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## The contending futures of UN peacekeeping

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# THE CONTENDING FUTURES OF UN PEACEKEEPING

Corine van Emmerik and Peter Albrecht

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# **THE CONTENDING FUTURES OF UN PEACEKEEPING**

**Corine van Emmerik and Peter Albrecht**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The past futures of peacekeeping</b>	<b>4</b>
1980s: The Nobel Peace Prize and the promise of a better future	5
1990s: Idealism meets reality – an agenda for peace	5
2000s: Brahimi and 9/11	8
2010s: The HIPPO report and lessons learnt?	10
<b>Present futures: new agenda and pact for peace</b>	<b>11</b>
Peacekeeping à la carte	14
Modular peacekeeping	15
<b>The many futures of UN peacekeeping</b>	<b>18</b>
Broadened futures	19
Suspended and delayed futures	22
Retroactive futures	25
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>29</b>

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the contending futures of United Nations (UN) peacekeeping through an analysis of key UN publications and interviews conducted in New York in 2024. At a time when peacekeeping faces multiple challenges – including a crisis of trust, diminished legitimacy, and a deadlocked Security Council – the study traces how visions of peacekeeping's future reflect the organisation's decision-making processes, institutional constraints, and political interests. By analysing documents and interviews with UN officials and diplomats, the paper identifies three emergent categories: broadened futures emphasising flexibility and integration; suspended and anticipated futures awaiting catalytic moments; and retroactive futures advocating return to core principles. Rather than offering prescriptive recommendations, the paper argues that peacekeeping's chronic challenges are inherently unsolvable and must be continuously navigated. The analysis concludes that peacekeeping's future lies not in fixed forms but in functional flexibility, reflecting broader tensions within the UN system itself.

## INTRODUCTION

Reviewing and reimagining United Nations (UN) peacekeeping is not a new endeavour but a consistent pursuit of the past. Peacekeeping is perhaps the UN's most recognised tool for supporting global peace and security and has been repeatedly reconfigured according to each era's challenges and distinct vision and anticipation of what the future will and should look like. Major global developments, such as the Cold War, the subsequent era of optimism in the early 1990s, and the emergence of global terrorism during the 2000s profoundly transformed UN-led peacekeeping from ceasefire monitoring to addressing more complex state-building exercises and counterterrorism interventions. Over the decades, as conflicts grew more complex, peacekeeping deployments became more frequent and followed increasingly standardised mandates, models and bureaucratic procedures. This contributed to friction between expectations and realities on the ground, which in turn has hampered mandating new missions since 2014. Today, peacekeeping stands at a crossroads, facing a crisis of trust in its effectiveness, diminished legitimacy, a deadlocked Security Council, and, with the re-election of Donald Trump as US president, diminished opportunities for multilateral cooperation. Working with these challenges requires yet another reimagination of peacekeeping to secure its future.

This paper analyses the historical and contemporary futures envisioned for peacekeeping from the UN's own perspective. It traces and foregrounds future-oriented discourse in key UN publications<sup>1</sup> and draws on interviews carried out with diplomats, researchers and UN officials in New York in 2024 on peacekeeping reform. These visions reveal not only the organisation's decision-making processes but also the institutional constraints, and the political interests shaping its peacekeeping agenda.

<sup>1</sup> We are inspired by Ann Mische's (2014) work on measuring futures in documents related to the UN Conference on Sustainable Development and the People's Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 2012. She argues that futures are externalised in text, for example, and can therefore be studied. The UN conference, just like the events discussed in our paper, are sites of what she calls 'hyper-projectivity', understood as an 'arena where future-oriented debate about contending futures' takes place (Mische 2014, 438).

Rather than focusing solely on the present and its immediate challenges, this study offers a long-term perspective that connects past visions of the future with current debates. Many of today's challenges – mission overstretch, lack of political will and unrealistic mandates – have been repeatedly identified in the past. We argue that these challenges are chronic, cyclical and inherently unsolvable, and thus may never be fully overcome. Addressing and mitigating them is therefore an ongoing and imperfect process that demands agility to adapt to shifting geopolitical dynamics, navigate institutional constraints, and recalibrate peacekeeping's role in an evolving conflict landscape. Doing so is crucial because the UN remains the only global forum for addressing conflicts, with peacekeeping operations serving as its most indispensable instrument in this role.

By analysing how multiple visions of peacekeeping's future emerge from within the UN as expressed in interviews, this paper makes a distinct contribution. Rather than offering prescriptive recommendations, it examines how the UN's future-oriented discourse has been shaped by past experiences and ongoing institutional debates about the role of peacekeeping. The paper explores how these discussions of what peacekeeping is and what it should do reflect broader shifts in global conflict management and the UN's role in the world. By tracing these evolving imaginaries, the paper highlights how the UN navigates its challenges and considers alternative trajectories for peacekeeping.

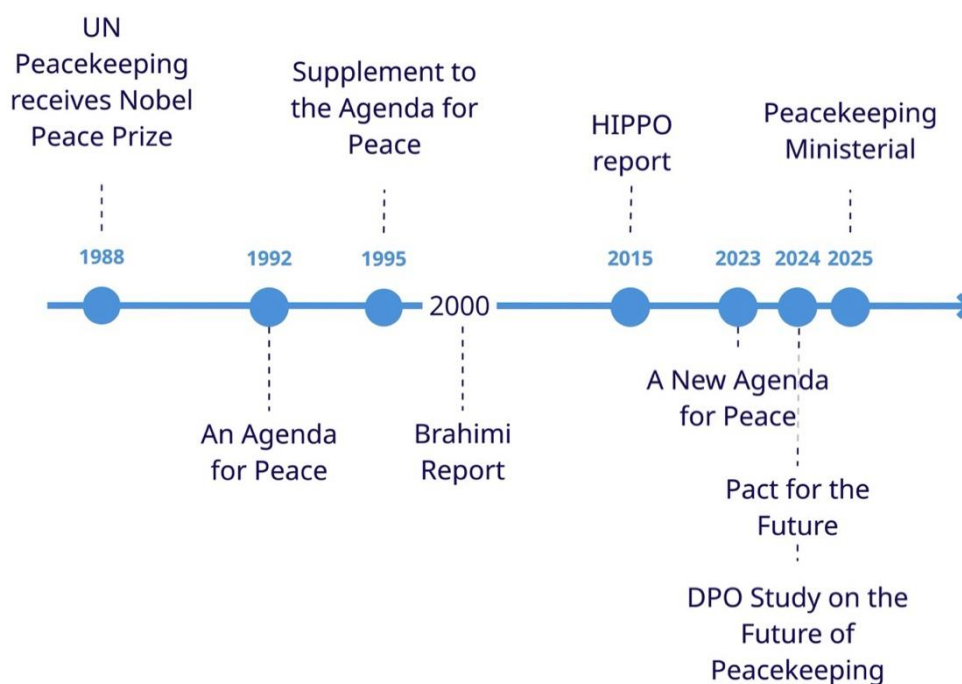
The timing of the study is significant. It coincides with a surge of UN publications that explore peacekeeping's future, including 'A New Agenda for Peace' (Guterres 2023), 'Pact for the Future' (UN 2024), a Department of Peace Operations commissioned study (Wane et al. 2024), and other emerging visions for advancing UN peacekeeping (see Chen 2024; Paris 2024; Day n.d.). Speaking to the broader literature on peacekeeping, this perspective on visions for the future moves the debate beyond questions of whether peacekeeping in its current form can be deemed 'successful' (Howard 2019; Paris 2004; Di Salvatore and Ruggeri 2017), whether missions are able to attract sufficiently trained and equipped personnel (Benson and Kathman 2014; Albrecht et al. 2017), or how troop-contributing countries (TCCs), individually and institutionally, are shaped by engaging in peacekeeping (Bellamy and Williams 2013; Fisher and Wilén 2022; Albrecht et al. 2024). Instead, it places peacekeeping within a larger historical and strategic framework, while emphasising its undeniable role as the only truly global conflict management tool we have – despite its flaws and limitations.

The first part of this paper tracks how past futures of peacekeeping have been discussed and anticipated in key UN publications and documents since the Cold War. It then discusses recent studies on the future of peacekeeping to offer an overview of current perspectives and how they have been shaped by the past. The paper goes on to examine the multiple futures of peacekeeping that emerge from the interviews conducted in New York, highlighting the diverse perspectives, institutional debates and strategic considerations shaping these visions. These interviews reveal multiple coexisting visions – some conflicting, others complementary – that reflect the complexities of contemporary conflicts, geopolitics and UN institutional constraints. The analysis shows how persistent challenges like mission overstretch, political deadlock, and host state consent continue to shape peacekeeping's evolution. By centring on multiple trajectories rather than a singular, linear projection, we provide policymakers and scholars with an alternative lens to better understand, anticipate and navigate the evolving challenges of peacekeeping.



**Figure 1. A timeline of key publications on the future of peacekeeping**

### Past and Present Futures A Timeline



## THE PAST FUTURES OF PEACEKEEPING

While the late Cold War era was marked by optimism for what peacekeeping could achieve, this gradually gave way to a more pragmatic outlook. As peacekeeping missions expanded from the early 1990s onward, foundational principles such as consent, impartiality, and the non-use of force faced intense scrutiny amid increasing militarisation and the blurring of lines between peacekeeping and peace enforcement.

