The Future of Protection in UN Peace Operations

Emily Paddon Rhoads

The year 2024 marks a significant milestone for the United Nations, as it commemorates the twenty-fifth anniversary of Resolution 1265, the first-ever resolution adopted by the Security Council to specifically address the protection of civilians in armed conflict, condemning the targeting of civilians and calling on all conflict parties to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law. During the recent UN Protection of Civilians Week, leaders and diplomats took stock of both the accomplishments and the stark realities highlighted in the secretary-general's latest report: "The state of the protection of civilians in 2023 was resoundingly grim."[1] In contexts like Gaza, Sudan, and Ukraine, the scale of civilian casualties and destruction has been unprecedented, underscoring the critical need for the Protection of Civilians (PoC) mandate.

Since the adoption in 1999 of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1270, which authorized the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) to protect civilians from physical violence, the PoC mandate has been a cornerstone of UN peacekeeping. There have been sixteen peacekeeping missions mandated to protect civilians, five of which are currently active.[2] Emphasizing the mandate's critical importance, the first module of the UN's military training materials on PoC warns that "failure to protect civilians undermines the legitimacy and credibility of field missions, and the UN overall."[3] Former secretary-general Ban Ki-moon went so far as to call it the "defining purpose of the UN in the twenty-first century."[4]

Emily Paddon Rhoads, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, United States (erhoads1@swarthmore.edu)

Ethics & International Affairs, 38, no. 4 (2024), pp. 418–432.

doi:10.1017/S0892679425000085

This essay examines the future of the PoC mandate as UN peacekeeping faces a critical juncture. Between 2015 and 2024, the number of active missions has declined from sixteen to eleven, budgets have been slashed, the Security Council has not authorized a new mission since 2014, and current operations are scaling back. And yet, in places like the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where peacekeepers are currently deployed with a protection mandate, and Sudan, where the mission was drawn down in 2021, insecurity remains rife, and the humanitarian situation is dire. Globally, conflicts have surged to unprecedented levels. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, in 2023 there were seventy-five nonstate and fifty-nine state-involved conflicts recorded—the highest since 1946.[5] These conflicts are increasingly protracted and complex, causing devastating effects on civilians.

The first section of this essay charts the evolution of the PoC norm and assesses the effectiveness of protection in peacekeeping, drawing on existing scholarship, which has flourished over the last decade. It argues that PoC in peacekeeping has undergone significant transformation in its conceptualization and operationalization over the last twenty-five years, most notably expanding from a focus on physical protection against imminent threats to a more holistic approach that includes establishing a protective environment. The second section identifies four major challenges to protecting civilians: declining state commitment to UN peacekeeping, fragmentation of peace and security mechanisms, managing expectations and public perceptions in a rapidly changing information landscape, and personnel disillusionment and morale issues. The conclusion discusses the implications of these challenges for existing missions, peacekeeping transitions, and other peace and security arrangements. It argues that the future of PoC in peacekeeping is uncertain and fraught with difficulties that may not be easily overcome. Rather than transcending politics, the inherent political nature of protection poses significant obstacles, and the ability to navigate these dynamics remains a critical yet daunting task.

The Evolution and Effectiveness of PoC in Peacekeeping

The protection of civilians is a norm in the sense that it is a "*prescription for action in situations of choice*, carrying a sense of obligation, *a sense that [it] ought* to be followed."[6] While many peacekeeping missions of the 1990s were involved in human rights monitoring, the protection of civilians as an explicit activity and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679425000085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

objective of UN peacekeeping—and one in which peacekeepers are authorized to use force to realize—was first authorized in 1999 in the context of Sierra Leone. Prior to that, peacekeeping primarily focused on monitoring ceasefires, supporting political processes, and keeping warring factions apart through interposition. The adoption of the PoC mandate thus marked a significant shift, and was a direct response to the inability of UN peacekeepers to shield civilians from slaughter in the so-called safe areas of the former Yugoslavia and from genocide in Rwanda. It also aimed to clarify the broader obligations of UN forces and member states to protect populations.[7]

As such, the initial focus of PoC was on physical protection provided by military contingents as well as through efforts to strengthen the capacity of national authorities to protect their own populations. According to Resolution 1270, UNAMSIL was "to afford protection to civilians under imminent threat of physical violence."[8] Similar language was authorized by the Security Council in subsequent contexts. However, how peacekeepers were meant to intervene—what types of actions were required, including the extent to which force could and should be used proactively or preemptively—was underspecified, as were details on the procurement of resources necessary for protection. Given that the norm needed concrete, direct, and immediate application, ambiguity came with risk. UN officials both at HQ and in the field sought greater clarity on PoC and over time developed a robust corpus of policies, guidelines, training, and activities. This resulted in two notable and related conceptual changes.

