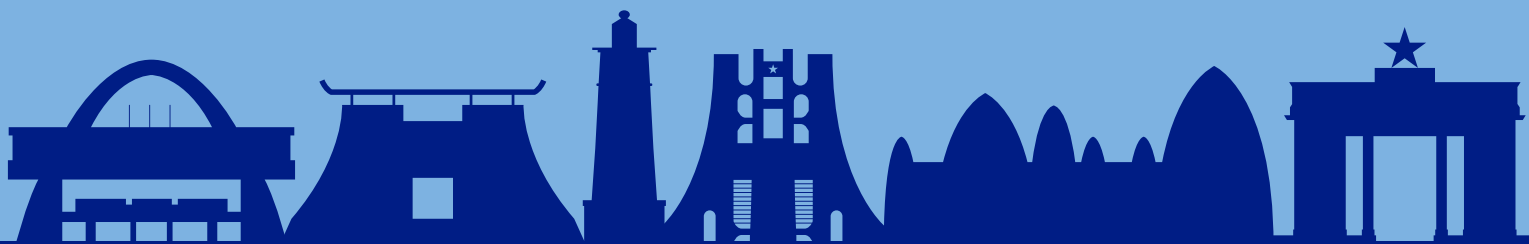


BACKGROUND PAPER

Considerations for the Review on the Future of All Forms of UN Peace Operations



ABOUT THE EVENT

The 2025 Challenges Annual Forum (#CAF25Accra) will contribute to the United Nation's Secretary General's Review of the Future of all Forms of Peace Operations by examining how conflict and instability are evolving, define key political and operational prerequisites for success, and generate concrete, innovative proposals to adapt and strengthen peace operations, with a particular focus on West Africa and the Sahel. The event is co-hosted by the Challenges Forum's Ghanaian partner, the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Center (KAIPTC), in Accra on 14–15 October. Challenges Forum is a global partnership that uses its convening power to generate innovative ideas and promote results for more effective peace operations.

Challenges Forum consists of Partners from:

 Argentina	 India	 Switzerland
 Armenia	 Indonesia	 Türkiye
 Australia	 Japan	 United Kingdom
 Canada	 Jordan	 United States of America
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 Egypt	 Norway	 World Federation of United Nations Associations
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The ongoing peace operations review provides an opportunity to examine how UN structures and approaches can be better adapted to respond to existing challenges and new realities. To make the most of this opportunity requires an understanding of the shifts required in peace operations, a recognition of the reasons why previous reform efforts fell short, and a strategy for leveraging related processes, including the UN80 initiative.

The international system is in flux. The assumptions underpinning the post-Cold War order are under question, and a resurgence in large-scale violent conflict is underway. 2024 saw the highest number of state-based conflicts since the end of World War II along with a persistently high number of non-state conflicts, particularly on the African continent¹. At the same time, the decade-long retrenchment of UN peace operations shows no signs of abating as host governments increasingly turn to non-UN options to meet their security requirements². Several UN missions have closed in recent years, and missions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, and Somalia are in the midst of transitions.

Despite the increasing tensions stemming from geopolitical fragmentation, UN Member States still see value in multilateral peace operations, even as they acknowledge the challenges facing such operations. Just last month, the Security Council adopted resolution 2793 authorizing the reconfiguration of the Multinational Security Support mission in Haiti into a Gang Suppression Force and establishing a UN support office.

In the Pact for the Future, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General “to undertake a review of the future of all forms of United Nations peace operations, taking into account lessons learned from previous and ongoing reform processes, and provide strategic and action-oriented recommendations for the consideration of Member States on how the United Nations toolbox can be adapted to meet evolving needs, to allow for more agile, tailored response to existing, emerging and future challenges”.

The peace operations review provides an opportunity to adapt the structures and approaches of the UN to better respond to existing challenges and new realities. The review is expected to result in a report to be submitted to the General Assembly and Security Council in early 2026.