This section traces the evolution of UN peacekeeping from the Cold War to the 2010s, examining how key UN documents shaped actual operations and how peacekeeping's role transformed over time. It highlights key moments in this transformation, beginning with the 1988 Nobel Peace Prize, which recognised UN peacekeeping at a time when missions were primarily focused on preventing armed clashes and facilitating negotiations. With the Cold War's end, peacekeeping was reimagined as a powerful instrument for global stability. However, the post-Cold War reality of the 1990s forced a reckoning with new, complex conflicts that demanded multidimensional approaches, reshaping peacekeeping into a more interventionist and politically entangled enterprise. In essence, both the *form* and *content* of peacekeeping changed from something relatively simple and clearly defined to a multi-applicable tool. As conflicts became more complex, and the UN faced immediate and pressing challenges – for example, in Somalia, Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina – it became increasingly challenging to imagine peacekeeping's future as the bringer of long-term global peace.



### **1980s: The Nobel Peace Prize and the promise of a better future**

The year 1988 was a landmark for UN peacekeeping as its efforts for ‘preventing armed clashes and creating conditions for negotiations’ were honoured with a Nobel Peace Prize. Having deployed missions to the Middle East, Kashmir, Cyprus, Congo, and West Guinea, UN peacekeeping came to symbolise what the then Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar (1988) called ‘the world community’s will to peace and [...] the impartial, practical expression of that will’. At the tail end of the Cold War, when the UN Security Council was politically paralysed by US-Soviet power struggles, Pérez de Cuéllar (1989) praised the ability of peacekeeping to improvise, use new techniques of peace-making, and fill the void left by the absence of ‘great power unanimity’. For the secretary-general, receiving this prestigious prize underlined the hope and promise of peacekeeping operations and embodied a projection of what peacekeeping ought to be – could be – in its ideal form. It represented an encouragement for a future where the spectre of war would cease to haunt the planet, serving to aspire ‘what we have dreamed of for so long, that is to make the rule of law standard rather than the exception in world affairs’ (Pérez de Cuéllar 1988).

This optimism was fuelled by the period that preceded the prize: during the Cold War, peacekeeping was constrained by a narrowly defined scope, shaped by a Security Council often paralysed by superpower rivalries. Paradoxically, these very constraints contributed to making peacekeeping operations relatively effective. Limitations forced peacekeeping missions to adopt a focused and pragmatic approach, often enabling more decisive action within their restricted mandates. UN peacekeeping forces contributed, for example, to a measure of stabilisation in the Middle Eastern region by preventing further escalation of the Greek-Turkish conflict in Cyprus in 1964, and supervised the withdrawal of Israeli, British and French invading forces during the Suez Crisis in 1956.

These achievements instilled confidence in peacekeeping’s potential, as reflected in Pérez de Cuéllar’s bold suggestion that the principles and techniques of peacekeeping could be applicable and relevant to ‘other areas and problems as well’, such as using ‘the symbolic representation of international authority’ or ‘the capacity for fact-finding’ (Pérez de Cuéllar 1989). This vision and optimism effectively widened the scope of peacekeeping but, as the Cold War ended, abstract hopes for the future were abruptly replaced by a need for tangible, actionable steps.

### **1990s: Idealism meets reality – an agenda for peace**

This transition from theory to action was crystallised in Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s ‘An Agenda for Peace’ (1992), which outlined a roadmap for achieving global peace in the post-Cold War era. In this visionary document, peacekeeping was highlighted as the UN’s premier initiative, greatly influenced by its recent Nobel Prize win and further bolstered by the significant geopolitical shifts during the 1990s. Peacekeeping was mobilised to ‘keep the peace’ after a period of heightened tensions ‘to seize the moment for the sake of the future’ (Boutros-Ghali 1992, 48). Yet rather than ushering in a stable global order, the post-Cold War era exposed a new global conflict landscape and, with it, the constraints of peacekeeping. In Somalia (1992-1995), for instance, the UN mission struggled with warlord resistance and poor coordination, while in Rwanda (1994), international forces, restricted by a limited mandate, failed to prevent a genocide, both revealing the instability and geopolitical

ambivalence that undermined interventions (Tchie 2023, 231; Oksamytna and Karlsrud 2020, 97-8).

Instability during the 1990s was driven in part by the power vacuum following the Soviet Union's collapse, suppressed ethnic and religious tensions, and the broader transition from bipolar to unipolar and later multipolar world orders. These shifts fuelled the rise of non-state actors and an increase in civil conflicts, often spilling across borders (as in, for example, West Africa), rather than the traditionally recognised interstate wars of the time (Peter 2015). The changing conflict landscape not only heightened the demand for peacekeeping operations but also necessitated their expansion, a shift outlined by Boutros-Ghali (1992, 29), which gave rise to multidimensional operations during the 1990s.

The idea of growth and prosperity through peace, which had inspired hope and trust in the effectiveness of peacekeeping was, however, quickly questioned. By the mid-1990s, the envisioned future in 'An Agenda for Peace' appeared increasingly out of reach and the expansion of peacekeeping mandates – grown to include protection of civilians and state-building support – proved unsustainable. Questions also arose about when and at what stage of conflict peacekeepers should intervene, challenging the traditional practice of deploying only after peace agreements were in place (Fulci 1996). In short, peacekeeping encountered the limits of its own possibility.

The challenges that peacekeeping was facing necessitated the publication of 'Supplement to An Agenda for Peace' in 1995, which also served as a position paper for the UN's fiftieth anniversary. The pace of global conflict transformation seemingly outstripped the UN's ability to adapt peacekeeping doctrines and capabilities, making the vision outlined in its agenda appear outdated. The supplement was therefore specified to fill the gap in those 'areas where unforeseen, or partially foreseen, difficulties have arisen' and where member states are asked to make 'hard decisions' (Boutros-Ghali 1995, 2-3). In that sense, the evolving conflict landscape made the supplement an urgent recalibration of the future envisioned just three years prior.

In fact, the once hopeful dreams of the late 1980s and early 1990s of peacekeeping as a genuine remedy were quickly 'shattered', bringing an end to the 'peacekeeping euphoria' (Schnabel 1997, 563). Missions across ex-Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Somalia, especially, prompted serious reflection on the limits of peacekeeping. The proliferation of missions in contexts where there was 'no peace to keep', combined with an expanded range of tasks, increasingly transformed peacekeeping into an intervention tool aimed, more or less explicitly, at imposing peace. The multidimensional model of peacekeeping came under scrutiny, prompting questions about whether peacekeeping could continue to expand as it had, and doubts arose over whether peacekeeping had a future at all.

Scholars like Albrecht Schnabel argued in the late 1990s that peacekeeping had become 'stretched beyond recognition' (1997, 569), with its original humanitarian and altruistic principles increasingly marginalised in favour of member states' strategic interests. Here, the blurring of boundaries between peacekeeping and peace enforcement was a particularly concerning trend: the 'Supplement to An Agenda for Peace' forewarned that 'the distinction between the two can undermine the viability of the peacekeeping operation and endanger its personnel' (Boutros-Ghali 1995, 9). This warning emerged alongside enforcement actions in Rwanda, Somalia and Haiti that

were framed as necessary measures to provide humanitarian relief, further entrenching the shift toward interventionist peacekeeping.

Despite Pérez de Cuéllar's Nobel Peace Prize speech emphasising peacekeeping and peace enforcement as distinct – even opposing – approaches, in practice these roles became increasingly intertwined. Scholars and practitioners alike warned that such shifts risked compromising the essential humanitarian foundations of peacekeeping in pursuit of more aggressive geopolitical objectives, foregrounding a 'bleak outlook for future peacekeeping practices' (Schnabel 1997, 567). Moreover, the missions in Bosnia and Somalia were watershed moments for peacekeeping, as their deviations from core principles like impartiality and consent pushed these foundational principles to – and beyond – their limits (Tharoor 1996, 90). The tentative calls to reconsider peacekeeping's core principles proved insufficient in addressing the challenges posed by complex civil wars and the deliberate targeting of civilians, highlighting the need for a more comprehensive re-evaluation of peacekeeping strategies.

As missions increasingly strayed from peacekeeping's foundational principles, analyses of past successes highlighted that mission effectiveness depended on strict adherence to those very principles (see Fulci 1996, 50), a point reiterated in the 'Supplement to An Agenda for Peace' (Boutros-Ghali 1995, 8–9). This insight had consequences for how the future of peacekeeping was imagined, articulated by referencing missions during the Cold War in their more modest form and with limited mandates. The UN was recognised for its ability to conduct this traditional, limited peacekeeping effectively, drawing on its expertise and what Boutros-Ghali called its 'unparalleled experience' (1995, 7). However, as Sashi Tharoor (1997, 85-6) observed, this success could only be sustained if peacekeeping was applied to crises deemed 'ripe' for its implementation.

Simultaneously, the evolving nature of the global conflict landscape underscored the understanding that 'we will not be able to face the twenty-first century by remaining firmly rooted in the twentieth' (Ibid., 86). The future of peacekeeping drew not only on past successes but also demanded the fundamental reimagining of its scope, principles and operational modalities, as Boutros-Ghali outlined in the supplement:

The times call for thinking afresh, for striving together and for creating new ways to overcome crises. This is because the different world that emerged when the Cold War ceased is still a world not fully understood. The changed face of conflict today requires us to be perceptive, adaptive, creative and courageous, and to address simultaneously the immediate as well as the root causes of conflict, which all too often lie in the absence of economic opportunities and social inequities. Perhaps above all it requires a deeper commitment to cooperation and true multilateralism than humanity has ever achieved before. [...] As understanding grows of the challenges to peace and security, hard decisions, if postponed, will appear in retrospect as having been relatively easy when measured against the magnitude of tomorrow's troubles (1995, 24).