First, the UN's approach to protection in peacekeeping gradually extended beyond the "domain of physical protection from imminent threat."[9] Specifically, the UN's operational concept for the protection of civilians, initially elaborated in 2010 and updated in the 2020 *Protection of Civilians* handbook, broadened the concept of protection to consist of three tiers: (1) protection through dialogue and engagement (for example, national and local conflict resolution and mediation, good offices of the secretary-general, and so on); (2) provision of physical protection (such as protective presence, interpositioning, and threatening or using force); and (3) establishment of a protective environment (such as through capacity building and promoting the rule of law)—with four phases (prevention, preemption, response, and consolidation).[10]

The three-tiered model of protection was accompanied by an expansion of protection roles. PoC became a whole-of-mission responsibility, involving all UN peacekeeping personnel, both military and civilian. Everyone now had a role

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679425000085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to play.[11] Further, this shift was part of broader efforts to harmonize the protection work of all UN entities in a country, catalyzed under the "One UN" approach. Ban Ki-moon's 2015 "Human Rights Up Front" initiative[12] reinforced this notion of collective responsibility for preventing and responding to protection crises, as does the 2024 *Agenda for Protection*, which begins with the "Protection Pledge."[13]

Attendant to this widening of the PoC concept in peace operations has been a greater emphasis on engaging local and affected communities in the design and implementation of peacekeeping protection plans and strategies. A 2015 High-Level Independent Panel on United Nations Peace Operations report called for a "people-centered" approach to peacekeeping and argued that the UN should develop better strategies for community engagement at all stages of the mission cycle.[14] In practice, this approach has been pursued through innovative tools, developed largely at the field level, such as the community liaison assistants, joint protection teams, and community watch groups.[15]

And the track record generally has been strong, despite perceptions surrounding high-profile incidents where civilians have been harmed in mission contexts. Indeed, research over the past decade consistently underscores peacekeeping as a powerful instrument for protection. Multiple studies, employing diverse methodologies and focusing on different aspects of peacekeeping, reveal a clear pattern: The presence of peacekeepers correlates with reduced violence against civilians and diminished local or subnational conflicts.[16] This impact is achieved primarily through monitoring and patrolling, and enforcing civilian protection behind the front lines, with studies showing that effectiveness hinges on factors such as the number,[17] quality,[18] and diversity[19] of military personnel involved. The primary contribution of peacekeepers is thus the creation of a protective environment through their presence and demonstrable resolve, which deters violent action and creates the space to change the broader dynamics of violence. In certain scenarios, peacekeepers have taken robust actions to separate combatants and mitigate battlefield activities that put civilians at risk, though studies show that such uses of force are rare.[20] Further, while much of the literature to date has focused on the military, civilian personnel also play a crucial function through engagement and dialogue, gathering critical information through relationships with local actors, and supporting national and local mediation efforts as well as institutional reforms under Tier 3.[21]

While there is overwhelming evidence that UN peacekeepers do help to reduce violence against civilians, there remain valid questions as to the limitations of PoC.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679425000085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This is because a continuously evolving conflict landscape and broader geopolitical shifts are challenging existing approaches to protection and peace.

Challenges

Waning Host and Member State Commitment

Peacekeeping is an important tool for protection, but its effectiveness hinges on political factors beyond a given mission's control. Chief among these are host-state consent and the political backing of member states, especially those in the Security Council. Host-state consent is a core principle of peacekeeping, one that is said to distinguish it from other international interventions, like peace enforcement. It refers to the agreement and willingness of the main conflict parties, particularly the host state, to allow the deployment and operation of a peacekeeping mission, enabling it to implement its mandate effectively.

While historically consent has at times been conditional or fractured, recent years have seen escalating tensions between host states and UN missions, leading to what some experts call a "crisis of consent."[22] In several contexts, host governments, emboldened by shifting geopolitical divisions inside and outside of the Security Council, are becoming more assertive and uncooperative with UN missions. This trend was starkly illustrated by the insistence by the transition government of Mali on the withdrawal of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, or MINUSMA, in June 2023. Following a military coup in May 2021, Mali's transitional government increasingly viewed MINUSMA with suspicion and hostility. Aligning with Russia and inviting the Russian private military company Wagner for security assistance, the Malian government distanced itself from Western partners, notably France. Criticizing MINUSMA for its perceived failure to protect civilians and ineffectiveness against jihadist threats, the government ultimately ordered the mission's withdrawal. The Security Council acquiesced, and on December 31, 2023, the last of MINUSMA's twelve thousand personnel were sent home.

