Challenges Annual Forum
2025

Challenges Forum

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CHALLENGES ANNUAL FORUM REPORT 2025
ACCRA, 14–15 OCTOBER

Adapt and Advance:
Renewing the impact of Peace Operations

The Challenges Forum is a global partnership that uses its convening mandate to generate innovative ideas and promote results for more effective peace operations. The partnership consists of more than 50 organisations in 25 countries, and it provides an impartial and informal platform for dialogue and convenes key actors for deliberations on different approaches to peace. The Challenges Annual Forum is a central driver of the partnership. Its outcomes are widely taken forward and used by partners and key stakeholders.

More than 170 partners and key stakeholders from over 30 countries gathered at the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Center in Accra for CAF25.

Introduction

The Challenges Annual Forum 2025 (CAF25), hosted by the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC), took place in Accra, Ghana, from 14-15 October 2025. It brought together over 170 partners and key stakeholders from more than 30 countries, including representatives from the United Nations (UN) and regional organizations to discuss how to adapt, advance and renew the impact of peace operations. CAF25 was pledged by Ghana and Sweden at the Berlin Peacekeeping Ministerial in May 2025, with the aim to inform and contribute to the Review on the Future of All Forms of UN Peace Operations ('the Review' hereafter) as mandated by the Pact for the Future in 2024.

The discussions at CAF25 took place against a backdrop of growing geopolitical fragmentation and polarization, major financial challenges for the UN system, and increasing levels of violence and insecurity across the world. CAF25 provided a timely platform for partners and participants to discuss and develop concrete, actionable recommendations, in support of the Review, in synergy with the Peacebuilding Architecture Review (PBAR) and the ongoing UN80 initiative.

CAF25 participants noted that despite imperfections and limitations, UN peace operations remain one of the most effective and broadly legitimate tools available for managing and resolving armed conflicts. A considerable body of evidence shows that UN peace operations can measurably reduce violence and protect civilians,[1] with a track record of supporting democratic processes and strengthening institutions.[2] Too often, these successes are disregarded or underappreciated.

Participants observed that while the UN Secretariat can do more to adapt its approaches and structures to evolving needs, Member States, particularly troop, police, and resource contributing countries, as well as mandating bodies and host countries, also bear responsibility for advocating in support of peace operations. Together, such measures can help restore the appreciation of peace operations as an effective instrument for the maintenance of peace and security, and of multilateral cooperation more broadly.

"Over the last 80 years, UN peace operations have served not only as an essential tool of multilateral action for peace but have also enabled essential and effective responses to environments where peace and security challenges are at the forefront of people's daily lives."

Hanna Tetteh, Special Representative of the Secretary General for Libya & Head of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL)

Fatemeh Ziai, Director, Office of the Director for Coordination and Shared Services.

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1   Håvard Hegre et al., "Evaluating the Conflict-Reducing Effect of UN Peacekeeping Operations," *The Journal of Politics* 81, no. 1 (2019): 215–32, https://doi.org/10.1086/700203.
2   Allard Duursma et al., "UN Peacekeeping at 75: Achievements, Challenges, and Prospects," *International Peacekeeping* 30, no. 4 (2023): 415–76, https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.20

A Changed Context for Peace Operations

Key takeaways

- Despite their imperfections, peace operations remain one of the most effective and legitimate tools available for managing and resolving conflicts.

- Peacemaking must be made more central in the UN's engagement. The UN's impartiality remains one of its greatest comparative advantages, but it must be matched by proactive and visible political leadership that demonstrates responsibility, courage and creativity.

- In the current financially austere context, doing more with less is neither realistic nor responsible. While expectations must be managed carefully, peace operations should seek to transform challenges into opportunities and strive to do things differently with the resources available to them.

- To navigate politics and remain pragmatic, what matters most is context: understanding the political and conflict dynamics in each setting and designing interventions that are both integrated and politically smart. This requires stronger political coherence and consistent backing from the UN Security Council.

- Within the UN Secretariat, a more candid, forward-leaning posture is needed: one that communicates plainly, resists bureaucratic self-preservation and champions the UN's assembling role, its broad toolbox of instruments and proven ability to adapt and remain relevant.

- A more networked and collaborative approach is required, ensuring that relevant actors, including UN country teams and regional partners, work in an integrated manner under an overarching political strategy that leverages their respective comparative advantages.

- The UN and host countries must deepen their mutual understanding of each other, including on how host governments and societies perceive, negotiate and derive value from the presence of peace operations. Host countries and their populations should be regarded as beneficiaries, and as partners and co-architects of the strategies aimed at stabilizing their societies. At the same time, host governments must demonstrate sustained commitment and responsibility in supporting peace operations throughout their entire lifecycle.

> *"We must be careful with the kind of multilateralism à la carte that is developing. It's all about transaction. It's all about me, myself, and I."*

Parfait Onanga Anyanga, Special Representative of the Secretary-General to the African Union and Head of the UN Office to the African Union, United Nations

The international system is in flux with a record number of state-based conflicts since the end of the Second World War and a persistantly high number of non-state conflicts, particularly on the African continent.[3] Despite escalating conflict and insecurity, the contraction of UN peace operations continues. Host governments are increasingly turning to non-UN options, including regional organizations, ad hoc coalitions, and private military and security companies, with the UN often relegated to the role of paymaster and logistical service provider.

Delayed payments by several Member States— among them the largest contributors to the UN regular and peacekeeping budgets—have created liquidity shortfalls that hinder UN peace operations' mandate implementation. The current financial crisis presents an acute test of the resilience and adaptability of UN peace operations, and it is neither responsible nor realistic to expect peace operations to do more with less.