Fresh perspectives were seen as essential to anticipating and addressing the challenges of the coming century. While it was evident that UN peacekeeping had a role to play, what exactly it could do and how it could be enabled remained underdefined (Tharoor 1997, 89). This uncertainty created space for new visions and scenarios, including some

that were not exclusively focused on the UN. Other organisations, particularly regional bodies like the Organisation of African Unity/African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which had begun taking on peacekeeping roles in response to conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Sudan, were expected to play a role in shaping future directions through non-UN forms of peacekeeping (Fulci 1996, 52–3).

In his reflections on the future of UN peacekeeping, Schnabel (1997) proposed several potential scenarios in the face of this uncertainty. Some of those he outlined as preferable, such as the future envisioned in 'An Agenda for Peace', where the UN leads operations in every internal or interstate conflict in need of third-party assistance. Other imagined futures he saw as less preferable. For instance, he argued that selective unilateral or multidimensional deployments, driven by the special interests of one or more nations, risked undermining missions through exploitation or even preventing peacekeeping altogether when key actors considered operations too costly, dangerous or unlikely to succeed (Schnabel 1997, 468).

All of these scenarios, both promising and problematic, shaped debates on peacekeeping and influenced the strategies and approaches envisioned for its future development. More significantly, they foreshadowed fundamental challenges that would later emerge as systemic crises that have come to define contemporary peacekeeping operations: the tension between ambitious mandates and limited resources, growing scepticism about peacekeeping's effectiveness in complex conflicts, the shift toward regional alternatives, and the emerging dominance of ad hoc coalitions.

### **2000s: Brahimi and 9/11**

Harsh criticism from both within and outside the UN in the late 1990s challenged the organisation's trust and credibility (see e.g. Urquhart 1996, 145). These problems were addressed in the 'Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations' (2000), commonly referred to as the Brahimi Report after the chairman of the committee, Lakhdar Brahimi. The panel was convened by Secretary-General Kofi Annan and the report was published ahead of the Millenium Summit. It acknowledged and addressed peacekeeping's shortcomings and failures and adopted a more pragmatic approach, marking a sharp departure from the optimism of less than a decade earlier.

The report recognised that missions in Kosovo and East Timor, established in 1999, where peacekeeping missions functioned as transitional (civil) administrations and temporary governance structures, revealed the UN's lack of expertise in 'running a municipality or national ministry' (UN 2000, para. 129), and in the end undermined state-building (Cassin and Zyla 2021, 458). The report raised questions about the UN's own capabilities, whether it 'should be in this business at all, and if so, whether it should be considered an element of peace operations or managed by some other structure' (UN 2000, para. 78). This reflection underscores the organisation's struggle with peacekeeping's expanding tasks and limitations, as internal discussions candidly acknowledged that 'there are many tasks which the United Nations peacekeeping forces should not be asked to undertake, and many places they should not go' (UN 2000, 1).

The report acknowledged that peacekeeping missions were not deployed 'into post-conflict situations but tried to *create* them' (UN 2000, viii [original emphasis]),

fundamentally altering their original intent and thrusting them into a domain of violence for which they were neither originally designed nor well-suited, and which the UN may not have been best placed to execute. These insights fed into the growing need for robustness, not only to protect civilians – a realisation that emerged sharply after the genocides in Srebrenica (1995) and Rwanda (1994), where mass atrocities occurred in the presence of peacekeepers – but also to safeguard UN personnel and uphold mandates through the use of force (Tardy 2011). Indeed, the conditions of success for future missions were described as ‘political support, rapid deployment with a robust force posture and a sound peace-building strategy’ (UN 2000, 1). This tripartite foundation marked a decisive shift from earlier, more idealistic approaches, reinforcing institutional commitment to addressing the root causes of conflict and fostering long-term peace through initiatives such as Special Political Missions (SPMs).

By emphasising the importance of ‘clear, credible, and achievable mandates’ (UN 2000, para. 56), reducing ambiguity and limiting differing interpretations, the report sought to bridge the gap between ambitions and operational realities. It reinforced the importance of gaining the consent of local parties, which had proven challenging for missions to obtain and maintain (Ibid., para. 127). Significantly, the shift in focus toward intra-state conflict redefined a core principle of peacekeeping: impartiality no longer meant treating all parties equally, but instead required adherence to the principles of the UN Charter, including human rights, international law and civilian protection. This is an important redefinition, enabling missions to condemn, sanction or take action against groups committing atrocities. It made peacekeeping more interventionist and explicitly guided by international norms rather than strict neutrality (Ibid., para. 50).

Compared to the idealised vision of peacekeeping in the early 1990s, the future outlined in the Brahimi report was more realistic about the UN’s abilities and capabilities and, consequently, more concrete about its form and tasks. This pragmatic perspective embraced the necessity of peace enforcement and robust multidimensionality to address the complexities of intra-state war and transnational conflict, along with the future instability they might create, necessitating more adaptable and responsive approaches.

In the early 2000s, efforts were made to implement such a future where peacekeeping would be more adaptive, responsive, and accountable, moving beyond past failures to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. While the reliance on peacekeeping was declining in the late 1990s, the 2000s saw a resurgence of missions with a particular focus on Africa, with more than twenty missions deployed in the region by 2005 (MacQueen 2006, 182). However, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 shifted global priorities toward counterterrorism, pushing UN peacekeeping missions into increasingly complex and hostile environments where non-state and transnational actors were the significant threats (Jones and Hart 2008; Clausen and Albrecht 2021). This shift was particularly evident in the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), where peacekeepers faced direct attacks from jihadist insurgents, and in the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), which was tasked with combating armed groups like the Allied Democratic Forces. In response, missions became more robust, emphasising force protection, offensive operations and intelligence-driven mandates, such as the deployment of the Force Intervention Brigade within MONUSCO in 2013.

## **2010s: The HIPPO report and lessons learnt?**

Following the fifteenth anniversary of the Brahimi report, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon commissioned the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) report, published in 2015. As a comprehensive assessment of UN peace operations, the HIPPO report built on the Brahimi report and maintained its pragmatic and realistic approach. It proposed four key shifts in peace operations: (1) prioritising political solutions; (2) applying the full spectrum of peace operations with greater flexibility; (3) strengthening global and regional partnerships; and (4) making the UN Secretariat more field-focused and peace operations more people-centred (UN 2015, 7).

In particular, the report scrutinised the militarisation of missions and the use of force, highlighting the disagreements it sparked among member states while also acknowledging the inherent limitations of peacekeeping. For example, the protection of civilians remained a key task, expected to be carried out 'proactively and effectively, but also with recognition of its limits' (UN 2015, 11). Recognising its limitations, the UN explicitly encouraged partnerships with regional organisations – despite challenges of their own (Adetula et al. 2021) – most notably in its support for AU peace support operations. This approach culminated in the adoption of Security Council Resolution 2719 on 21 December 2023 [see Box 1], which established a framework for AU-led peace support operations to access UN-assessed contributions on a case-by-case basis (UN 2023b). Consequently, the UN's self-image and its role as the world's peacekeeper underwent a clear turn, driven by a conscious effort to move away from militarisation. Instead, the organisation presented itself more as an 'enabler and facilitator of others to play their increasingly prominent roles' (UN 2015, para. 56), supporting regional entities in taking on more significant responsibilities.

The emphasis on prevention in the Brahimi report had little practical impact but was picked up and given greater significance in the HIPPO report. It consistently underscored the 'primacy of politics' (Andersen 2018) as essential for achieving lasting peace, emphasising the critical link between civilian protection mandates and broader political processes (UN 2015, 11). However, differing interpretations of this principle (Russo and Mamiya 2022) made alignment challenging, while the increasing standardisation of missions further hindered operational effectiveness. As the HIPPO report observed: 'mandates and missions are produced on the basis of templates instead of tailored to support situation-specific political strategies, and technical and military approaches come at the expense of strengthened political efforts' (UN 2015, 9). This constitutes a form of peacekeeping aligned with what John Karlsrud (2023a, 265) has referred to as 'UN support missions', which are not obliged to adhere to the core principles of peacekeeping. The future of peacekeeping, the report suggests, must reconnect with its foundational purpose by prioritising political strategies tailored to specific contexts.

The report acknowledged the contributions of peace operations, highlighting their adaptability and their role in reducing conflict. However, it also warned that 'today [...] there is evidence of a worrisome reversal of some of that trend and a widely shared concern that changes in conflict may be outpacing the ability of United Nations peace operations to respond' (UN 2015, 9). This statement demonstrates not only critical self-reflection but also hints at an approaching future where conflict dynamics evolve faster than the UN's capacity to adapt, where the 'international community seems to have run out of ideas as to how to deal with certain categories of conflict' (Adetula et al. 2021, 147).

