategically, not a reason to withhold them. Even the lower end of the Pathways for Peace estimate, at $5 billion per year, is more than a hundred times larger than DPPA's current appeal of $43 million. Seen against that ratio, the debate over whether the department should receive its full target appears less like a question of affordability and more like one of political attention.

A Shrinking Space for Diplomacy

In his 2025 UN80 progress briefing, Secretary-General António Guterres warned that the rising number of conflicts, deepening geopolitical divisions, and growing impunity for violations of international law are narrowing the political space available for mediation and diplomacy (United Nations Secretary-General, 2026). The 2026 Global Peace Index gives that warning a number: global peacefulness declined for a twelfth consecutive year, with more active interstate wars underway than at any point since the Second World War, and the number of countries involved in at least one external conflict rising from 59 in 2008 to 103 today (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2026).

These trends cut in two directions. On the one hand, a more crowded and more polarised conflict landscape increases the need for mediation, early warning and sustained political engagement. On the other hand, it makes that work harder, as divisions among major powers reduce the room for agreement in multilateral forums. The result is a period in which preventive diplomacy is both more necessary and more difficult to conduct. Under such conditions, the margin for error narrows, and

a department that must first secure its own funding before it can respond is placed at a further disadvantage. It is, in effect, asked to respond to a growing problem with a shrinking set of tools.

Political frameworks such as the Pact for the Future (United Nations, 2024) and Security Council Resolution 2788 (United Nations Security Council, 2025) commit member states, in principle, to strengthening mediation and preventive diplomacy. Such commitments set shared priorities, but a priority is only as strong as the resources behind it. Mediation and preventive work depend on skilled staff and sustained attention, which cannot be assembled quickly once a crisis has begun. The open question is therefore whether those commitments translate into funding that DPPA can actually plan around, rather than a target it misses year after year. Predictable financing would let the department build capacity in advance, whereas a repeatedly missed target suggests that political language has not yet been matched by budgetary decisions. The gap between the two is, in this sense, a measure of how seriously the commitments are meant.

There are several ways in which this gap could be narrowed without new institutions. Multi-year pledges, rather than annual ones, would give the department greater certainty about the resources available over time. A larger share of unearmarked funding would preserve the flexibility on which rapid response depends. And a broader base of contributors would reduce the extent to which the appeal rises or falls with the decisions of a small number of donors. None of these measures would resolve the political constraints described above, but each would make it easier for DPPA to plan, staff and deploy in advance rather than in response.

Conclusion

The funding shortfall at the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) is a small case study with a larger implication. In 2023 it fell roughly a quarter short of its funding target, and the gap widened in 2024. The international community's stated commitment to preventive diplomacy is not yet matched by how it pays for that work.

The difficulty is structural. Diplomatic success means wars that never happened, which rarely make headlines and are hard to price. Invisible benefits are easily underfunded, while visible crises demand money urgently, often after the cheaper option has been lost. The DPPA figures make this concrete: three consecutive appeals, rising from $41 million to $43 million, with receipts short each year for which data are available.

This reasoning does not require a sweeping claim about the value of prevention in general, which would be difficult to test. A narrower and more testable claim is available. DPPA is small, its funding is transparent, and it is heavily used when demand for its work is rising. Because its budget is open to scrutiny, the gap between target and actual funding can be measured directly, year by year, rather than inferred from general impressions. Because demand for its services tends to grow during periods of tension, the relationship between need and resources can also be examined against the evidence. In this sense, DPPA offers something close to a test case. If a department of its size, with

documented activity and rising demand, cannot secure a modest and transparent target, the explanation is unlikely to lie in the scale of what it asks for. It points instead to the way prevention is valued, or undervalued, in the decisions that shape international budgets. The question is therefore less whether prevention works in principle than whether the international community is prepared to finance the instruments it has already created for that purpose.

Closing this specific gap would be a modest step. The sums involved are small relative to the broader international budget, and the measure would not require new institutions or contested political bargains. It would simply require the community to fund what it has already agreed, on paper, to fund. Critics may argue that budgets are finite and that every shortfall involves trade-offs. That objection deserves a serious answer, but it does not weaken the core point: where a commitment has been made and the cost of meeting it is low, the failure to do so is difficult to justify. For an international community that has repeatedly affirmed the importance of preventing conflict, meeting this target would be a credible first signal that those commitments are meant to be kept.

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Imprint

Editors: Coline Zozime Delage & Sydney Armor
ViSdP: Theodor Himmel
Publisher: EPIS ThinkTank e.V.
Contact: board.directors@epis-thinktank.com
ISSN:

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