Compromised consent—understood as a situation in which consent for a peacekeeping operation and its mandate is either inadequate from the outset or deteriorates over time—often has significant, and even traumatic, practical effects on protection efforts. As several recent studies show, it frequently results in restricted or reduced freedom of movement; access denials to areas of concern, including "checkpoint delays/obstructions, regulation of aerial movement, and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679425000085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

blocking the transport of UN equipment, supplies, and humanitarian containers."[23] Such restrictions severely impede the ability of peacekeeping missions to carry out patrols, monitor human rights, and deliver essential supplies, thereby undermining the PoC mandate. In some contexts, UN personnel, facilities, and assets have been attacked by host-state actors.[24]

While scholars have shown recently that some protection of civilians' activities, such as local peacebuilding efforts, might still be possible in a context of compromised host-state consent,[25] dependence on such consent at the strategic level creates dilemmas for the mission that are directly related to its PoC mandate. In several contexts, UN officials have at times been hesitant to address government abuses or status-of-forces agreement violations, fearing strained relations and reduced access.[26] Further, research indicates that the UN is more likely to respond to violence by nonstate armed groups than by government actors, prioritizing the maintenance of government consent over protection from all types of threats.[27] This means that civilians are protected in some situations and not in others. Finally, some argue that the UN's uncritical support to the state, particularly under Tier 3, may inadvertently reinforce repressive tendencies within the host state, undercut long-term efforts to build peace, and potentially implicate the UN in the permanency of illiberal regimes.[28]

This crisis of host-state consent should be seen within the context of a broader "crisis of confidence" in peacekeeping.[29] Acknowledging waning state commitment, the UN secretary-general introduced the Action for Peacekeeping initiative in 2018, with the aim of achieving a "quantum leap in collective engagement" among member states.[30] However, this initiative has largely fallen short of its goals. Longstanding grievances over power disparities and unequal burden sharing between major financial contributors and troop- and police-contributing countries have escalated recently.[31] These tensions are accompanied by differing perspectives on the future of peacekeeping. Some member states support more militarized stabilization and protection approaches, while others advocate for a return to the fundamental principles of traditional peacekeeping.[32] These longstanding tensions have been exacerbated by divisions within the Security Council, making the situation even more pronounced.

This has not always been the case. In the immediate post–Cold War era, peacekeeping operations were generally unaffected by tensions among the permanent five (P5) members of the Security Council. Even the fallout from the Iraq War did not diminish the Council's commitment to deploying peacekeepers.[33] However,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679425000085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the deep divisions among the P5 following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, along with the recent conflict in the Middle East, are challenging this stability. Renewals for existing missions increasingly lack unanimity, signaling waning political support. This support is vital, particularly when state consent is compromised, as it helps present a united front and provides "top cover" for UN staff in the field as discussed below. Instead, the lack of unanimity has empowered host authorities to push back against the Council. Experts note that host states have reacted by pushing for particular mandate priorities, lodging complaints about the penholder and certain civil society briefers, and aiming to have more control over the missions' role.[34] In some cases, Russia and China have shown solidarity with host governments and promoted their own agenda by abstaining from mandate renewals, arguing that peacekeeping infringes on state sovereignty by seeking unrestricted operations and movement, especially on human rights and protection activities.[35]

Fragmentation of Peace and Security Mechanisms

A related challenge stems from the fragmentation of peace and security responses and the proliferation of "alternative security arrangements." Diminishing state commitment to UN peacekeeping has been accompanied by "forum shopping," whereby states choose security mechanisms that best suit their political and strategic needs. While regional responses to conflict are not new—the Charter defines a role for regional organizations—the number of such operations has increased significantly, and the political dynamics have evolved. Furthermore, the recent resurgence of state-affiliated private military and security companies, such as the Wagner Group, complicates this landscape and presents dilemmas for the United Nations in certain contexts.

Nowhere has this trend been more visible than in Africa. Since 2000, thirty-eight African-led peace and security operations (PSOs) have been conducted, with ten active PSOs operating across seventeen countries in 2023. Notably, only three of these are mandated by the African Union (AU), while the rest are led by regional economic communities such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the East African Community (EAC), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), or other subregional configurations or ad hoc initiatives like the G5 Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin Commission.[36] These responses display "variable geometry" with UN-led forces, including sequential deployment; parallel or co-deployment; hybrid or full integration; and standalone missions or partnerships with the host state.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679425000085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This shift toward regional operations aligns with the secretary-general's vision articulated in *A New Agenda for Peace*, which emphasizes robust regional operations and UN support rather than deployment of traditional UN peacekeeping missions.[37] It also finds expression in Security Council Resolution 2719, passed in late 2023, which seeks to deepen the UN-AU partnership in peace and security and makes a commitment from the Security Council to support sustainable financing of AU-led PSOs.