The absence of new mandated missions since 2014 seems to validate these concerns and highlights the challenges of implementing and testing the reforms proposed in the HIPPO report. Herein lies both a significant challenge for the global organisation and an explanation for its persistent efforts to develop and reshape peacekeeping, as it has evolved far beyond its originally envisioned role during the Cold War. Despite being stretched beyond recognition, peacekeeping sits at the core of the UN's identity, and a UN without this instrument is a UN in identity crisis. Indeed, as the HIPPO report noted, peace operations are often equated with the UN itself (UN 2015, 6), reinforcing the idea that peacekeeping is not just one of its activities but one of its defining features. Perhaps this equation explains why the existential crisis of peacekeeping is also a crisis for the UN – one that persists to this day.

## **PRESENT FUTURES: NEW AGENDA AND PACT FOR PEACE**

The mid-2010s represented a pivotal juncture in which the UN was starkly confronted by its own limitations, but this crisis also represented the potential for renewal. After a decade of reflection, the present moment, starting in 2023, has seen a series of publications once again envisaging the future of peacekeeping (such as Gilder et al. 2023; Duursma et al. 2023; Cassin and Zyla 2023; Paris 2024; Day n.d.). This section offers an overview of this concentrated burst of thought, which underscores the urgency and crisis facing peacekeeping, its long history of more than 75 years, and the pressing need for alternative perspectives on its future.

Current views of the future have been shaped by a series of events, including the closure of the Malian mission MINUSMA in 2023 that marked a major turning point for UN peacekeeping and its future (see Boutellis 2024). Established in 2013 as a stabilisation mission, MINUSMA closed a decade later after the Malian government withdrew its consent to the mission and requested its departure. It was plagued by numerous challenges, including a lack of sufficient resources to match its expansive mandate, anti-UN sentiment among the Malian population, and the need to operate in an unstable political and security environment (see e.g. UN 2023a). Hence, when the mission ended, the prevailing sentiment was that UN peacekeeping was 'dead', an ironic twist, given that it coincided with its 75th anniversary.

This pessimism was articulated with the release of Secretary-General António Guterres's 'A New Agenda for Peace' (2023), published ahead of the Summit of the Future in September 2024. The document marked another turning point, introducing an urgent, concerned, and starkly realistic tone that underscored the precarious state of the world and its uncertain future. Such urgency is unsurprising given the numerous ongoing conflicts at the time, including the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. Guterres diagnosed the world as being at a crossroads, with a shifting world order characterised by interlocking threats and a move toward 'a new global order' (Guterres 2023, 3; see also Cassin and Zyla 2021).

For many, peace remains an elusive promise, 'A New Agenda for Peace' contends, but 'if war is a choice, peace can be too' (Guterres 2023, 3). Despite this hope, Guterres remains acutely aware of the UN's diminishing relevance (Ibid., 33), viewing the present moment as an inflection point that requires member states to demonstrate a commitment to peace. This framing has consequences for how the future features in 'A



New Agenda for Peace'. On the one hand, there is the threat of undesirable futures if no action for peace is taken, including lawlessness, existential risks for states, and global instability. On the other hand, deep divisions among the permanent members of the Security Council have eroded trust and cooperation that have frozen the UN as 'primary guarantor of peace and security' (Duursma et al. 2023, 448). Yet, this crisis has also highlighted the pressing need for stronger multilateral efforts for peace and 'a vision for multilateralism in a world of transition' (UN 2024, 11). At the time of writing, this vision remains largely theoretical, with little tangible connection to practical realities.

While potential new frontiers, such as outer space and cyberspace, are being explored, the uncertainty of the global security landscape makes Guterres's deep scepticism about its future unsurprising. His vision of a diminished role for peacekeeping reflects not only contemporary challenges but also his well-documented reservations about its effectiveness in addressing protracted civil wars. In South Sudan, for instance, UN peacekeepers struggle to maintain stability amid ongoing violence. Geopolitical rivalries further complicate peacekeeping efforts, exemplified by US-China tensions in the Indo-Pacific. Great power competition is also evident in Russia's war in Ukraine, where Western military aid to Kyiv has turned the conflict into a proxy confrontation between NATO and Russia. Additionally, the continuously morphing role of non-state actors has reshaped conflict dynamics. This is seen in Hamas's governance and military operations in Gaza, as well as the Wagner Group and its successor, the Africa Corps, which function as Kremlin-backed paramilitary forces in Mali, the Central African Republic and Sudan.

Decreased demand for peacekeeping from member states, the review and scaling down of missions, and emerging threats – such as climate change, water insecurity, and the increasing hybridisation of warfare – have all made the security landscape more unpredictable and contributed to growing disillusionment with peacekeeping (Ponzio and Siddiqui 2023). Much like the vision outlined in the HIPPO report, the 'New Agenda' sees the UN not in centre stage but instead assuming the role of an enabler, empowering regional organisations and international partners to lead intervention efforts. Guterres emphasises supporting the AU, for instance, through what he envisions as 'a new generation of peace enforcement missions and counterterrorism operations' (UN 2024, 26). These initiatives have sought to tackle regional challenges under African leadership, with support from the Security Council.

This shift reflects a broader reimagining of the UN's role, prioritising support and coordination over direct intervention in an increasingly multipolar global landscape. However, as Duursma et al. (2023, 424) highlight, it remains unclear whether parallel deployments, ad hoc coalitions, or partnership peacekeeping affect the perception of UN missions as impartial, particularly among local communities. With its emphasis on realistic mandates and smaller missions the 'New Agenda' resonates with 'pragmatic peacekeeping' (Moe and Stepputat 2018), a realistic approach that favours feasible, effective solutions over idealistic outcomes.

Acknowledging these trends, Guterres (2023, 24) pushes for the primacy of politics, clear and realistic mandates, the use of data and digital technologies, and a renewed commitment to peacekeeping reform, largely echoing the HIPPO report, albeit in less tangible terms. The 'New Agenda' therefore serves less as a roadmap and more as a starting point for discussions on peacekeeping and its future. Aligned with Guterres's push to phase out peacekeeping, greater emphasis is being placed on exit strategies and transitions from peace operations, anticipating the closure of additional missions

beyond MINUSMA. As part of this strategy to make peacekeeping more versatile and responsive, there is a call to:

undertake a reflection on the limits and future of peacekeeping in the light of the evolving nature of conflict [... and to] clearly reflect the comparative strengths and successes of peacekeeping, as well as its doctrinal and operational limitations, as a tool that relies on strategic consent and the support of critical parties (UN 2024, 24).

While peacekeeping was widely seen to be on life support at the end of 2023, with the 'New Agenda' as its death knell, by mid-2024 the discourse was shifting again. UN officials and associates interviewed for this study towards the end of 2024 hinted at slight optimism. While most agreed that multidimensional peacekeeping in its current form is dead and with it, the end of the liberal worldview peacekeeping has been pushing, promoting democratic transitions, market-oriented economies and civil and political rights (Clausen and Albrecht 2021; Paris 2024, 2; see also Cassin and Zyla 2021), they could nevertheless see a future for peacekeeping in a multipolar world order (see Dunton et al. 2023; Karlsrud 2023b).

What caused this change in sentiment? A key factor was the publication of the 'Pact for the Future' after the Summit of the Future in September 2024, which emphasised the goal to 'deliver a better future for people and planet' (UN 2024, 1). By reaffirming commitments to multilateralism and proposing structural reforms to enhance global peace and security, the pact signalled a renewed effort to revitalise international cooperation, offering a counterpoint to the prevailing pessimism surrounding peacekeeping. In short, the pact acknowledged that peacekeeping remains a unique strength of the UN in maintaining peace and security and may still hold value (see also Gowan 2024). It helped realign member states' visions toward shared goals, yet it remains more of a broad consensus and tentative promise for the future than a firm commitment with concrete steps, offering little insight into the actual thinking within the UN.

Even so, 'Pact for the Future' reaffirmed interest in peacekeeping and sparked further discussions about its future. Subsequent reviews of peacekeeping as an instrument of the international community, outlined below, build on this momentum, anticipating or assuming a future where peacekeeping remains relevant and continues to play a significant role. However, this renewed enthusiasm largely reflects the UN's internal drive to reinvigorate its role rather than a clear increase in demand for peacekeeping from member states or conflict-affected regions. Accordingly, the drive to shape peacekeeping's future may be an artificial attempt to maintain its relevance. This raises doubts about whether the UN is truly adapting to changing global power dynamics and new conflict types or simply rebranding old methods to fit a new narrative. There is also doubt as to whether the UN even has the political ability to make such adaptations.

## Peacekeeping à la carte

In response to the 'Pact for the Future' and the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO)'s initiative to reevaluate and reaffirm peacekeeping, the latter commissioned a comprehensive study, 'The Future of Peacekeeping, New Models, and Related Capabilities' (Wane et al. 2024). The study emphasises the achievements and comparative advantages of peacekeeping, including its system of networked multilateralism, rapid response capabilities, and accountability and compliance mechanisms. It underlines from the outset that UN peacekeeping '*remains* an effective multilateral tool for preventing and limiting armed conflict, sustaining peace, as well as responding to a broader range of threats to international peace and security' (Ibid., 1 [emphasis added]).