Lucía Soriano Irigaray, Strategic Foresight Analyst, UN Futures Lab and Lin Kang, China Peacekeeping Police Training Center.

Even amid acute financial constraints and growing geopolitical tensions, UN Member States continue to see value in multilateral peace operations, despite the challenges confronting them. Several peace operation mandates have been renewed, and just days before the CAF25, resolution 2793 authorised the reconfiguration of the Multinational Security Support mission in Haiti into a "Gang Suppression Force" and establishing a UN support office. Some participants however cautioned against "multilateralism à la carte" and a shift toward a more transactional form of peace and security diplomacy.

Today's crisis is political, financial, and conceptual. To remain relevant, the UN must draw on its capacity for reinvention, embracing pragmatic innovation, political responsibility and solidarity across regions. Speakers and participants highlighted that UN peace operations often constitute the difference between fragile peace and continued war, and over the past eight decades, UN peace operations have repeatedly adapted to shifts in the geopolitical context.

> *"The challenges ahead are significant. But so is our collective capacity to overcome them if we remain united in purpose, pragmatic in action, and unwavering in our commitment to peace."*

Jean-Pierre Lacroix, Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations, United Nations

The future of peace operations depends not only on reimagining structures and approaches but also on renewing a shared commitment to collective action. Although expectations must be realistically managed, the various UN reform initiatives underway provide an opportunity to renew, realign, and reenergize how the UN can deliver on peace and security. To be successful, these processes must also understand why previous efforts at reform fell short. Several long-outstanding recommendations from the 2015 report of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) remain relevant, despite the changed circumstances.

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3 Siri Aas Rustad, *"Conflict trends: A Global Overview, 1946-2024,"* Peace Research Institute Oslo (2025), https://www.prio.org/publications/14453.

Restoring the UN's central role in peacemaking and political solutions

During the past decade, the UN has played a limited role in peacemaking, engaging primarily in diplomacy aimed at managing the economic and humanitarian fallout of conflict, alongside some successful ceasefire and monitoring initiatives. Peacemaking must regain its prominence in the UN toolkit, both in terms of greater use of good offices by the Secretary-General and the overall orientation of peace operations around credible political solutions. This will require the UN to move away from its current risk-averse posture, placing diplomacy and mediation at the center of its engagement in conflict contexts, working in coordination with complementary regional and bilateral efforts.

> *"Today, peacemaking has fallen between the cracks, but the UN must once again take a leading role."*

Harold Agyeman, Former Permanent Representative of Ghana

Impartiality is a critical element and a comparative advantage of the UN as an organization with a unique role in the maintenance of international peace and security. The perception of impartiality by the parties to a conflict enhances the leverage and legitimacy of the UN in peacemaking. In country contexts, the UN should serve as an impartial and honest broker between adversaries. The UN must constantly work to build trust with the parties to the conflict, and beyond host governments, also engage with civil society, including youth and women's groups, as well as with affected populations. To do this effectively requires proactive and visible

Music performance at the opening of CAF25.

political leadership within missions and in the Secretariat more broadly that demonstrates responsibility, courage, and creativity, and which works to restore and maintain the perception and reputation of the UN as an impartial actor.

Navigating the politics underpinning mandates

For peace operations to be effective and responsive UN officials and other participants stressed the importance of unified political support and adequate financial resources from Member States. The UN has often experienced varying levels of support and backing from the Security Council, and financial constraints in relation to agreed mandates have been a persistent challenge throughout the history of peace operations. The ability of the UN to effectively prevent, manage, and resolve violent conflict would also benefit from a more candid and proactive posture on the part of the Secretariat, one that communicates plainly, resists bureaucratic self-preservation, and champions the peacemaking and convening role of the UN. More should be done to bridge internal obstacles to effectiveness and relevance.

> *"To have a truly supportive relationship for peace operations, that operation must be rooted in national ownership."*

Jonathan Titus-Williams, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, Liberia

The shifting support and engagement from host countries continue to pose a significant challenge for peace operations. It is important for the UN to deepen its understanding of how host governments and societies perceive, negotiate and derive value from the presence of peace operations. At the same time host countries need to be realistic and supportive about the underlying reasons for an international peace operation presence in their country. Genuine national ownership should begin with the mandating and planning stages of peace operations and extend throughout the lifecycle of the mission. Participants recognized that host countries are not monolithic: the views, priorities, and interests of a government may not reflect those of opposition groups and the broader population. Peace operations should

remain vigilant to ensure they are able to promote inclusive and legitimate peacebuilding and be careful of not becoming instruments of regime preservation. This is particularly important given the increasing demand by host governments for robust and militarized responses to insecurity.

The Review must draw lessons from the experience of withering host-state consent and the need for clearer frameworks of shared responsibility and sustained political dialogue. Accountability for mandate implementation should be shared more evenly between missions, host governments, and the Security Council. A strategic compact between these actors could help build mutual commitments and raise the political cost of backing out, providing a stronger foundation for partnership.

Further integrating the peace and security toolbox

Although participants noted that the current political and financial climate is more likely to favor smaller and more narrowly focused missions, there was also a strong desire to avoid being prescriptive about the available peace and security toolkit. In recent years, some stakeholders have called for "going back to basics" or for peace operations to focus narrowly on "core tasks", including on supporting credible political processes.[4] However, CAF25 participants acknowledged that debates over the "core tasks" of peace operations risk becoming overly technical and detached from reality, rather than focusing on pragmatic problem-solving. What matters more is context: understanding the political and conflict dynamics in each setting and designing interventions accordingly that are integrated and politically astute.