The allure of PSOs lies in their perceived ability to provide flexible and rapid military responses to address insecurity and consolidate state control. Operations fielded have primarily focused on peace enforcement and counterterrorism, framing civilian protection more as harm mitigation and human security rather than a core objective. They typically deploy only military personnel and lack the multidimensional approach of UN missions. However, in some instances, regional security forces have been accused of committing grave human rights abuses during operations, including cases of extrajudicial executions or unlawful killings, and enforced disappearances.[38]

The regionalization of stabilization and peacekeeping tasks presents several challenges for the UN. It risks further marginalizing existing UN missions, reducing the UN's political leverage, and increasing opportunities for institutional exploitation.[39] Furthermore, collaborating with and supporting regional powers or ad hoc coalitions, especially those established without Security Council involvement, is risky for the UN. This risk includes possible complicity where human rights abuses are committed, compounded sometimes by difficulties in vetting and a lack of transparency. In addition, over the long term, a military approach may be problematic given that most violent conflicts cannot be resolved through military means alone. Thus, there is no guarantee that states will achieve their goals by relying on these mechanisms. In the DRC, the government's dissatisfaction with the engagement of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) with rebel groups led to calls for ad hoc coalitions, first from the EAC, and then, when that did not achieve the hoped-for aims, from the SADC.

Expectation Management and Local Perceptions

As prescriptions for action that have an element of moral or ethical duty, norms invariably create expectations, and the PoC norm is no exception. Indeed, managing expectations regarding protection has been a perennial challenge in UN

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679425000085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

peace operations. Several reports, beginning with the landmark 2000 *Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations*—commonly known as the Brahimi Report—have cautioned that the deployment of a UN mission invariably generates heightened expectations among the population that peacekeepers will protect those at risk.[40]

To manage expectations both locally and globally, peacekeeping resolutions have often stipulated that peacekeepers protect civilians "within the scope of their mandates and areas of operation" and with "respect to the responsibilities" of the host state. However, the effectiveness of these caveats is limited. As Jean-Marie Guéhenno, the former head of peacekeeping operations for the UN, notes, "Civilians don't read the fine print of Council mandates."[41] While missions have also tried to manage expectations through improved strategic communications and honest messaging about mission limitations, these can backfire. If locals feel unprotected, they can quickly move to feeling that the very presence of the mission is not "necessary or desirable."[42] This was evident during the August 2022 protests in the DRC, where the mission's candor about its capabilities played a role in inciting violence and discontent.

Protection is inherently subjective because it is shaped by individual and communal experiences, perceptions, and cultural contexts. What one group perceives as adequate protection may be seen as insufficient or even harmful by another. Fewer fatalities do not necessarily translate to a perception of increased safety or mission success. Two factors have exacerbated the challenge of managing expectations in recent years: deeper engagement with local communities and the spread of mis-, dis-, and malinformation.

Deeper engagement with communities can raise expectations, as locals anticipate more direct benefits and responses to their specific needs and concerns. Critically, it can also expose divergences in understandings of protection—of what being safe means—that are not easily resolved and can provoke a backlash. Indeed, at times there has been a disjunction between how the UN conceives of PoC and how communities or groups do. There can in many cases be competing understandings of what constitutes a threat and what is protection and how it should be pursued within and across communities. The UN's support for community watch groups (CWGs) in South Sudan's PoC sites, for example, led to accusations of condoning gender inequalities and neglecting female protection concerns. To ensure that communities retained decision-making power, the UN allowed communities to nominate CWG members, and those nominated were mostly male.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679425000085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

While the UN advocated for female participation, in some PoC sites such advocacy did not align with what the community itself called for and was even met with resistance.[43] Similarly, UN staff in the PoC sites had to deny requests from CWGs for containers in which to detain people, lest the organization become complicit in unlawful detention practices.[44]

The rise of social media has amplified these challenges. Peacekeepers now navigate both physical and digital landscapes, in which disinformation actors exploit genuine grievances or fabricate new ones to undermine and sabotage peacekeeping efforts. In some mission areas, hostility incited by disinformation has led to diminished consent from local communities, manifesting in restrictions on the freedom of movement, targeted demonstrations, and direct attacks. These campaigns have been strategically waged by various actors, including civil society, state and nonstate armed groups, host governments, and foreign entities. In the DRC, during the Ebola epidemic, false claims were spread suggesting that MONUSCO peacekeepers were involved in spreading the virus, which led to increased hostility and attacks on the mission's personnel.[45] And in Mali and CAR, the Wagner Group undermined the missions' credibility by orchestrating sophisticated disinformation campaigns, which included producing falsified public opinion polls purportedly indicating strong support for the mercenaries.[46]

Personnel Disillusionment and Morale Issues

The final peacekeeping challenge, with implications for the future of protection, centers on the well-being and morale of "UN people." As Eugene Chen and Katharina Coleman recently observed, UN peacekeeping faces more than just a severe "public relations problem" in the sense that outside observers fail to appreciate its full benefits; "many of the people most closely connected with UN peacekeeping—both at HQ and in deployment locations—are disillusioned and disaffected."[47]