Previous reviews

Several reviews of peace operations have been undertaken since the end of the Cold War. The most recent major review was undertaken by a High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) appointed by Ban Ki-moon. In its 2015 report, the panel called for four essential shifts in UN peace operations:

1. Political solutions should always guide the design and deployment of UN peace operations.
2. The full spectrum of UN peace operations (as opposed to the existing models for special political missions and peacekeeping operations) must be used more flexibly to respond to changing needs on the ground.
3. UN peace operations must be situated within a stronger, more inclusive peace and security partnership.
4. The UN Secretariat must become more field-focused and UN peace operations must be more people-centered.

Ten years on, the Secretariat has made little progress in each of these shifts. The UN has arguably

1. Rustad, S.A. (2025). Conflict trends: A Global Overview, 1946–2024. Peace Research Institute Oslo. <https://www.prio.org/publications/14453>.

2. Karlsrud, J. (2023). ‘Pragmatic Peacekeeping’ in Practice: Exit Liberal Peacekeeping, Enter UN Support Missions? *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 17(3), 258–272. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2023.2198285>

gone backwards on the first two shifts³. The UN has effectively been sidelined from peacemaking and has in some contexts, become more of a service provider, as evidenced through Security Council resolution 2719 (2023) and recent calls for the UN to deploy a support office in Haiti. The 2019 establishment of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) and the Department of Peace Operations (DPO) further entrenched distinctions between special political missions and peacekeeping operations.

With regard to the third shift, commitment within the UN system to integration has weakened, and political and economical considerations are undermining the progress made in strengthening the partnership between the UN and regional organizations in peace operations.

Results have been mixed on the fourth shift. The Secretariat put in place a new system of delegation of authority in 2019 but it has failed to realize its full potential. However, the adoption of the 2016 resolutions on sustaining peace reinforced a commitment to meaningful participation by women, youth, and marginalized groups, and peace operations have put in place tools to enhance community engagement.⁴

Applicable considerations

The HIPPO was able to come up with a range of recommendations, many of which challenged the status quo, because it consisted of experts who were independent from the departments in question. The current peace operations review, however, is conducted by DPPA and DPO, and therefore risks being driven by their respective institutional interests.

The implementation of the HIPPO recommendations was hamstrung by how late it came in Secretary-General Ban's term. Once António Guterres came into office, implementation was overtaken by the new Secretary-General's reform priorities. This timing problem will also

affect both the peace operations review and the UN80 initiative.

The HIPPO review also took place at a time of expansion in UN peace operations. With the ongoing retrenchment and the overall atmosphere of forced austerity, the Secretariat prefers to focus on external reasons for why peace operations are struggling.⁵ The 2023 New Agenda for Peace, focused on actions to be taken by Member States rather than also focusing on necessary changes within the Secretariat.

Elements for consideration

The Secretary-General has not presented a clear and coherent vision for the role of UN peace operations for the current geopolitical inflection point. Several elements, however, continue to resonate with stakeholders and should be considered as part of the peace operations review.

These elements include the importance of coherent political strategies, one of the essential recommendations from the HIPPO report but one that has been subsequently and repeatedly reaffirmed by both the General Assembly and the Security Council.

"In addition to modalities such as the framework established in Security Council resolution 2719, coherence could also be pursued between peace operations and partners both within the UN and outside"

3. Russo, J., Tadesse, B., Kotini, I. (2025). Ten Years after HIPPO: Assessing Progress and Charting the Future of UN Peace Operations. International Peace Institute. <https://www.ipinst.org/2025/07/ten-years-after-hippo-assessing-progress-and-charting-the-future-of-un-peace-operations>

4. Henigson, H. (2020). Community Engagement in UN Peacekeeping Operations: A People-Centered Approach to Protecting Civilians. International Peace Institute. <https://www.ipinst.org/2020/11/community-engagement-in-un-peacekeeping-operations-a-people-centered-approach-to-protecting-civilians>

5. Chen, E. (2025). Managing Peace Operations: How to Exit the Groundhog Day Time Loop of Peace Operations Reform. New York University Center on International Cooperation. <https://cic.nyu.edu/resources/managing-peace-operations/>

Partnership is another recurring theme. In addition to modalities such as the framework established in Security Council resolution 2719, coherence could also be pursued between peace operations and partners both within the UN system (such as the agencies, funds and programmes) and outside (such as regional and subregional organizations) by embracing “networked multi-dimensional operations”⁶ or modular approaches. Such arrangements would allow entities to exercise their respective comparative advantages and avoid duplication in the implementation of mandates.⁷

Shifts in approach, however, must also be underpinned by changes to structure, given that much of the current approach to the design of missions and the implementation of mandates is highly deterministic given the existing organization of the UN at Headquarters and at the country level.