"The UN family has a wealth of expertise across the diversity of its components that is not fully used in all contexts."

Zia Choudhury, Resident Coordinator
Ghana, United Nations

Participants in the main hall at the CAF25.

Several speakers pointed out that multidimensional missions with broad, needs-based mandates originally emerged out of a recognition of the multitude of interconnected social, political, and economic drivers of conflict, and that the option for multidimensional missions should not be lost. The idea of 'Networked Multidimensional Operations' proposed by the Secretary-General can allow for a more context-specific way of thinking more flexibly about future peace operations.[5] Such an approach would allow missions to mobilize capacities and expertise across the UN system as well as non-UN partners, enabling all actors to work in an integrated manner under an overarching political strategy in a manner that leverages their respective comparative advantages in each specific context.

There was also broad recognition that, while the most critical difficulties facing peace operations lie beyond the control of the UN, many stem from internal structural arrangements and outdated approaches to mission planning and budgeting. These create institutional incentives and a path dependency that drives the current persistence of two sets of options for UN missions—special political missions and peacekeeping operations—rather than enabling the flexible use of the full spectrum of peace operations, which should also encompass options such as tailor-made UN peace operations with an adequate set of instruments and capacities, enhanced UN country teams as well as the various modalities for UN partnerships with regional organizations, including joint missions and the delivery of UN support packages to non-UN operations.

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4   United Nations, "With Conflicts at Highest Since 1946, United Nations Peacekeeping Remains Lifeline for Millions, Senior Official Tells Security Council," *Meetings Coverage and Press Releases*, September 9, 2025, https://press.un.org/en/2025/sc16162.doc.htm.

5   United Nations, *UN80 Initiative Workstream 3: Changing Structures and Realigning Programmes — Shifting Paradigms: United to Deliver: Report of the Secretary-General (A/80/392)* (2025), 6, https://undocs.org/en/A/80/392.

Thematic Discussions

At CAF25, partners and participants used the formal panels, and breakout sessions, to discuss some of the key considerations that should shape the future of UN peace operations in the areas of partnerships, the effective use of new technology, and the nexus between climate change and peace and security.

Partnerships with regional organizations

Most UN peace operations are currently deployed in Africa and four of the top ten UN troop and police contributing countries are African Member States. Moreover, the willingness of the African Union (AU) and subregional configurations to proactively deploy African-led peace operations has grown considerably over the past two decades. Africa has the potential to play a central role in shaping the future of peace operations. With its resources, dynamic human capital and growing institutional capacities, Africa is positioned to advance "African solutions to African challenges." The continent's innovative drive, experience and determination are important assets when it comes to renewing the African Peace and Security Architecture.

"The ongoing UN Review presents an opportunity to explore ways to strengthen complementarity among multilateral organisations through more modular, flexible and cross-institutional approaches, involving the UN, AU and RECs."

Bitania Tadesse, Policy Specialist for Africa, International Peace Institute

Key takeaways

- Cooperation must be guided by shared principles and values, subsidiarity and complementarity, with each organization acting in line with its comparative advantage and leveraging unity of effort.

- UN Security Council resolution 2719 (2023) needs to be operationalized, tested and refined through practical implementation to ensure it delivers on its transformative promise.

- Contemporary African security challenges cannot always be addressed through traditional UN peace operations alone: in some contexts they demand political strategies, complemented by more robust enforcement options.

The need for coordinated political strategies

In the Sahel, where terrorism continues to escalate and poses a significant threat to international peace and security; the UN, AU and ECOWAS continue to face challenges in engaging effectively with the military authorities. In such contexts, there is a critical need for scaling up diplomatic efforts and developing a coordinated political strategy to sustain continuous dialogue.

Realizing this potential will require the enhancement of partnerships between the UN, the AU, the European Union (EU), and subregional organizations, including the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). These partnerships should be based on trust and predictability, they also require each partner to understand the capabilities and constraints of the other. It was evident from the discussions at CAF25 that there is considerable room for progress. For example, the wider UN can do more to acknowledge progress and commitments made by African Member States and institutions. At the same time, the belief amongst some interlocutors from the African continent that the UN has "unlimited resources" fails to appreciate the depth of the political and financial challenges currently faced by the entire UN system. In addition, meaningful African ownership over peace operations requires both the necessary political capital and sufficient financial resources. The initiative by ECOWAS to activate the West African Standby Force exemplifies this commitment.

The UN Security Council should act as a platform for international partnerships in conflict and crisis response. When it determines a threat to international peace and security and launches a response, this should trigger coordinated engagement by the wider international community—regional organizations, IFIs, NGOs, and other stakeholders. This would advance effective multilateralism, reinforce UN and international legitimacy, accelerate and sharpen responses, and significantly strengthen international coordination and partnerships.

Responding to violent extremism

Despite the broad recognition of the efficacy of UN peace operations, several speakers asserted that

Mohamed Ibn Chambas, High Representative for Silencing the Guns, AU arriving at CAF25.

contemporary African security challenges may require counterterrorism and peace enforcement mandates that go beyond what is commonly accepted for peace operations. This is sometimes refelected also in the gradual shift in demand on the part of the Security Council and host countries away from UN peace operations to non-UN missions with greater capability for offensive operations. The divergence in the discourse between participants from New York and those based in West Africa was notable – conversations on the future of peace operations largely exclude counterterrorism given the presence of a separate counterterrorism architecture within the UN Secretariat, while concerns about terrorism and violent extremism were front and center for participants from the region.