Peacekeeping is hard. Protection is hard. The volatile environments in which most UN staff live and work, and the nature of their roles, can be stressful, emotionally straining, and sometimes traumatic. Civilian and military personnel witness crises and violence and are themselves exposed to risks from unstable political situations, including, in recent years, violent protests against them. Given these hardships and risks, it is not surprising that empirical studies reveal higher rates of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health issues among UN personnel who have been deployed to UN peace operations compared

to the general population.[48] Despite recent initiatives to bolster mental health support and awareness, experts argue that the system of care remains inadequate.[49]

The situation has arguably worsened in the current era of austerity and downsizing, exacerbating personnel disillusionment and low morale. UN personnel are increasingly asked to do more with less. Downsizing, as Coleman explains, fundamentally undermines the sense of job security for both national and international staff, which "long-lasting missions, routine contract renewals, and years of UN peacekeeping expansion had previously fostered."[50] This has made the loss of UN status a more immediate prospect for both groups; however, national staff face unique risks, as the loss of UN protection in hostile environments can expose them to significant personal threats. For locally recruited staff, association with the UN can provoke hostility from local actors, leaving them vulnerable to retaliation.[51]

Disillusionment is further intensified by the aforementioned "crisis of confidence" and a perception that member states do not care, do not care enough, and do not have the backs of those in the field. Such sentiments are further fueled by doubts surrounding the current secretary-general's commitment to UN peacekeeping. His advocacy for a new generation of peace enforcement and counterterrorism operations, led by regional forces, adds to the uncertainty, and has eroded confidence.[52]

This deep-seated disillusionment and demoralization has significant ramifications for the long-term sustainability and efficacy of peacekeeping operations. While the morale of any workforce is critical, it is particularly crucial in the context of protection, where the risks are significant and "mindset" plays such an important role, and not just for military personnel. PoC requires initiative and a belief for all concerned that their work makes a difference. Personnel will be less willing to take risks, put their necks out, and perform their duties if they do not feel supported. This was a key message of former UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon's Human Rights Up Front initiative. Further, research has shown that the perception of "top cover" has at various junctures been essential for forces to take robust action.[53] As a result, personnel may be increasingly hesitant to take decisive action, calculated risks, or demonstrate courage in their duties if they feel undervalued and institutionally unsupported.[54]

Conclusion

Despite the considerable challenges, it is premature and dangerous to dismiss the importance of UN peacekeeping and the crucial role it plays in protection. While

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679425000085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

there has been significant downsizing, thousands of peacekeepers remain in the field, with their withdrawal contingent on the demonstrated capacity of local security forces and governance institutions. These personnel continue to play a vital role in protecting civilians in some of the world's most dangerous conflicts. We must not lose sight of the critical importance of their mission and its implications for hundreds of thousands of civilians who every day rely on its presence for their safety. Responsible transitions necessitate attunement to the challenges laid out above, lest they result in greater civilian suffering and damage to the UN's legitimacy. Expectations must be managed, support to personnel increased, and the complex dynamics of local engagement navigated with care and sensitivity.

These challenges and the recent experiences of peacekeepers should also give pause to the Security Council in its authorization of protection for other types of missions, including, notably, special political missions (SPMs). SPMs, which are less expensive, more flexible, and politically palatable, have increasingly been deployed in contexts where host states are resistant to the presence of traditional peacekeeping forces, but where the violence is no less extreme. Whether SPMs play or should play a protection role is subject to internal debate within the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, the department that oversees them. And yet, experts argue they already do serve a protection role, not least given the secretary-general's 2024 "Protection Pledge." But they often fall short of being a complete solution. Such missions often face significant limitations, as they lack the robust mandates and operational capacities necessary for force protection. Furthermore, they are afflicted by many of the same political tensions that undercut peacekeeping operations. Therefore, while SPMs may represent a strategic adaptation, they are not a panacea.

Fundamentally, these challenges underscore that protecting civilians cannot substitute for addressing political tensions—the root cause of protection threats. Resolving these tensions remains crucial. The success of protection efforts is inherently tied to the broader political context, necessitating commitment and collaboration from member states and host governments. Protection and human rights cannot be divorced from power dynamics, partisan interests, historical injustices, and current inequalities. Protection, it must be said, is invariably political. The privileges accorded to states in international relations continue to play a significant role in the shaping of PoC initiatives. Thus, the political nature of protection poses inherent obstacles and opportunities that must be navigated with sensitivity and strategic acumen. The countless civilians worldwide seeking safety and security deserve nothing less.

Notes

[1] United Nations Security Council, Art. 1(3), *Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General*, S/2024/385 (May 14, 2024), p. 1.