"Structural adjustments to the Secretariat should also address thematic and operational friction and overlap with other departments and entities within the UN."

Ongoing and upcoming processes

UN80 initiative: Separate from the peace operations review, DPPA and DPO have come up with structural adjustments that will be presented to the General Assembly as part of the UN80 initiative. These adjustments include:

- Merger of rule of law and peacebuilding functions under DPPA.
- Consolidation of the single regional political-operational structure into two pillars:

one covering Africa and one covering the rest of the world.

- Establishment of a joint DPPA–DPO Gender Unit and closer cooperation between the DPPA Policy and Mediation Division and the DPO Division for Policy, Evaluation and Training.

These adjustments, though still quite conservative, are a positive step towards addressing the structural difficulties affecting the working relationship between the two departments. Structural adjustments to the Secretariat should also address thematic and operational friction and overlap with other departments and entities within the UN.

Other processes: Beyond the UN80 initiative, there are several other intergovernmental processes that should be taken into account as part of the peace operations review.

Financial arrangements and procedures for the implementation of resolution 2719 (2023) (A/80/88): This report addresses practical elements of the UN–African Union partnership in peace operations, many of which are also relevant in other potential partnership contexts. [Fifth Committee, main part of the 80th session]

2025 Peacebuilding Architecture Review (A/78/870–S/2024/339): Member States engage in a review of the peacebuilding architecture every five years. The General Assembly and Security Council are scheduled to conclude their consideration of the report of the Secretary-General (A/79/552–S/2024/767) and the letter from the group of independent eminent persons (A/79/643–S/2024/869) by the end of December 2025.

2026 Working Group on Contingent-Owned Equipment: In January 2026, the working group will convene for its triennial review of the framework under which military and police capabilities are engaged in UN peace operations. The recommendations of the working group can potentially enhance or undermine the effectiveness of mandate implementation and the

6. United Nations (2025). Shifting Paradigms: United to Deliver: Report of the Secretary-General.

7. Chen, E. (2024). A New Vision for Peace Operations (Or how I learned to stop worrying and love Christmas tree mandates). New York University Center on International Cooperation. <https://cic.nyu.edu/resources/a-new-vision-for-peace-operations/>

performance and accountability of uniformed personnel.⁸

9th Review of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Architecture: The boundaries between peace-keeping, stabilization, and counterterrorism at the UN have been blurred over time as UN missions have been pushed to adopt increasingly robust postures. Despite the increasing overlap between UN peace operations and counter-terrorism efforts, these agendas have traditionally been approached separately. [General Assembly, by the end of the 80th session]

Selection of the next Secretary-General: The candidates for the next Secretary-General should be pressed on their views on the role of the UN in peace and security and for how the Secretariat should be reconfigured to support such a vision.

Guiding questions

- Given the considerable changes in the international security landscape over the past decade, are the four shifts called for by the HIPPO still broadly relevant for UN peace operations today?
- What steps can be taken to help the peace operations review and the UN80 initiative mitigate bureaucratic and intergovernmental obstacles to reform?
- What specific questions should the peace operations review address, and is there anything currently missing from the scope of the peace operations reform, as currently conceived by the Secretariat, in terms of either form or function?

8. The recommendations of the Working Group, cover policies, standards, and rates of reimbursement for major equipment and logistical support capabilities as well as the model memorandums of understanding for military and police contingents.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eugene Chen is a former diplomat and UN official whose research focuses on the interplay of substantive policy, intergovernmental politics, and bureaucratic processes at the UN in areas such as international peace and security and institutional reform.



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