Violent extremism and terrorism are seen as existential threats by many countries in West Africa and remain a central concern of the African Peace and Security Architecture. Most terrorism-related deaths worldwide now happen in the Sahel.[6] Moreover, unconstitutional changes of government have further destabilized the region, with three countries having withdrawn from ECOWAS to establish their own Alliance of Sahel States,[7] while being suspended from the AU.

Contemporary African security challenges cannot always be addressed through traditional UN peace operations alone: in some contexts, they may require more offensive responses. The growing demand for counterterrorism operations in West Africa and the Sahel calls for a careful recalibration of roles among international, regional and subregional actors. Cooperation must be guided by shared principles and values, subsidiarity and complementarity, with each organization acting in line with its comparative advantage while avoiding fragmentation of effort.

At CAF25, there was a broad recognition of a comprehensive approach that balances short-term military solutions with longer-term efforts to build sustainable peace. It was also emphasized that the inclusion of civilian mandates in field operations, and alignment with broader political strategies, are essential to ensure that peace operations do not only contribute to counterinsurgency but also to the protection of civilians. This is necessary given the increased risk of human rights violations arising from domestic and multilateral counterterrorism operations, as well as the absence of evidence of the efficacy of securitized responses alone in countering violent extremism. It is urgent to clarify how and under what conditions UN tools can effectively support more offensive non-UN counterterrorism operations while remaining consistent with UN principles. In addition, there are principally important issues that need to be addressed concerning legality, accountability and transparency.

Peace operations, violent extremism and counterterrorism

Beyond the UN80 initiative, there are several other intergovernmental processes that should be considered as part of the Review, for example the Review of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Architecture. The boundaries between peace operations, stabilization, and counterterrorism at the UN have been blurred over time as UN missions have been tasked to adopt increasingly robust postures. The increasing overlap between UN peace operations and counter-terrorism efforts must be discussed and addressed.

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6 Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (2025), https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2025.pdf

7 Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.

Parfait Onanga-Anyanga, SRSG to the AU and Head of the UN Office to the AU and Abdel-Fatau Musah, Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security, ECOWAS Comission

Implementing Security Council Resolution 2719

The adoption of Security Council Resolution 2719 in December 2023 represented a milestone in the development of the UN-AU peace and security partnership. It put in place a framework under the Security Council authority and established a process for joint planning and authorization, and a means by which UN assessed contributions can be used to enhance the predictability and sustainability of financial resources for AU-led peace support operations. It also put in place standards for financial oversight and accountability along with an emphasis on compliance with international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and relevant UN and AU policies. To realize the possibilities of the 2719 framework requires continued progress across all tracks of the UN-AU implementation roadmap.

In addition, diverging views on the 75 percent financial ceiling for assessed contributions for AU-led peace support operations need to be reconciled. Case-by-case analysis and assessment may facilitate multi-stakeholder win-win solutions. When it comes to international crisis management, no options should be principally ruled out. It is important to bear in mind that the Security Council can authorize the use of UN assessed contributions for non-UN peace operations also without a resolution like 2719, with the Gang Suppression Force in Haiti as a recent example.

CAF25 participants believed that greater sensitivity to the political dynamics of the permanent members of the Security Council could increase the chance of resolution 2719 being implemented successfully in the future. At the same time, concerns were raised that the emphasis on the 2719 framework risks downplaying the long-

Annika Hansen, Deputy Team Leader, Policy, Partnerships & Innovation, Berlin Centre for International Peace Operations (ZIF).

standing, successful cooperation that already exists between the AU, UN and EU regarding the deployment of hybrid or complementary peace operations in Africa. It is worth exploring complementary approaches, including networked multidimensional operations, as work progresses on the operationalization of the 2719 framework. Discussions also emphasized that sustainable financing must extend beyond logistical support to include institutional capacity-building, transparency, and local ownership. Ultimately, success in regional peace operations will depend on the establishment of inclusive, trust-based, and professional partnerships that involve not only governments but also youth, civil society, and local communities.

Jenna Russo, Director of Research and Head of the Brian Urquhart Center for Peace Operations, International Peace Institute (IPI) and Maj Gen BK Sharma, Director General, United Service Institute of India (USI).

Networked multidimensional approaches

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 programs, and outside such as regional and subregional organizations, by embracing "networked multidimensional operations" or modular approaches. Such arrangements would allow entities to exercise their respective comparative advantages and avoid duplication in the implementation of mandates. This is not, however, about replacing specialist peace operations' capabilities.

Effective use of new technologies

UN peace operations depend increasingly on data, networks, and algorithms for the implementation of mandates. From unarmed surveillance drones and geospatial information systems to large language models, predictive analytics, and digital command platforms, technology has become a strategic enabler and multiplier in complex conflict environments. Technology has always been an important vector of peace operations reform, and several initiatives are under way to harness new technologies to improve the effectiveness of peace operations, including through the Strategy for Digital Transformation of UN Peacekeeping driven by the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO)

"Decisions around data governance, partnerships and digital inclusion will be core determinants of how peace operations act and are perceived to act in the conflicts of the future."

Samuel Atuahene, Research Scientist at CSIR, Institute of Industrial Research and Dirk Druet, Non-Resident Fellow at the Brian Urquhart Center for Peace Operations, International Peace Institute

and the work of the Innovation Cell within the UN Department for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA). It is important to bear in mind that new technologies have the potential to either build or erode trust, depending on how their use impacts on perceptions of neutrality, consent, and legitimacy.