[2] These missions are as follows: the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA), and the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS).

[3] United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations and Department of Field Support, *Comprehensive Protection of Civilians Training Materials for United Nations Peacekeeping Operations*, military version (New York: United Nations, 2017), p. 3, resourcehub01.blob.core.windows.net/training-files/Training/03020RTP-CPOC_Military/030-001%20RTP_CPOC_Military_-_Instructional_Material.pdf.

[4] Ban Ki-moon, quoted in "Responsibility to Protect: Ban Urges Action to Make UN-Backed Tool 'a Living Reality,'" UN News, January 18, 2012, news.un.org/en/story/2012/01/400702.

[5] Uppsala Conflict Data Program, cited in "UCDP: Record Number of Armed Conflicts in the World," Uppsala University, July 3, 2024, www.uu.se/en/press/press-releases/2024/2024-06-03-ucdp-record-number-of-armed-conflicts-in-the-world.

[6] Abram Chayes and Antonia Handler Chayes, *The New Sovereignty: Compliance with International Regulatory Agreements* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 113 (emphasis in original).

[7] For a detailed analysis of the origins and evolution of the norm, see Emily Paddon Rhoads and Jennifer Welsh, "Close Cousins in Protection: The Evolution of Two Norms," *International Affairs* 95, no. 3 (May 2019), pp. 597–617.

[8] United Nations Security Council, Art. 14, Resolution 1270, S/RES/1270 (October 22, 1999), p. 3.

[9] United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations and Department of Field Support, "Draft DPKO/DFS Operational Concept on the Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations" (United Nations, 2010), p. 4.

[10] Ibid.

[11] United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations, *Handbook*: *The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping* (New York: United Nations, 2020).

[12] "'Human Rights Up Front,'" YouTube video, 15:52, posted by United Nations, August 12, 2016, in "'Human Rights Up Front' Initiative, United Nations Secretary-General, www.un.org/sg/en/content/human-rights-front-initiative.

[13] Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *United Nations Agenda for Protection: Strengthening the Ability of the United Nations System to Protect People through Their Human Rights* (Geneva: United Nations, March 2024), www.ohchr.org/en/documents/tools-and-resources/united-nations-agenda-protection-strengthening-ability-united-nations.

[14] High-Level Independent Panel on United Nations Peace Operations, *Uniting Our Strengths for Peace—Politics, Partnership and People* (New York: United Nations, 2015); and Louise Riis Andersen, "The HIPPO in the Room: The Pragmatic Push-Back from the UN Peace Bureaucracy against the Militarization of UN Peacekeeping," *International Affairs* 94, no. 2 (March 2018), pp. 343–61.

[15] Emily Paddon Rhoads and Aditi Gorur, "United Nations Peacekeeping and Civilian Protective Agency," in Jana Krause, Juan Masullo, Emily Paddon Rhoads, and Jennifer Welsh, eds., *Civilian Protective Agency in Violent Settings: A Comparative Perspective* (Oxford University Press, 2023), pp. 227–43.

[16] Hanne Fjelde, Lisa Hultman, and Desirée Nilsson, "Protection through Presence: UN Peacekeeping and the Costs of Targeting Civilians," *International Organization* 73, no. 1 (Winter 2019), pp. 103–31.

[17] Lisa Hultman, Jacob Kathman, and Megan Shannon, "United Nations Peacekeeping and Civilian Protection in Civil War," *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 4 (October 2013), pp. 875–91; and Lisa Hultman, Jacob Kathman, and Megan Shannon, "Beyond Keeping Peace: United Nations Effectiveness in the Midst of Fighting," *American Political Science Review* 108, no. 4 (November 2014), pp. 737–53.

[18] Felix Haass and Nadine Ansorg, "Better Peacekeepers, Better Protection? Troop Quality of United Nations Peace Operations and Violence against Civilians," *Journal of Peace Research* 55, no. 6 (November 2018), pp. 742–58; and Stian Kjeksrud, *Using Force to Protect Civilians: Successes and Failures of United Nations Peace Operations in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

[19] Vincenzo Bove, Chiara Ruffa, and Andrea Ruggeri, *Composing Peace: Mission Composition in UN Peacekeeping* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[20] Alex J. Bellamy and Charles T. Hunt, "Using Force to Protect Civilians in UN Peacekeeping," *Survival* 63, no. 3 (2021), pp. 143–70.