The study presents thirty models, traditional and new roles, that respond to existing and emerging threats, such as the weaponisation of new and emerging technologies, transnational organised crime and the climate emergency (Ibid., 16-7). These models draw inspiration from peacekeeping's broader historical successes, urging a focus on the bigger picture rather than recent setbacks. They are intended to function as a kind of menu, or *peacekeeping à la carte*. As a DPO official<sup>2</sup> explained, this menu illustrates the breadth of peacekeeping capabilities, allowing member states to mix and match based on the types of missions they are politically willing to fund and deploy. Through this lens, peacekeeping does not have to revolve around large-scale comprehensive operations, a UN commentator<sup>3</sup> explained, as was the norm in the 2000s, but may take different forms.

The study also addresses challenges to the future of peacekeeping, foremost among them being host state consent. The withdrawal of MINUSMA from Mali exemplifies the growing difficulty of securing and maintaining consent, as well as the manipulation of UN missions by host states to reinforce their legitimacy. The study also revisits a persistent post-Cold War tension that was evident in Mali as well, between peacekeeping and peace enforcement, one that puts pressure on the core principles of peacekeeping and contributes to the tarnished reputation of the UN (Peter 2015). Echoing the Brahimi and HIPPO reports, the DPO study acknowledges that this blurring has 'put the UN in a very difficult position' (Wane et al. 2014, 10) and warns against it. However, without mandating new missions with the opportunity to navigate these tensions and effectively manage host state consent, peacekeeping cannot demonstrate its worth or achieve success.

To address this, the study proposes 'incorporating a degree of risk tolerance into the enterprise' (Wane et al. 2014, 11). However, this approach sidesteps deeper structural issues, such as the manipulation of host state consent, the blurred line between peacekeeping and peace enforcement, and the Security Council's political divisions, which often obstruct clear mandates. Instead of tackling these core challenges, the study offers an operational adjustment that does little to resolve the structural weaknesses that continue to undermine peacekeeping's effectiveness, including political resistance, resource constraints and mandate limitations.

The models are not intended to be normative or dogmatic but to illustrate the range of possibilities for peacekeeping, as one DPO official explained.<sup>4</sup> Rather than prescribing a

<sup>2</sup> Interview with DPO official, remote, 24 Sept 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with UN commentator, NYC, 7 Oct 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with DPO official, remote, 24 Sept 2024.

fixed approach, they serve as conceptual tools to explore how peacekeeping can adapt to different conflict dynamics and operational challenges. They also help shape member states' understanding of what peacekeeping can achieve and encourage them to pledge the necessary capabilities ahead of the peacekeeping ministerial in 2025. This might also explain the study's lack of assertiveness and direction, reflecting the broader uncertainty surrounding peacekeeping's future. Rather than refining existing approaches, it signals a search for new roles or combinations of roles, aiming to inspire rather than prescribe a fixed course. In this sense, the report envisions a future with a diverse set of models while, at the time of writing, leaving the path forward open.

Perhaps the greatest challenge identified by the study in charting a path forward for peacekeeping is the 'inner workings of UN headquarters, which can sometimes hinder the Organization's ability to design and deploy optimal field operations' (Wane et al. 2014, 11). This, in turn, raises the question of which and how many of the 30 models proposed the institutional infrastructure of the UN realistically can facilitate and operationalise in its rigidity (Cassin and Zyla 2021, 459-60). One UN official commented:

Rather than viewing peacekeeping as an à la carte menu, I see it as a shelf full of ingredients – but without knowing how to cook with them. What we need is a cookbook: a clear guide on how to use these ingredients within the Security Council. The key questions are how to apply these models and what process to follow for establishing new mandates.<sup>5</sup>

The DPO study leaves open for discussion what concrete solutions might be. A greater reliance on regional missions is suggested, but more importantly there is a call to move beyond the binary thinking of whether the UN should intervene or not, to a recognition that the organisation can contribute in a variety of ways.

### **Modular peacekeeping**

In another recent study, 'A New Vision for Peace Operations', Eugene Chen takes the challenges of peace operations, rather than their past successes, as a starting point. Building on the recommendations in 'A New Agenda for Peace', the report aims to address the ongoing crisis of confidence in UN peace operations and sustain their relevance amid growing contemporary geopolitical upheaval (Chen 2024, 6). Chen, who has extensive experience working for the UN, proposes a complementary framework that leverages the strengths of various actors, both within and outside the UN, to enable more adaptive and context-specific interventions. His vision reimagines peace operations as a dynamic and flexible ecosystem, calling for a decisive break from the rigid bureaucratic inertia that has long drawn criticism of the UN. By transcending institutional constraints and integrating diverse expertise, Chen's approach seeks to enhance the effectiveness of peacekeeping in an increasingly complex global landscape.

Chen identifies challenges to peace operations like those in the DPO report, particularly the reliance on host state consent and its impact on impartiality, while also taking a more direct approach in highlighting additional, compounding contemporary

<sup>5</sup> Interview with military advisor of European UN mission, NYC, 16 Oct 2024.

shortcomings. Major setbacks that have contributed to the reputational damage and erosion of confidence in peace operations include the withdrawal of MINUSMA from Mali and the ongoing challenges faced by MONUSCO in the DRC (Gilder et al. 2023). One major contributor to this crisis is, according to Chen, ‘the tensions within the sprawling mandates implemented by multi-functional missions’ (2024, 13). These so-called ‘Christmas tree mandates’ may accommodate diverse interests, but their varying degrees of impartiality and timelines complicate the primary goal of facilitating inclusive negotiations, strengthening governance structures, and ensuring sustainable conflict resolution through political processes.

Even though the 30 models proposed in the DPO study are intended to be flexible, Chen argues that ‘the UN (should) move past the mentality of “models,” which imply a templated approach, towards a new way of conceiving peace operations’ (2024, 17). He builds on recommendations from the HIPPO report and emphasises the need to ‘meaningfully reflect long-neglected lessons learned in the conception, planning, and design of missions’ (Ibid., 28), advocating for a more adaptive and context-driven approach to peace operations. Indeed, a frequently voiced critique is that the UN’s institutional memory is short (see e.g. Nadin 2015), a weakness reflected in the recurring lessons learned and repeated recommendations across key UN documents discussed in the previous sections.

Chen’s report stands apart by actively engaging with past lessons, drawing on institutional memory rather than disregarding it, and proposing a modular approach informed by historical insights. Responding to the HIPPO report’s call to employ ‘the full spectrum of peace operations’, a concept left undefined in practical terms, Chen’s report offers a concrete approach through modular operations, shaped by two key factors: ‘the scale of desired UN engagement and the range of other actors present from within and outside the UN with complementary objectives and expertise’ (Chen 2024, 29).

The scale of operations would be adaptable, ranging from large, multidimensional missions with military, police and civilian components to small units embedded within resident coordinators’ offices (Chen 2024, 29). Distinguished by its practical focus and detail, this modular approach moves beyond traditional assumptions about peace operations, SPMs and their mandates. Instead of rigidly structuring missions, it proposes that operations concentrate on a subset of mandated activities while drawing on expertise within and beyond the UN. Responsibilities and resources would be delegated to partners based on their mandates and capacities, ensuring more effective burden-sharing while maintaining impartiality (Ibid., 30).

Chen highlights a cluster system proposed by a senior advisory group in 2011 to improve UN coordination and effectiveness. Activities were grouped into thematic clusters, each led by a coordinating organisation and divided into subclusters. For example, ‘the safety and security cluster’ included disarmament, policing and civilian protection, while the ‘justice cluster’ covered corrections and judicial reform. Chen argues that reintroducing these clusters could enhance planning predictability, foster specialised expertise and clarify responsibilities. This modular approach, he suggests, could also aid in implementing Resolution 2719 by creating a clear division of roles for a potential joint UN-AU mission.

The proposal for modular peace operations thus envisions a dynamic, flexible and collaborative ecosystem that challenges the rigid institutional constraints of traditional UN missions. It provides a tangible framework for more responsive and efficient peacekeeping. And yet its implementation remains uncertain. Given the current scaling back of peace operations, applying a modular approach to a new mission – or implementing one of the 30 models for that matter – remains largely theoretical, Chen (2014, 41) admits. Yet the biggest challenge lies in overcoming entrenched policies, processes and structures that have shaped UN peacekeeping for decades. As one UN official notes, the proposal assumes a level of coordination and leadership that is currently lacking.

Despite these hurdles, the modular approach forces the UN to rethink outdated paradigms at a time when fresh thinking is sorely needed. While the DPO report reminds Member States of peacekeeping's existing capabilities, Chen's new vision challenges the Security Council to recognise and remember that alternative approaches are possible. Yet, both frameworks risk feeling detached from the present reality, where immediate solutions are in high demand, raising critical questions about how these envisioned futures can be realised. Such detached futures certainly hold relevance in inspiring ideas about the direction of peacekeeping, yet they also highlight a fundamental reality: peacekeeping is constrained by existing resources, and they may not be enough. Ultimately, as many UN officials have emphasised, it is the Security Council that holds the power to turn these ideas into action.

## **BOX 1. RESOLUTION 2719**

UN Security Council Resolution 2719, adopted on 21 December 2023, emerged as a response to the longstanding need for more sustainable and predictable financing for African Union (AU)-led peace support operations. The resolution sets a framework allowing AU missions to access UN-assessed contributions on a case-by-case basis, with 75% of funding covered by the UN and the remaining 25% mobilised by the AU and UN jointly. This model signals a more formalised collaboration between the AU and UN but also reflects deeper anxieties about peacekeeping's future – its effectiveness, financing and adaptability to evolving conflicts in an increasingly fragmented global order. In that sense, many of peacekeeping's problems converge in this resolution. This boxed section explores some insider views on Resolution 2719 and lays bare wider frustrations about UN peacekeeping.