Key takeaways

- New technologies will significantly improve mandate implementation, enhance situational awareness, improve safety and security of personnel, counter mis- and disinformation, and promote communication and partnerships with host country actors. Drones can patrol remote areas, and data-driven planning can inform decisions and strengthen early warning.

- Appropriate safeguards are required to ensure the ethical use of new technologies as well as to mitigate the unintended risks to populations resulting from the misuse of collected data.

- Effective and ethical use of new technologies in peace operations requires investment to ensure that UN's staff members, as well as troop, police and resource contributing countries, have the requisite skillsets and expertise on data, digital technologies and the use of artificial intelligence.

The use of new technologies and peace operations

New technologies will become central factors in the legitimacy and credibility of peace operations. Decisions around data governance, partnerships and a inclusion will be core determinants of how peace operations act and are perceived to act, in the conflicts of the future.

In DPPA, an innovation cell was established in 2020 to help DPPA and its field presences understand, explore, pilot and scale new technologies, tools and practices. It has since delivered several proofs of concept and scaled several use cases for digital technologies, such as a platform to support efforts to address climate-related risks using open-source satellite data to track water scarcity across regions like West and Central Africa.

Within DPO, a team was established to implement the 2021 Strategy for the Digital Transformation of Peacekeeping, as well as a dedicated capacity to strengthen information integrity and tackle mis/disinformation and hate speech.

Improved mandate implementation

New technologies have the potential to significantly improve mandate implementation, enhance situational awareness, improve safety and security of personnel, counter mis– and disinformation, and promote communication and partnerships with host country actors. For example, unmanned aerial vehicles can be valuable sources of information for missions and can help peacekeepers patrol long and otherwise inaccessible borders or ceasefire lines. Artificial intelligence (AI) tools have the potential to help peace operations better leverage the datasets already available to missions to improve conflict analysis and to support mission operations.

Awareness of advances in technology is also needed by missions to counter the weaponization of new technologies by malicious actors against peace operations and their mandates.

Participants also noted that new technologies can only enhance the effectiveness of mandate implementation if the way that they are used supports the legitimacy of operations. Negative community perceptions of surveillance technologies and the use of data have the potential to erode support for peace operations and their mandates.

Dawit Yohannes, Project Manager and Senior Researcher Training for Peace, Institute for Security Studies and Ngozi Margareta Amu, Acting Director Political Affairs, UNOWAS.

Emma Birikorang, Director of Research, KAIPTC.

Drones – an opportunity and a challenge to peace operations

Unmanned aerial vehicles have the potential to patrol long or inaccessible borders, or ceasefire lines, to support current and future peace operations and observer missions. However, the increasing use of small armed drones by insurgent groups in West and Central Africa and the Middle East and targeted internet shutdowns present serious risks for the security of peace operations. The targeting of civilian populations, infrastructure and humanitarian operations with these weapons will also place significant pressure on the protection roles of peace operations and mission leaders.

Mitigating negative impacts of data bias and exclusion

Technology can be a double-edged sword: although it can help improve the effectiveness of peace operations, it also has the potential to undermine peace operations if misused. CAF25 participants noted that peace operations are entering a period of digital transformation in which the dominance of a limited number of AI platforms and models—many of which currently perform poorly in African settings—may not only introduce bias into data inputs, reasoning processes, and prescriptive outputs, but can also apply poorly contextualized gender and cultural assumptions, and reinforce asymmetric power dynamics, all of which have the potential to skew decision-making processes. Appropriate safeguards are required to ensure the ethical use of new technologies as well as to mitigate the unintended harm and risks to populations resulting from the misuse of collected data.

Leonardo Santos Simão, SRSG UNOWAS and Liesl Louw-Vaudran, Senior Adviser for the AU, International Crisis Group.

On the other hand, thoughtfully engineered processes can streamline internal UN processes, provide peace operations with more nuanced appreciation of local perceptions, identify avenues for strategic communication, improve information sharing, and support more inclusive political processes. In addition to ensuring that existing frameworks, including the Principles for the Ethical Use of AI in the UN System, are translated into operational protocols, the UN should establish peace operations-specific standards while working to ensure that algorithms used remain transparent, rights-compliant, and auditable.

Capacity-building

Effective and ethical use of new technologies in peace operations requires investment to ensure that UN's staff members, as well as troop, police and resource contributing countries, have the requisite skillsets and expertise on data, digital technologies and the use of artificial intelligence. CAF25 participants highlighted the importance of key skills such as AI and data literacy, cyber hygiene, coding, and legal awareness, and of the importance of human oversight and data consent.

Peace operations should also support local capacity-building efforts that could, inter alia, increase resilience against mis- and disinformation. They can also work with local stakeholders to bolster local innovation and enhance local ownership, and in doing so improve the contextual fit of analytical tools.

"We are operating in an environment of misinformation and disinformation, so to have a robust communication which can counter the narrative of fake news is essential."

Leonardo Santos Simão, Special Representative and Head of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), United Nations

Climate security integration

Key takeaways

- Peace operations should anchor climate-security responses in the implementation of the broader mission mandate, including through the mainstreaming of climate-risk assessments into conflict analysis and integrated mission planning.

- Climate security considerations should be more systematically integrated into peacebuilding efforts to help communities better manage risks and serve as catalytic entry points for political solutions and local reconciliation.

- Transboundary strategies, early warning systems, political support and predictable funding are key to adequate climate-security responses.