[21] See, for example, Allard Duursma and Hannah Smidt, "Peacekeepers without Helmets: How Violence Shapes Local Peacebuilding by Civilian Peacekeepers," *Comparative Political Studies* 57, no. 5 (April 2024), pp. 778–817; Allard Duursma, "Making Disorder More Manageable: The Short-Term Effectiveness of Local Mediation in Darfur," *Journal of Peace Research* 58, no. 3 (May 2021), pp. 554–67; and Robert A. Blair, Jessica Di Salvatore, and Hannah M. Smidt, "UN Peacekeeping and Democratization in Conflict-Affected Countries," *American Political Science Review* 117, no. 4 (November 2023), pp. 1308–26.

[22] Anjali Dayal, "A Crisis of Consent in UN Peace Operations," Global Observatory, International Peace Institute, August 2, 2022, theglobalobservatory.org/2022/08/a-crisis-of-consent-in-un-peace-operations/.

[23] Julie Gregory and Lisa Sharland, *Host-Country Consent in UN Peacekeeping* (Washington, D.C.: Stimson Center, September 2023), p. 21. See also Allard Duursma, Sara Lindberg Bromley, and Aditi Gorur, "The Impact of Host-State Consent on the Protection of Civilians in UN Peacekeeping," *Civil Wars* 26, no. 1 (2024), pp. 16–40.

[24] Julie Gregory and Lisa Sharland, *Host-Country Consent in UN Peacekeeping* (Washington, D.C.: Stimson Center, September 2023).

[25] Duursma et al., "Impact of Host-State Consent."

[26] See Adam Day and Charles T. Hunt, "Distractions, Distortions, and Dilemmas: The Externalities of Protecting Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping," *Civil Wars* 24, no. 1 (2022), pp. 97–116; and Emily Paddon Rhoads, "Putting Human Rights Up Front: Implications for Impartiality and the Politics of UN Peacekeeping," *International Peacekeeping* 26, no. 3 (May 2019), pp. 281–301.

[27] Lisa Hultman, "UN Peace Operations and Protection of Civilians: Cheap Talk or Norm Implementation?," *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no. 1 (2013), pp. 59–73.

[28] Sarah von Billerbeck and Oisín Tansey, "Enabling Autocracy? Peacebuilding and Post-Conflict Authoritarianism in the Democratic Republic of Congo," *European Journal of International Relations* 25, no. 3 (2019), pp. 698–722. See also Walt Kilroy, Sukanya Podder, and Allard Duursma, "Civilian Protection in Theory and Practice," *Civil Wars* 26, no. 1 (April 2024), pp. 1–15.

[29] Eugene Chen and Katharina Coleman, "Reinvigorating UN Peacekeeping," in Markus Kornprobst and Sławomir Redo, eds., *Reinvigorating the United Nations* (Abingdon, U.K.: Routledge, 2024), pp. 131–49.

[30] António Guterres, quoted in "Quantum Leap in Collective Engagement Needed to Meet Serious Peacekeeping Challenges, Secretary-General Tells Security Council Open Debate," SC/13268 (8218th meeting, United Nations Security Council, March 28, 2018), press.un.org/en/2018/sc13268.doc.htm.

[31] Emily Paddon Rhoads, *Taking Sides in Peacekeeping: Impartiality and the Future of the United Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); and Arthur Boutellis, "Rethinking UN Peacekeeping Burden-Sharing in a Time of Global Disorder," *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 13, no. 2 (June 2020), pp. 193–209.

[32] Chen and Coleman, "Reinvigorating UN Peacekeeping."

[33] Ibid.

[34] Gregory and Sharland, *Host-Country Consent in UN Peacekeeping*, p. 16.

[35] Ibid., p. 16.

[36] Nate D. F. Allen, "African-Led Peace Operations: A Crucial Tool for Peace and Security," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, August 9, 2023, africacenter.org/spotlight/african-led-peace-operations-a-crucial-tool-for-peace-and-security.

[37] António Guterres, *A New Agenda for Peace*, Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 9 (United Nations, July 2023), dppa.un.org/en/a-new-agenda-for-peace.

[38] See, for example, Amnesty International, *"They Executed Some and Brought the Rest with Them": Human Rights Violations by Security Forces in the Sahel*, AFR 37/2318/2020 (London: Amnesty International Publications, June 2020), www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/AFR3723182020ENGLISH.pdf; and "Sahel: End Abuses in Counterterrorism Operations; International Coalition Should Commit to Protecting Civilians, Detainees," Human Rights Watch, February 13, 2021, www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/13/sahel-end-abuses-counterterrorism-operations.

[39] Kilian Spandler, "UNAMID and the Legitimation of Global-Regional Peacekeeping Cooperation: Partnership and Friction in UN-AU Relations," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 14, no. 2 (2020), pp. 187–203; John Karlsrud and Yf Reykers, "Ad Hoc Coalitions and Institutional Exploitation in International Security: Towards a Typology," *Third World Quarterly* 41, no. 9 (2020), pp. 1518–36; and Emily Paddon, "Partnering for Peace: Implications and Dilemmas," *International Peacekeeping* 18, no. 5 (2011), pp. 516–33.