Overall, there was not much enthusiasm for the resolution amongst the UN officials that we interviewed: 'most are overwhelmed thinking about how the process would play out with 2719-missions', a DPO official explained, 'with all the joint planning, joint oversight, joint mandating, there are a lot of requirements that would need to be met and that would take a lot of time'.<sup>6</sup> The same official expressed appreciation, however, for the potential of a 2917-mission to do what UN peacekeeping cannot do, specifically peace enforcement: 'if you look at the future, there is one thing we see a lot of consensus around, and that's that the UN really cannot do peace enforcement'. In that sense, 2719 is an alternative avenue to engage in peace enforcement and counterterrorism. Another DPO colleague felt uncomfortable with 2719 as it seemed to 'subcontract the dirty job'

<sup>6</sup> Interview with DPO official, remote, 24 Sept 2024.

to AU countries, and they expressed concern that these new mission types ‘have the same flaws as UN peacekeeping’.<sup>7</sup> It might be more logical, they suggested, to boost existing collaborations like the ECOWAS Standby Force, ‘because what does seem to be working is Africa taking matters into their own hands as happened in Somalia for example’. They could see 2719 as positive in that it might ‘convince... African countries to pick up the fight’ in a future AU-UN partnership, but acknowledged ‘that is not positive per se’.

The practicalities that need to be hashed out and the subcontracting of peace enforcement are among the few reasons why an academic close to the UN described 2719 as a ‘huge distraction’, especially if the missions are ‘not strategically linked to the political strategy and activities of the UN’.<sup>8</sup> If the UN is rendered a service provider, or ‘enabler’, as the HIPPO report suggested, this can have detrimental consequences for the UN, such as its further marginalisation from political processes, a loss of impartiality and, as the academic speculated: ‘if something goes wrong in those missions, the UN will get the blame’. The academic described the resolution as a political symbol for AU-UN collaboration that is in reality counterproductive, ‘especially if there are more straightforward ways to respond to AU needs’.

A military adviser from a large African TCC confided that they were surprised 2719 was voted through.<sup>9</sup> They explained that ‘Africans want to deeply be involved in peacekeeping on the continent’ but suggested that people are not comfortable with 2719. They pointed to regional institutions, which they felt are more accepted among local communities. The AU, they said, ‘has its own mechanism so we can see how UN systems fall into place with the AU systems and tweak if needed’. Such an approach would work on the terms of the AU rather than adjusting to those of the UN.

## THE MANY FUTURES OF UN PEACEKEEPING

While the ‘Pact for the Future’ and the DPO study outline possibilities for the future of peacekeeping, they offer little insight into current thinking within the UN. Both the DPO and ‘New Visions’ reports should therefore be seen as efforts to challenge the rigid, templated model of peacekeeping and introduce greater fluidity and flexibility into its design and implementation. However, interviews with UN officials and diplomats in New York revealed alternative perspectives, problematisations and nuances to the models outlined in these studies. These perspectives are discussed below and grouped into three forms of futures: (1) broadened; (2) suspended and anticipated; and (3) retro-active futures. While many of these ideas are not immediately implementable, they influence current practices, policy and thinking in ways that deserve serious consideration if peacekeeping is to remain relevant and adaptable. Emerging from within the UN, these initiatives may provide insights into the potential evolution of peacekeeping, highlighting meaningful innovations that could inform future planning. Rather than forcing convergence on a single model or a limited range of approaches, they encourage flexibility in preparing for multiple possible futures.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with DPO official, NYC, 10 Oct 2024.

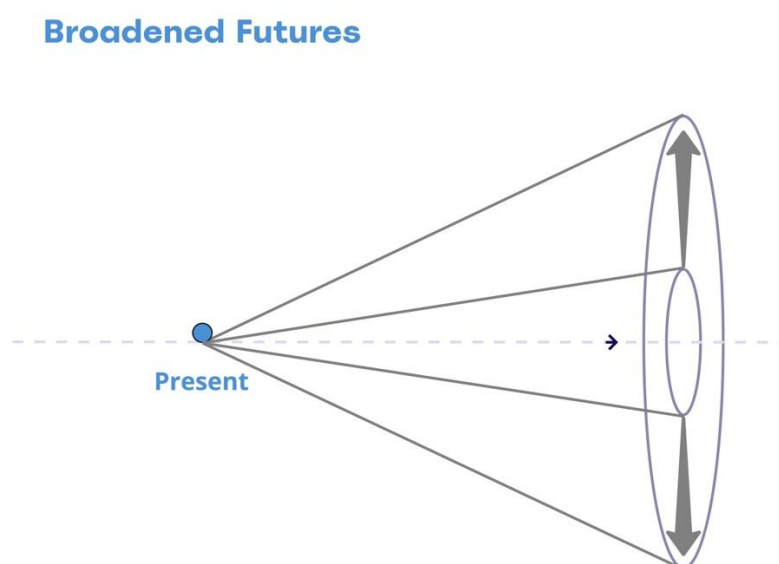
<sup>8</sup> Interview with academic close to UN, NYC, 11 Oct 2024

<sup>9</sup> Interview with military advisor for African UN mission, NYC, 16 Oct 2024.



When debating the future of peacekeeping, it is crucial to recognise that no single, unified trajectory exists. Multiple visions coexist, some conflicting, others complementary, and many overlapping in ways that reflect the complexities of contemporary conflicts, geopolitics, and the institutional constraints and politics of the UN itself. What is clear is that the challenges of mission overstretch, political deadlock, and the struggle to secure host state consent, as they have been identified and reidentified over the past 30 years, are likely to persist – mitigated at best, but never fully overcome. The question, therefore, is what form peacekeeping is likely to take in response to these enduring constraints: whether it will return to more limited, consent-based missions, evolve into a more flexible and modular system, continue to operate within the increasingly blurred boundaries of peace enforcement and stabilisation, or, if political and financial support erodes further, cease to exist as a viable instrument of multilateral conflict management.

**Figure 2. Broadened futures**



### **Broadened futures**

In the spirit of the two reports discussed above, many UN insiders imagined – and even desired – a more flexible and fluid approach to peacekeeping that could draw on the range of expertise and resources available within the UN. Frustrated with siloed approaches, where different UN departments, agencies and missions operate with limited coordination, they express the need for more open and integrated thinking. This means breaking down bureaucratic barriers, improving communication across different parts of the UN system, and fostering a more flexible, collaborative approach that allows peacekeeping to draw on a wider range of expertise and resources.

One informant suggested the modular approach by envisioning a dashboard with adjustable buttons and sliders, allowing decision-makers to calibrate mission

components in real time.<sup>10</sup> This would enable the Security Council to assess the specific needs of a conflict, select the most relevant tools, and dynamically adjust peacekeeping responses as situations evolve. When a conflict requires a peace operation, the Security Council would have a range of options at its disposal, allowing it to assess priorities, determine the most immediate needs, and ‘use the dashboard to push some buttons and set some levers in motion while adjusting where needed’.<sup>11</sup>

Eliminating these internal constraints enhances operational flexibility and synergy within the UN, allowing missions to draw more effectively on the full range of available expertise and resources. In theory, breaking down bureaucratic rigidity and budgetary restrictions could make peace operations truly adaptive, responsive and better aligned with the realities of contemporary conflicts. However, in practice, such reforms face significant obstacles due to entrenched institutional inertia, political divisions among member states, and deeply embedded bureaucratic structures that shape UN operations. While greater flexibility remains a compelling vision, the likelihood of implementing such fundamental changes is severely limited by the very system that sustains peacekeeping.

When asked about the difference between peacekeeping and peacebuilding, and whether one will have more prominence in the future over the other, that same DPO official responded that they were not particularly attached to either term, suggesting that ‘maybe it is good to not have these labels, which only make things more difficult. In that way, it would allow for more flexibility’.<sup>12</sup> By moving beyond rigid categorisations, the official implied that peace operations could be more adaptable, tailoring their approach to specific contexts rather than being constrained by predefined mandates, expectations and models. They suggested that the distinction between peacekeeping and peacebuilding, while useful in policy discussions, does not always reflect the realities on the ground, where missions often perform overlapping tasks (see also Curran and Hunt 2020), from stabilising conflict zones to supporting governance and reconciliation efforts. Removing these strict classifications, as the official suggested, could create more space for integrated and pragmatic interventions that evolve in response to shifting dynamics.