Cynthia Chigwenya, Former Youth Ambassador for Peace for Southern Africa, AU, Babu Rahman, Senior Principal Research Analyst, UK Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office and El-Ghassim Wane, Former SRSG and Head of MINUSMA.

Andreas Øien Stensland, Head of Peace and Democracy Unit, NORCAP.

Peace operations have the potential to play a transformative role in mitigating climate-security risks because of the significant overlap between climate-vulnerable countries and those that are most affected by fragility, conflict and violence.[8] The impact of peace operations in this area can be enhanced through innovative approaches to strategic analysis and planning, program design, resource allocation, partnerships and implementation. The Climate Security Mechanism (CSM) aims to help the UN to more systematically address linkages between climate change, peace and security. In addition, several peace operations have begun integrating climate security considerations into their work, but much more can and should be done.

"Peace operations must adapt to mitigate risks and to strengthen resilience through climate-sensitive approaches. Climate change is no longer an environmental issue. It is a security imperative."

Hon. Ernest Brogya Genfi, Deputy Minister of Defence, Ghana

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8   Harriet Mackaill-Hill, *Making climate finance fit for a world in conflict*, International Alert (2023), https://www.international-alert.org/app/uploads/2023/11/Climate-Finance-World-In-Conflict-EN-2023.pdf

Climate mainstreaming

The adoption of climate-sensitive approaches in peace operations can help prevent and manage conflicts. Peace operations should anchor climate-security responses in the implementation of the broader mission mandate, including through the mainstreaming of climate risk assessments into conflict analysis and integrated mission planning. This, however, requires predictable and sustainable funding for climate security and environmental peacebuilding approaches. Much of the dedicated capacity for climate-security in peace operations today remain funded through voluntary contributions rather than being included in assessed budgets, despite the inclusion of climate security-related tasks in mission mandates.

Dominique Grass, Head of the United Nations and Cross-Cutting Affairs Department, Directorate-General for International Relations and Strategy, Ministry of Defence France and Jianhua Wu, China Peacekeeping Police Training Center.

UNMISS climate risk assessment and projections

Efforts to integrate climate security into peace operations have recorded successful results. The UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) has reduced conflict potential by systematically embedding climate risk assessments into strategic planning and reporting, constructed critical flood protection infrastructure, and facilitated local dialogues to manage seasonal cattle migrations. Seasonal climate projections have been incorporated into operational plannings which inform the pre-positioning of supplies in flood-prone communities to overcome the challenges faced when floods cut off roads and supply channels.

People-centered approaches

Climate security considerations should be more systematically integrated into peacebuilding efforts to help communities better manage risks and serve as catalytic entry points for political solutions and local reconciliation. Peace operations efforts must consider the fact that climate and security concerns can affect men, women, boys and girls differently. Working closely with civil society actors, including women's and youth organizations, ensures that responses are more inclusive and locally anchored.

Gender–climate–security nexus

Climate-related security concerns affect men, women, boys and girls differently, which needs to be factored into the conflict analysis and climate-risk assessments of peace operations. For example, an assessment made by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia's (UNSOM) found that the lack of infrastructure and security as a result of water scarcity, increased the exposure of women and children to sexual violence, harassment and abuse. Climate change adaptation and resilience can also be used as an entry point for greater inclusion of women and youth in local governance and decision-making processes.

Partnerships

Because of the temporary nature of peace operations, it is crucial to engage in long-term climate sensitive programming and build sustainable partnerships with UN agencies, funds and programs, as well as with local, national and regional actors. Peace operations, including peacebuilding actors, should seek alignment and close cooperation with host countries' public policies, including Agenda 2030 National Implementation Plans and National Prevention Strategies. These can serve as important levers, facilitate sustainable host country cooperation and improve mission mainstreaming of climate–security issues.

Political support, transboundary strategies, including early warning systems, and predictable funding are also key to adequate climate security responses. At the same time, the presence of peace operations can allow them to play a catalytic role through the infusion of capacity and resources, which can help foster social cohesion, support local development, and enable public–private partnerships to enhance innovation and resilience.

Hanna Bertelman, Head of the United Nations Department, Folke Bernadotte Academy, Jonas Alberoth, Principal Senior Adviser, Challenges Forum and Jonathan Titus-Williams, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, Sierra Leone.

Conclusions and Observations on the Way Forward

In today's turbulent and uncertain times, we need predictable multilateral institutions and instruments. Peace operations remain a unique and indispensable tool and sustained investment is essential to preserve the UN's capacity to deliver on its peace and security mandate. Moreover, the wider peace operations ecosystem is fragile and needs consistent and collective support.

> *"Because peace operations have always been an act of optimism: the belief that, however uncertain the world, we can still shape it for the better — together."*
>
> Benoit Pylyser, Director Challenges Forum International Secretariat

Stronger political advocacy is needed to rebuild trust in peace operations, and to encourage conflict-affected countries to once again seek UN support. The ongoing UN liquidity crisis is a test of resilience and adaptability and "doing more with less" is neither realistic nor responsible. While financial pressure can encourage efficiency, excessive cuts and unpaid dues undermine mandates and erode credibility. Yet these same pressures can be a catalyst for renewal. They can push us to innovate, to modernize, and to reimagine how the UN delivers peace and security, true to its adaptive legacy. The Review on the Future of All Forms of UN Peace Operations, the Peacebuilding Architecture Review, and the UN80 reform process present a unique opportunity to address structural and operational challenges and to galvanize renewed political support for peace operations.