[40] United Nations General Assembly, *Identical Letters Dated 21 August 2000 from the Secretary-General to the President of the General Assembly and the President of the Security Council: Comprehensive review of the whole question of peacekeeping operations in all their aspects*, A/55/305–S/2000/809 (August 21, 2000).

[41] Jean-Marie Guéhenno, quoted in Paddon Rhoads, *Taking Sides in Peacekeeping*, p. 106.
[42] Albert Trithart, *Local Perceptions of UN Peacekeeping: A Look at the Data* (New York: International Peace Institute, September 2023), p. 18. See also Jake Sherman and Albert Trithart, *Strategic Communications in UN Peace Operations: From an Afterthought to an Operational Necessity* (New York: International Peace Institute, August 2021); and Jaïr van der Lijn, Noura Abouelnasr, Tofayel Ahmed, et al., *Assessing the Effectiveness of the United Nations Mission in Mali/MINUSMA* (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2019).
[43] Jennifer Welsh, Emily Paddon Rhoads, and Juan Masullo, "Risky Business: International Support for Civilian Self-Protection," *Perspectives on Politics* (forthcoming).
[44] Emily Paddon Rhoads and Rebecca Sutton, "The (Self) Protection of Civilians in South Sudan: Popular and Community Justice Practices," *African Affairs* 119, no. 476 (July 2020), pp. 370–94, at p. 390.
[45] David P. Fidler, "Disinformation and Disease: Social Media and the Ebola Epidemic in the Democratic Republic of the Congo," Council on Foreign Relations (blog), August 20, 2019, www.cfr.org/blog/disinformation-and-disease-social-media-and-ebola-epidemic-democratic-republic-congo.
[46] Raphael Parens, "The Wagner Group's Playbook in Africa: Mali," Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 18, 2022, www.fpri.org/article/2022/03/the-wagner-groups-playbook-in-africa-mali.
[47] Chen and Coleman, "Reinvigorating UN Peacekeeping," p. 132.
[48] Namie Di Razza, *Mental Health in UN Peace Operations: Addressing Stress, Trauma, and PTSD among Field Personnel* (New York: International Peace Institute, December 2020); and Kelsey L. Larsen and Elizabeth A. Stanley, "How Stress, Trauma, and Emotion May Shape Post-Conflict Environments—with Implications for International Peacekeeping," *International Peacekeeping* 31, no. 3 (2024), pp. 332–59.
[49] Namie Di Razza, *Mental Health in UN Peace Operations: Addressing Stress, Trauma, and PTSD among Field Personnel* (New York: International Peace Institute, December 2020).
[50] Katharina Coleman, "Optimising National Staff: Contributions in UN Peacekeeping Operations," *Performance of Peacekeeping joint brief series* (Stockholm: Folke Bernadotte Academy, 2024), p. 4.
[51] Chen and Coleman, "Reinvigorating UN Peacekeeping," p. 135.
[52] Ibid., p. 136.
[53] Tom Buitelaar, "Leadership Agency in UN Peace Operations," *International Peacekeeping* (2024), pp. 1–29; and Emily Paddon, "Peacekeeping in the Congo: Implementation of the Protection of Civilians Norm," in Alexander Betts and Phil Orchard, eds., *Implementation & World Politics: How International Norms Change Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 160–79.
[54] Emily Paddon Rhoads, "The Importance of Practical Wisdom for 21st Century Peace Operations," *Journal of the United Service Institution of India* 153, no. 631 (January–March 2023).

Abstract: United Nations peacekeeping is experiencing a generational shift as several large missions downsize and close. Amid this change, this essay considers the future of the Protection of Civilians (PoC) mandate, which has been a priority of UN peacekeeping since it was first authorized twenty-five years ago. It argues that PoC has evolved significantly, expanding from a narrow focus on physical protection from immediate threats to a holistic approach that includes establishing a protective environment. It suggests that while the PoC mandate has proven effective in reducing violence, the future is fraught with four significant challenges: waning state commitment to UN peacekeeping, the fragmentation of global peace and security mechanisms, shifting local perceptions in a rapidly changing information landscape, and mounting disillusionment among UN personnel. This essay contends that these obstacles underscore the inherently political nature of PoC, where power dynamics and perceptions profoundly impact mission success. As peacekeeping missions scale back, PoC remains essential but increasingly precarious, demanding strategic adaptability and sustained commitment. Ultimately, the essay argues that without renewed political and institutional dedication, PoC's effectiveness—and the UN's credibility—will be difficult to uphold in the face of evolving conflict dynamics and geopolitical shifts.

Keywords: protection, protection of civilians, peacekeeping, peace operations, United Nations, use of force, conflict, human rights