

BACKGROUND PAPER

Host Country Consent and Cooperation with UN Peace Operations: Towards Shared Accountability for Mandate Implementation

ABOUT THE EVENT

The 2026 Challenges Annual Forum (#CAF26NewYork) will explore how to build momentum for effective and responsible peace operations in a demanding world. Against the backdrop of the Review on the Future of All Forms of UN Peace Operations and the forthcoming appointment of a new UN Secretary-General, the Forum will examine how peace operations can adapt to increasingly complex environments and what is needed to strengthen the political, operational, and financial support required for them to deliver on their mandates. The Forum is hosted by the Permanent Missions of Sweden, Denmark, and Pakistan at the United Nations Headquarters in New York on 8 October. The Challenges Forum is a global partnership that uses its convening power to generate innovative ideas and promote results for more effective peace operations.

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Host-country consent and cooperation are foundational to UN peace operations and a prerequisite for effective mandate implementation. The erosion of consent across a range of missions represents one of the most significant changes in the peace operations landscape over the past five years, with profound implications for how missions operate and deliver on their mandates. This background paper analyses this trend, and the opportunities and challenges associated with the recommendations put forward in the Secretary-General's *Review on the Future of all Forms of UN Peace Operations*. Building stronger relationships between the UN Security Council, host states, peace operations and other key stakeholders will be critical to the effectiveness and legitimacy of future UN peace operations.

1. Evolving consent and cooperation dynamics

Consent of the main parties to a conflict is a cornerstone of UN peace operations and one of the principles underpinning peace operations doctrine.¹ It is both foundational and fundamental and provides the basis for the presence, purpose and activities of UN field missions.²

The interpretation and practice of consent have evolved considerably over time. First, there can be no 'one-size-fits-all' conception: consent is necessarily context-specific, shaped by conflict characteristics and the constellation of actors involved. Second, while historically centred on state authorities, understandings of consent have had to stretch to encompass non-state and sub-state actors, including parties to conflict, de facto authorities, political opposition and as appropriate, local populations. Yet within these constituencies, consent is rarely uniform; it is often uneven, conditional and contested.³ Consent is therefore increasingly complex and distributed across multiple levels. Third, consent

is not static. It changes throughout a mission's life cycle in response to shifting conflict dynamics, political interests and relationships, and operational requirements.

Over the past years, this complexity has been compounded by a marked deterioration in consent for, and cooperation with, UN missions. From Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to Mali, the Central African Republic and Lebanon, consent among host states, conflict parties and local communities has fluctuated, waned and, in some cases, been withdrawn altogether. The crisis of consent has not been confined to peacekeeping missions but has also affected special political missions, including in Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia and Yemen/Hudaydah.

1. United Nations, Department of Peacekeeping Operations, "Chapter Three: The Basic Principles of United Nations Peacekeeping" in the United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Principles and Guidelines, (January 2008) 31. https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/capstone_eng_0.pdf;

2. Gregory, Julie, & Sharland, Lisa. (2023). Host-country consent in UN peacekeeping. Stimson Center, <https://www.stimson.org/2023/host-country-consent-in-un-peacekeeping/>; Sofía Sebastián and Aditi Gorur (2018). U.N. Peacekeeping & Host-State Consent: How Missions Navigate Relationships with Governments, Stimson Center, <https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/files/file-attachments/UN-PeacekeepingAndHostStateConsent.pdf>.

3. For example, where host state authority is disputed or fragmented across different ministries or departments of government.

This trend has multiple drivers, including perceptions of missions' inaction or overreach, gaps between expectations and implementation, the rise of alternative security providers, and a breakdown of political unity among the members of the UN Security Council.

The erosion of consent has manifested itself in multiple ways, ranging from obstruction and restrictions on freedom of movement—including persistent violations of the status of forces agreement, as in South Sudan—and constraints on deploying or using critical equipment to complete withdrawal of host-state consent, as in Mali and Sudan. Degraded consent among segments of local populations, fuelled by disinformation campaigns, has also resulted in hostility toward peacekeepers (e.g., in eastern DRC). All these developments have impeded mandate implementation and, ultimately, the effectiveness of missions.

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In response to these trends, the Secretary-General's review on the future of all forms of UN peace operations builds on repeated appeals to strengthen UN–host country relations,⁴ calling for stronger partnerships with host states.⁵

Under the heading, 'Towards a new partnership with host states' the review makes three main recommendations and commitments relating to: (i) the mandating process; (ii) strategic level compacts; and, (iii) more transparent and inclusive dialogue on the use of technological capabilities.⁶

2. Risks and key considerations moving forward

Broadening the conception of consent

The review calls for stronger partnerships with host states in general.⁷ This is important given the UN Security Council's prerogative on international peace and security and the central role of state authorities in consenting to UN missions.

However, by concentrating primarily on host states the review misses an opportunity to address how missions can also build and maintain consent among a wider range of stakeholders including conflict-affected populations. Sustaining a missions' social legitimacy requires continuous attention to consent, supported by people-centred and community-engaged approaches to mandate implementation and the delivery of peace dividends. Such engagement should be responsive to gender and other intersectional power structures and provide meaningful channels for communities to influence mission priorities and activities. Missions also need concerted strategies, socialized across mission components, to identify and counter harmful misinformation and disinformation that can erode trust and consent.

The Security Council, host states and missions would benefit from a more holistic conception of consent reflecting the wider ecosystem of actors influencing mission legitimacy and effectiveness.

4. Drawing lessons from the experience of withering host-state consent and the need for clearer frameworks of shared responsibility and sustained political dialogue was a key recommendation from CAF25, https://fbaproductcontent.blob.core.windows.net/challengesforum-prod/2026/02/CAF-Report-2025_FINAL.pdf; A4P Impact implementation strategy (April 2026) also called for a "review to provide recommendations to strengthen the critical partnership between peacekeeping missions and host governments to implement mission mandates."