CAF25 served as a dynamic platform for candid dialogue, enabling stakeholders to reflect and provide valuable input for the Secretary-General's forthcoming proposals and for the broader reform agenda.

First and foremost, peacemaking must once again sit at the heart of the UN's engagement. In a fragmented and transactional world, the UN must reclaim its political space, showing proactive and entrepreneurial leadership, ready to lean forward, and to pursue political solutions with courage and conviction: in the Security Council, among Member States, and within its own leadership. Member States, in turn, should trust the Secretariat with creative and flexible mandates that give mission leaders room to maneuver. Debates over "core tasks" should not become overly technical or ideological. What matters most is context: understanding the conflict dynamics and designing integrated, politically smart interventions, consistently backed by the Security Council.

Second, the UN must renew how it engages with host countries and local populations, treating them as partners and co-architects in mission planning and implementation. Accountability for mandate implementation must be shared more evenly between peace operations, host governments, and the Security Council. A strategic compact between these actors could help build mutual commitments and raise the political cost of backing out, providing a stronger foundation for partnership. The Review must draw lessons from peace operations that have experienced challenges of withering host-state consent and emphasize the need for clearer frameworks of shared responsibility and sustained political dialogue. More research is needed into how host governments and societies perceive and engage with peace operations, ensuring future missions are both legitimate and locally grounded.
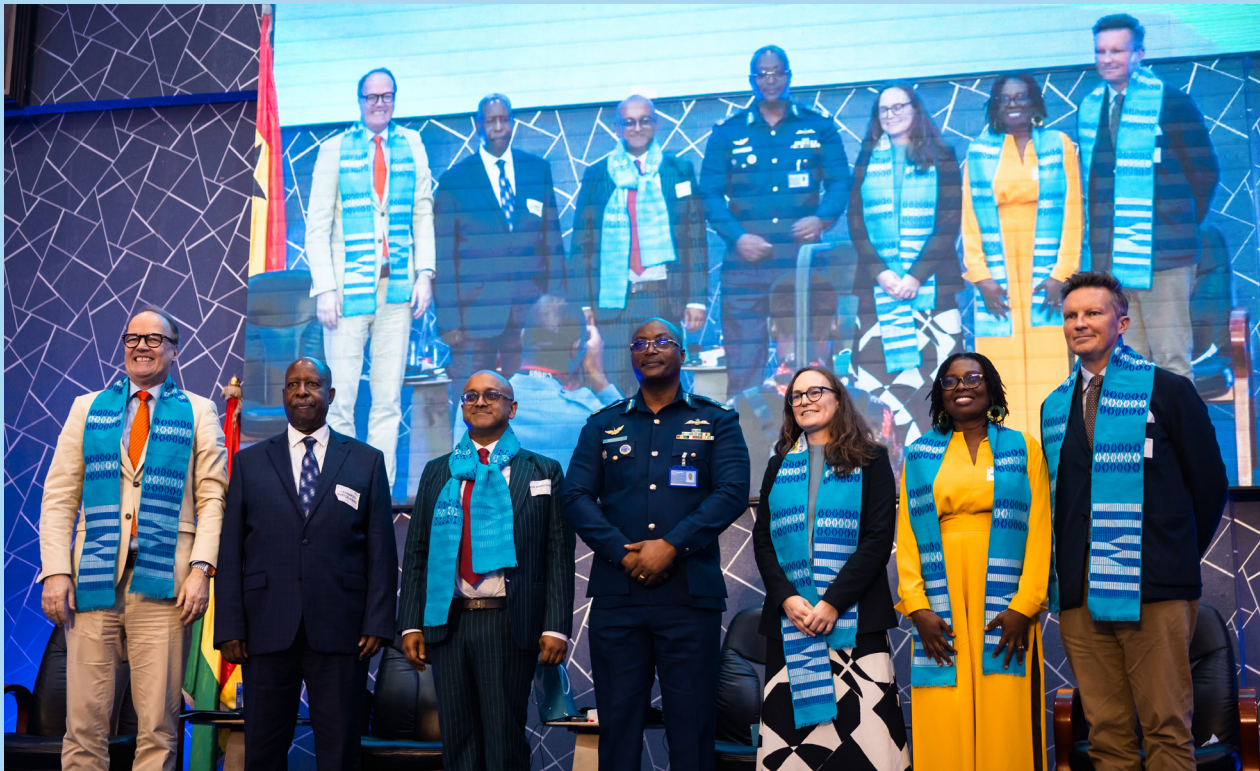
Participants in the final session of the CAF25 on concrete ways forward.

"We need a vision for the future of UN peace operations that enables agile, whole-of-system responses to safeguard international peace and security, as instructed by Member States in the Pact of the Future"

Per Olsson Fridh, Director-General Folke Bernadotte Academy, Chair of the Challenges Forum Partner Meeting

Third, in many regions such as the Sahel and West Africa host countries often seek specific kinds of support that the UN and partners are not always able to provide. This mismatch erodes trust. The UN must therefore reclaim its role as convener, bringing diverse partners together under a shared political strategy. Leadership development is key to sharpening the strategic and political acumen needed for this convening role.

Partnerships with regional and subregional organizations must deepen under a shared political vision. Security Council Resolution 2719 should be operationalized, tested, and refined. The UN must clarify the normative implications of cooperation with partners engaged in peace enforcement, ensuring the UN remains principled yet pragmatic, and that political, security, and peacebuilding tools work together.