This is an important point as it lays bare the tensions between the need to define and confine what a peacekeeping mission entails, such as distinguishing it from a peace enforcement mission, and the imperative for genuine adaptability. While clear definitions provide structure and set expectations, they can also limit the flexibility needed to respond effectively to the complexities of contemporary conflicts, where peacekeeping often overlaps with other forms of intervention. This relinquishing of rigid definitions aligns with Chen’s observation about the need for the UN to move beyond its model-driven mentality and break free from its fixation on categorisations. The lack of a clear definition would position missions on a spectrum, allowing for greater flexibility in mandate interpretation and smoother transitions between different operational scales and tasks as conflict dynamics evolve. However, apart from the politics of doing so, another key question, as raised by one UN official, is whether the UN could manage such

<sup>10</sup> Interview with UN official, NYC, 10 Oct 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with DPO official, NYC, 10 Oct 24.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

complexity, foreseeing challenges not only on the operational side but also in the rotation of personnel, which would inevitably further complicate implementation.<sup>13</sup>

A military advisor, along the same lines, offered another perspective to broaden the future of peacekeeping by focusing on operational factors rather than predefined models. He suggested that missions should start small and limited, emphasising key operational dimensions such as force (for example, composition and meaningful inclusion of women), space (a clearly defined and restricted area), and time (short-term mandates, such as one year, with periodic assessments to adjust to evolving needs).<sup>14</sup>

Yet broadened futures do not only entail more possibilities in terms of the missions' structure but also greater diversity in who shapes them. A military advisor from a large African TCC explained that the core problem with peacekeeping in its current state 'boils down to the structure of the Security Council. Not all regions are covered'.<sup>15</sup> They pointed to the need for Security Council reform, highlighting how Africa, despite being a major contributor to peacekeeping, remains underrepresented in decision-making. While serious discussions are underway regarding two rotating African seats without veto power (see Uzodike et al. 2020; UN News 2024), they remained sceptical, concluding that, for now, 'the Global North calls the shots'.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, the push for the Women, Peace and Security agenda informs a more inclusive future, emphasising the need for meaningful representation, participation and leadership (see e.g. Corcoran 2024; Zahar and Deschampes-Laporte 2023; Basu et al. 2020). However, despite promoting this agenda externally, one UN official acknowledged that the UN itself 'should practice what they preach',<sup>17</sup> as gender inclusion within the organisation often falls short of its stated ambitions (see also Holder and Abbott 2024). These tensions illustrate how structural inequalities, whether regional or gender-based, continue to shape the power dynamics of peacekeeping, influencing not only who participates but also whose interests are prioritised in shaping its future.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with UN official, NYC, 16 Oct 2024.

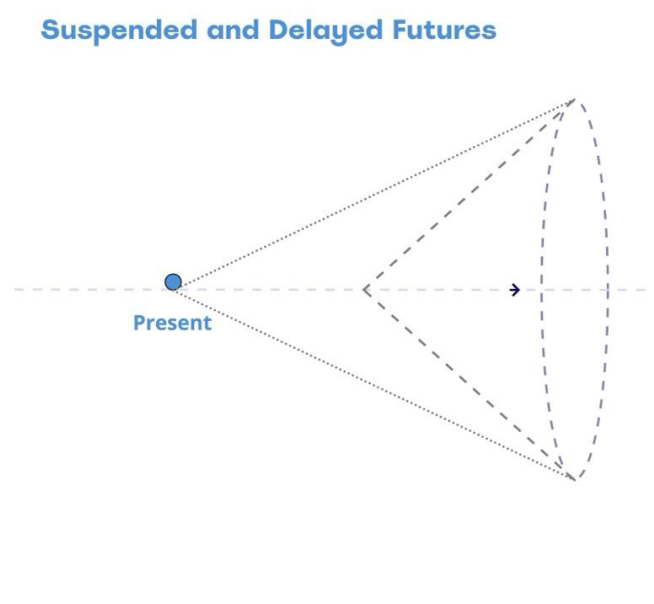
<sup>14</sup> Interview with military advisor of European UN mission, NYC, 16 Oct 2024.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with military advisor of African UN mission, NYC, 16 Oct 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with military advisor of African UN mission, NYC, 16 Oct 2024.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with UN official, NYC, 16 Oct 2024.

**Figure 3. Suspended and delayed futures**



### **Suspended and delayed futures**

When asked about the current secretary-general's apparent lack of enthusiasm for peacekeeping, one DPO official appeared largely unconcerned:

I don't think we are going to stop new missions despite this secretary-general's feeling about it. It will be tougher in the next two years, but I think we will go back to being the first point of call for the types of missions we have done in the past. Obviously, we are not going to be involved in major power conflict, but I think it [peacekeeping missions] will continue.<sup>18</sup>

There was hope that the next secretary-general would be more receptive to and supportive of peacekeeping. In this light, the recent DPO report can be seen as both a strategic positioning and a preparatory effort for a future in which peacekeeping might regain prominence and political backing under new leadership. At the same time, the report provides insight into the internal dynamics and political undercurrents within the UN. DPO remains eager to leverage its expertise, plan proactively, and reaffirm the role of peacekeeping. However, as one insider noted, these ambitions are constrained by the current political climate within the UN, where deepening geopolitical rivalries, Security Council deadlock, and shifting member state priorities increasingly limit the organisation's ability to mandate and sustain new missions.<sup>19</sup> With growing resistance to large-scale peace operations, an emphasis on regional alternatives, and a preference for counterterrorism frameworks, DPO finds itself navigating an environment where long-term planning is difficult, funding is uncertain, and institutional inertia further complicates efforts to adapt peacekeeping to contemporary conflicts.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with DPO official, remote, 24 Sept 2024.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with UN commentator, NYC, 7 Oct 2024.

One UN insider pointed to the rivalry between DPO and the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) to illustrate internal tensions within the UN, suggesting that the biggest obstacle to breaking down silos, dividing labour effectively, and advancing plans for new missions is ultimately political (see also Chen 2024, 12). This is particularly evident in discussions about the future of peacekeeping and flexible deployment, where institutional competition and differing mandates often hinder coordination and strategic alignment:

The DPPA will say, oh well, we've been doing this all along. Look how many different types of configurations of political missions we have, and peacekeeping does only that one thing. If you're cynical, you might also think that the DPPA is sort of happy to see all this kind of criticism of big peacekeeping operations and a kind of move towards more flexible approaches, because that is more in the DPPA's house. That issue is still there.<sup>20</sup>

This is an issue that the next secretary-general might attempt to address through institutional reforms, particularly in redefining the division of labour and coordination between DPO and DPPA. For now, the structural tensions and competition between the two departments remain unresolved, hindering efforts to break down silos and implement more integrated approaches. The informant concluded, 'I don't think you would find hardly anyone that really wants to open that can of worms right now'.

Moreover, the implementation of such reimagined peacekeeping, as proposed in 'A New Agenda for Peace', 'Pact for the Future', the DPO study and Chen's paper, remains suspended and anticipated for the future. Whether these ideas will materialise during the upcoming ministerial or sometime later is still unknown. There is a growing and increasingly articulated realisation, as the two latter reports also describe, that UN peace operations are not applicable in every situation, and are sometimes actively undesirable. Whereas 15 years ago the prevailing mindset was that missions could be adjusted to fit the contexts in which they were deployed, there is now a recognition that, in some cases, no amount of adaptation will make peacekeeping an effective solution and that forcing its application could, in fact, worsen the situation. This is where the limits of the future are drawn, suggesting that, in some cases, peacekeeping may be indefinitely suspended.

To rebuild trust and confidence in its capabilities, achieving success is essential. As one insider acknowledged, 'we need to make success possible', which in practice means 'waiting for the right circumstances' to deploy a mission.<sup>21</sup> This entails carefully selecting contexts where peacekeeping can demonstrate clear and measurable impact while avoiding deployments in highly volatile situations where failure would only deepen scepticism about its effectiveness. In the context of moving to a more fluid understanding of peacekeeping, it is nevertheless necessary to at least define its limitations – what it can realistically achieve, in which contexts, and with what means.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with UN researcher, NYC, 8 Oct 2024.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with military advisor of European UN mission, NYC, 16 Oct 2024.

The idea of ensuring peacekeeping success was mentioned by one informant in relation to the application of an AU-UN partnership as outlined in Resolution 2719:

The Americans were saying that they need to have the right test-case where we can show this works. Well, let's just hope someone starts a small war where this model will apply. Where is this sort of Sierra Leone-sized crisis where you could show the model works?<sup>22</sup>

Certainly, such an anticipatory stance may appear somewhat cynical given the ongoing conflicts and security crises in places like Sudan, the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. However, some informants identified Somalia as the most likely candidate for a Resolution 2719 application, suggesting that an AU-UN peace operation under this framework could materialise sooner than expected. While the AU and UN are already engaged through the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), Resolution 2719 would allow for a new financial arrangement, potentially enabling direct UN-assessed contributions or a restructured AU-UN mission model. Yet, this anticipation underscores the UN's ongoing inability to provide truly tailored, context-specific solutions, instead revealing a supply-driven approach – waiting for a mission that fits its models rather than designing interventions based on the unique realities and needs of each conflict (Gilder et al. 2023, 47).

At the same time, the absence of new UN peacekeeping missions in Africa for over a decade could prompt important institutional reflection. With no fresh mandates, ad hoc coalitions have increasingly stepped in to fill security gaps (Karlsrud 2023a; Maglia et al. 2025), a shift that, as one informant noted, may force the UN to reconsider its role and approach.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, TCCs are becoming less willing to participate due to delayed payments, flawed procurement processes, and declining operational incentives, while morale among UN staff remains low. In other words, the current, protracted situation is worsening, and change is needed. As one informant put it, 'we are getting to a tipping point, but we need a catalyst to make that change happen'.<sup>24</sup> Yet, what that catalyst might be, and when or if it will emerge, remains uncertain. This informant revealed how little perceived control and influence there is in the UN to make change happen (see also Mische 2014). They suggested that a key vector of change lies beyond immediate reach, existing outside the organisation's control and in a more distant, uncertain future. Yet without a decisive catalyst – whether internal reforms or external pressures – peacekeeping may continue to erode.

Another envisioned suspended future involves peacekeeping in its current form taking a more passive role or effectively being put on hold, with an emphasis on preventive peacekeeping instead. Instead of deploying robust, active missions, this future model would lean toward early intervention and prevention. While prevention has long been a priority documented in the UN publications discussed above, one UN official admitted that it is 'less sexy and less measurable',<sup>25</sup> making it difficult to secure donor support. To make preventive peacekeeping more prominent and operational, several challenges must be addressed, starting with the ability to identify conflict drivers more effectively.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with UN commentator, NYC, 7 Oct 2024.

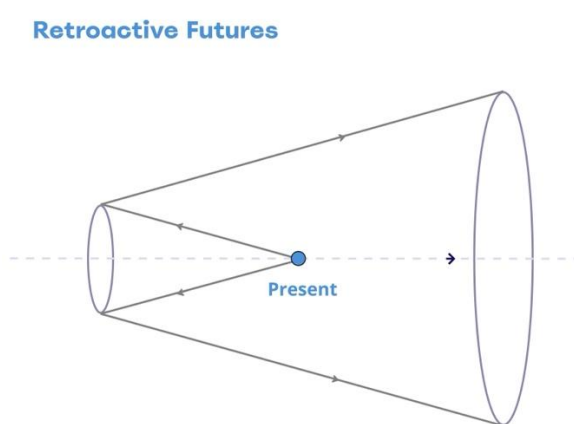
<sup>23</sup> Interview with researcher close to the UN, NYC, 11 Oct 2024.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with DPO official, NYC, 10 Oct 2024.

Currently, the Common Country Analysis is used to assess key challenges at the national level, relying on government-provided data. In response, the Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework was introduced, but both tools remain outdated and primarily shaped by the UN's development agenda. As a result, they fail to capture the full picture, particularly the political and security dimensions of conflict dynamics. To bridge this gap, the role of resident coordinators and special representatives of the secretary-general should be strengthened, granting them access to broader analytical and operational toolboxes. This would allow for a more comprehensive assessment of conflict drivers, ensuring that preventive peacekeeping efforts are not only better targeted but also measurable over time. In this way, the push for preventive peacekeeping aligns with a broader shift toward a more integrated, cross-sectoral approach within the UN system.

**Figure 4. Retroactive futures**



### **Retroactive futures**

One of the more restrained visions for the future of peacekeeping involves a 'back to basics' approach, adapting core principles to contemporary challenges while making a retroactive movement that revisits the past towards the present and future. Rather than radically reinventing peacekeeping through new models and modalities, this perspective refines its foundational elements, emphasising consent-based missions, limited mandates, and a return to traditional forms of conflict monitoring and mediation reminiscent of the Cold War era. This strongly echoes many of the past futures discussed above, where peacekeeping's core principles and original purpose, such as ceasefire monitoring, serve as the backbone of its effectiveness and legitimacy.

One informant noted that the fundamental principles of peacekeeping have, in some cases, been stretched beyond recognition. What is needed, they argued, is a thorough re-evaluation of these principles:

What does consent look like today? A lot has changed since the principles were established and reaffirmed in the Capstone Doctrine. How does that affect the



basic kind of premises of peacekeeping?<sup>26</sup>

They propose reaffirming the principles of peacekeeping, offering a reinterpretation of their meaning — one that, while different from the original intent, is more aligned with the needs of today's and tomorrow's world and that can be used as a common framework to hold missions accountable. The peacekeeping ministerial in May 2025 could serve as a platform to debate and potentially adopt such reforms, ensuring that, while peacekeeping adapts to modern complexities, it remains anchored in its core principles. These retroactive futures therefore stand in contrast to some of the broadened futures, favouring narrower mandates and a focus on core operational tasks rather than providing a wide range of services.

Returning to the basics thus implies a shift toward simpler and more limited forms of peacekeeping, including at the technological level. A big push for technological innovation in peacekeeping is currently well under way (see Négyesi 2024; Wählich 2020; Bell 2024; Duursma and Karlsrud 2021), for example, where peacekeepers use drones and early warning systems that require fewer humans to be physically present. While the inclusion of technology has many benefits, some worry it is heading in an undesirable direction. As the military advisor for a large African TCC explained: 'peacekeeping is not a scientific but a social phenomenon'.<sup>27</sup> They underlined the importance of a balance between the technological and the human. Especially on the ground, they argued that human presence is important:

A bigger push for IT and tech is not good because it doesn't give the local population a good feeling. They don't understand why they are there. Physical contact is very important, especially the inclusion of females.

The advisor pointed out that the replacement of human officers with technology stands in tension with the UN's stance on diversity: 'If female inclusion is so important then why is the UN pushing for IT and drones?'<sup>28</sup> While there is a financial stake for TCCs to participate on the ground, the advisor questioned whether the increased technologization of peacekeeping is right for every context. In doing so, they alluded to a future that might return to or reintroduce human contact and intelligence rather than relying solely on technology and AI.

This desire to return to the core of what UN peacekeeping is and does also underpins the conclusions of many informants – that, in the end, despite everything, the UN remains the only institution to fall back on. One informant referred to the stabilisation mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) explaining that 'it has been important because it has reminded everyone by default about what the UN can do. That's actually very hard to do without the UN's institutional architecture'.<sup>29</sup> For many, it is difficult to imagine a future without the UN's presence because of its unique expertise and institutional architecture. However, there is also a risk: over-reliance on historical models may stifle innovation, preventing the UN from adapting to new types of conflicts. Therefore, a balanced approach is essential: one that honours the proven successes of the past while

<sup>26</sup> Interview with academic close to UN, NYC, 8 Oct 2024.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with military advisor of African UN mission, NYC, 16 Oct 2024.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with military advisor of African UN mission, NYC, 16 Oct 2024.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with UN commentator, NYC, 7 Oct 2024.

integrating innovative, context-specific strategies. Ultimately, this approach may prompt member states to reaffirm their commitment to the UN as the central pillar of conflict management, ensuring its relevance in both current and future operations.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that reimagining the future of peacekeeping has been a recurring exercise throughout its history, providing an exposition of peacekeeping's imagined futures. The world is currently marked by multiple, intersecting crises – or what has been termed a 'polycrisis' – including war, climate change and food insecurity, which means that the liberal model of peacekeeping is no longer sufficient. Instead, the emerging multipolar reality fosters a fragmentation of the templated approach, breaking it into limited tasks and smaller, context-specific missions – ideally, ones that are 'fully locally driven' (Cassin and Zyla 2021, 460). However, such scattering amidst a multipolar era loses cohesion without a unifying guiding philosophy. As Roland Paris (2024, 2) argues in his reflections on the future of UN peace operations and the shift towards pragmatism: 'Today's doubts about the future of UN peace operations reflect, in part, a deeper uncertainty about which doctrine (if any) should guide such missions, now that the liberal approach has lost much of its appeal'.

Moreover, the Security Council's current deadlock has effectively frozen peacekeeping's strategic evolution, creating a political vacuum that has suppressed institutional innovation and prevented the deployment of new missions for nearly a decade. The multiplicity of futures outlined above demonstrates that within the UN, efforts to imagine and anticipate the future of peacekeeping have not ceased. Understanding these evolving visions is crucial if we are to grasp what a future-proof peacekeeping model might entail.

Instead of simply looking ahead to the future of UN peacekeeping with our backs turned to the past, this paper takes a birds-eye view by examining both past and present visions of peacekeeping's future. By scrutinising these past futures, it uncovers not only the distinct responses and adaptations made at the time, but also the deep, recurring challenges that continue to shape peacekeeping today. How is it possible that UN peacekeeping was once hailed and awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and most recently was presumed dead? The UN's institutional memory is short, and it has failed to take in lessons learnt and adapt to new changes in conflict and world orders. Nevertheless, peacekeeping has entered a period of not only uncertainty but also profound transformation (Dunton et al. 2023) – one in which, as history suggests, significant decisions may emerge under the weight of pressure.

Although the above-described futures are different in nature, they share an emphasis on fluidity and flexibility. Put otherwise, what matters is not so much the fixed *form* that peacekeeping takes, but rather its *function* – what it enables, what it sets in motion, what it makes possible in the ever-shifting terrain of conflict. Such desire for flexible futures stems from an immanent critique, a refusal of the institutional architectures and siloed bureaucracies that constitute the UN itself. In that sense, UN peacekeeping and the UN are not just institutionally, but also existentially intertwined. To reckon with the existential stakes of peacekeeping, then, is to engage in a reckoning of the UN itself. A desire for a flexible mission is, at its core, a desire for a more flexible UN.

But what's the point if institutional change seems impossible and the future of peacekeeping seems to hang by a thread? These reimaginings of peacekeeping matter not simply as conceptual exercises but as pivots – thresholds through which the trajectories of peacekeeping, whether in the immediate context of the upcoming ministerial or in more indeterminate futures, are set into motion. At their most generative, these contending futures do not merely anticipate what is to come but actively configure a temporal scaffolding, through which new directions emerge, decisions take shape, and the very possibilities of peacekeeping are contested and reworked.

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