The UN should also optimize its peace operations toolbox, deploying capabilities across the full spectrum of peace operations. Mission design and budgeting must be needs-driven and adaptive. If mobility and flexibility are the future, Member States must loosen the reins allowing missions to adapt mandates, budgets, and capacities as conditions evolve. Smaller missions are not always the answer; in complex environments, multidimensional approaches may remain essential. Furthermore, the UN must also tap into the full UN system and work more closely with civil society.

Fourth, technology remains a powerful driver of reform. The UN Digital Transformation Strategy for Peacekeeping is a major step forward,

Hanna Tetteh, SRSG for Libya & Head of UNSMIL, Mohamed Ibn Chambas, High Representative for Silencing the Guns, AU and Abdel-Fatau Musah, Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security, ECOWAS Commission.

and implementation is key. New technologies can enhance mandate delivery, improving situational awareness, increasing personnel safety, and helping counter misinformation. Drones can patrol remote areas and data-driven planning can inform decisions and strengthen early warning. However, risks of bias and exclusion must also be mitigated. Over reliance on a few AI platforms risks reinforcing inequity. Ethical safeguards and responsible data use are essential to protect affected populations. The UN must build capacity in digital skills, in data literacy, and in ethical technology use, across the organization, among troop and police contributors, and with national partners. Peace operations should help local communities build resilience against misinformation and digital manipulation.

Lastly, climate change is increasingly affecting conflict dynamics and posing significant obstacles to building peace around the world. Peace operations should use climate security to engage with communities and national actors in ways that help prevent and mitigate conflict. Doing so requires greater coherence with UN country teams, ensuring that political, security, peacebuilding and development efforts are mutually reinforcing. It also calls for deeper collaboration with regional organizations, whose proximity and contextual knowledge can strengthen climate-sensitive peace initiatives.

"One of the strengths of peacekeeping has always been adaptability, going forwards this is what we should lean on"

El-Ghassim Wane, Former Special Representative of the UN Secretary General and Head of MINUSMA

CAF25 underlined that peace operations stand at a crossroads. While expectations for rapid transformation may be modest, ongoing reform processes can lay the foundation for meaningful change in the years ahead, particularly as the next Secretary-General articulates a vision for

the future of peace operations. Member States have a critical role to play in shaping that vision by engaging proactively with candidates, securing commitments to peace-making, and clarifying how the UN peace and security toolbox can be used more effectively to support mandate implementation.

Ultimately, the future of peace operations depends on political leadership, predictable financing, and the ability to harness partnerships and innovation. Civilian populations continue to rely on peace operations to protect lives, create space for dialogue, and build sustainable peace. In a volatile world, peace operations must remain credible, adaptable, and fit for purpose. CAF25 delivered a clear message that with commitment, creativity, and collaboration, peace operations can continue to constitute the difference between fragile peace and continued war—and remain a dynamic instrument for international peace and security in the decades to come.

> *"No matter what design we would like to do, it will always be our responsibility to save human lives."*
>
> Bintou Keita, Former Special Representative of the Secretary-General for the Democratic Republic of Congo and Head of MONUSCO

Air Commodore David Anetey Akrong, Commandant, KAIPTC and Benoît Pylyser, Director Challenges Forum.

Hanna Bertelman, Head of the United Nations Department, Folke Bernadotte Academy.

Zia Choudhury, Resident Coordinator Ghana, United Nations.

ABOUT THE EVENT

The Challenges Annual Forum serves as a platform for launching research, concepts and policy initiatives in the area of peace operations reform. The Annual Forum is hosted yearly on a rotating basis by partner organisations. The Challenges Annual Forum 2025 (CAF25) was organised by the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Center (KAIPTC), in Accra.

ATTRIBUTIONS

This summary report captures selected parts of the discussions and recommendations that emerged during the two-day Forum. A range of individuals, with extensive mission experience and engaged in the reform of peace operations, have actively contributed. The report was written by the Challenges Forum International Secretariat together with the host of the forum, on behalf of the Challenges Forum partnership. In line with the Challenges Forum cooperative formula it does not necessarily represent the views of all participants.

ABOUT CHALLENGES FORUM

The Challenges Forum is a global partnership that uses its convening mandate to generate innovative ideas and promote results for more effective peace operations. It consists of more than 50 partner organisations in 25 countries.
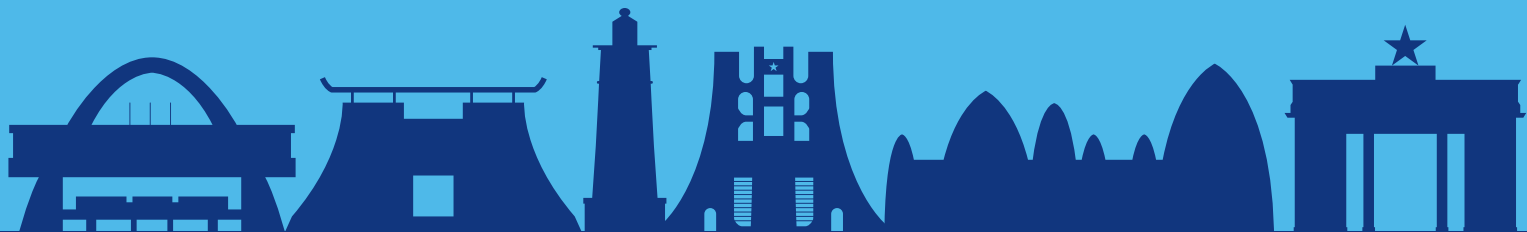
The Challenges Forum consists of Partners from:

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