5. UN. 'Review on the future of all forms of United Nations peace operations', Report of the Secretary-General, 22 July 2026, A/80/798-S/2026/600, para 23(b), p.9.

6. UN. 'Review on the future of all forms of United Nations peace operations', Report of the Secretary-General, 22 July 2026, A/80/798-S/2026/600, para 31(a-c), p.13

7. UN. 'Review on the future of all forms of United Nations peace operations', Report of the Secretary-General, 22 July 2026, A/80/798-S/2026/600, para 23(b), p.9.

Balancing rights with responsibilities

The review emphasises a commitment to better including host-states in initial mandating and renewal processes.⁸ This would be a welcome development to inclusively balance the strong influence of the Council, particularly the P5 and ‘penholders’. But participation should also to a higher degree include other critical stakeholders, including opposition parties, civil society and local authorities, recognising the need for broad and inclusive consent and cooperation.⁹ The Council as a whole should be more actively engaged in supporting such an inclusive approach.

The review unfortunately devotes less attention to host-state accountability for mandate implementation and obligations to cooperate with missions. The Council, Secretariat and missions should be more demanding of co-owned frameworks for shared and mutual accountability, shifting host countries from primarily beneficiaries to partners and co-architects of stabilisation and peace operations’ strategies.

Demonstrating progress can build mission credibility among key constituencies and, in turn, strengthen cooperation.¹⁰ Doing so requires clear benchmarks and monitoring and evaluation frameworks jointly designed with host-country stakeholders. Responsibility for milestones must be clearly allocated and targets, particularly those applying to host states, should remain flexible and adaptable to changing circumstances.

Sustaining dialogue to build trust and maintain relations with host countries

The review also calls on the Council to conduct “ongoing, structured and transparent dialogue with host states and T/PCCs”.¹¹ This is tied to agreements on use of technological capabilities but should be expanded to the active maintenance of consent among the wider ecosystem of stakeholders, not only host states and T/PCCs. Consent should ultimately be understood not as a condition secured at the outset of a mission, but as an ongoing process of building and sustaining mutually supportive political relationships. These relationships need to be openly and continuously cultivated, monitored and, where necessary, renegotiated throughout the mission lifecycle.

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To do so, existing Council working methods could be revitalised through more regular engagement with relevant host-country interlocutors in New York, more frequent Council fact-finding missions, and greater use of subsidiary bodies such as the Military Staff Committee, Working Groups and Groups of Friends.

8. UN. ‘Review on the future of all forms of United Nations peace operations’, Report of the Secretary-General, 22 July 2026, A/80/798-S/2026/600, para 31(a), p.13

9. Albeit there is a need to avoid situation where UNSC/missions become beholden to host country actors for what goes into (or gets left out of) mandates

10. Newby, V. F. (2022). Offering the Carrot and Hiding the Stick? Conceptualizing Credibility in UN Peacekeeping. *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations*, 28(3), 303–329. [https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-02803003](https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-02803003)

11. UN. ‘Review on the future of all forms of United Nations peace operations’, Report of the Secretary-General, 22 July 2026, A/80/798-S/2026/600, para 31(c), p.13

Maintaining consent should also become a whole-of-UN system responsibility. The General Assembly offers functions and modalities that could be mobilised when mission–host country tensions escalate, particularly where the Council is unable or unwilling to respond.¹² The Peacebuilding Commission could provide a forum for sustained dialogue, including periodic review and adaptation of arrangements for maintaining consent and furthering cooperation.¹³ On the ground, missions, Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams should be better aligned to achieve a unity of effort, drawing on the wider UN presence to strengthen relationships with all relevant host–country actors.

3. Developing inclusive and adaptive strategic-level compacts

The review encourages the Council to consider “establishing a political mechanism or compact on mutual commitments between the Council, the Secretariat and the host State or States.”¹⁴ While not a new idea,¹⁵ a specific strategic-level agreement between the host state and the UNSC has merit.

A compact or joint political framework could promote a more adequate, evidence-based and supportive narrative around UN peace endeavours in general, and on the usefulness and effectiveness of peace operations. More specifically it could:

- enable a shift from host countries as beneficiaries to partners and co-architects of stabilisation and peace operations’ strategies;
- generate ‘buy-in’ to mission objectives from key stakeholders and make missions more tailored and responsive to demand;
- more clearly ‘contractualise’ and codify cooperation, consolidating political support from the Council and altering host–country political incentives, while giving missions and the Secretariat greater delegated influence over the political process;

- formalise (‘fix’) mutual political commitments and clarify that UN support is conditional on cooperation;
- support expectations management by setting out reciprocal responsibilities for mandate implementation – what the UN will deliver and what other main parties, including host state authorities, must guarantee;
- improve strategic alignment among key stakeholders and outline shared expectations about the mission’s desired end–state;
- broaden participation in the bargain, widening the range of stakeholders with vested interests in success (i.e. ‘skin in the game’);
- increase transparency and facilitate for a more facts-based and inclusive dialogue, debate and communication on the progress of the peace process, and the mutual achievements of the host state and the UN mission;
- help mitigate mis- and disinformation and disruptive information operations;
- serve as platforms and mechanisms to engage also other strategic partners, such as regional organisations, IFIs and bilateral donors;

There are, however, several challenges to realising these potential benefits and, even in apparently ‘easy’ cases, compacts will be difficult to craft and sustain.

First, the Council has historically not been very successful in achieving inclusive processes around peace operations, including the need to adequately involve T/PCCs. Given recent withdrawals of consent by some host states, the UNSC, particularly the P5 and penholders, may be hesitant on opening up for greater inclusion.

12. See, for example, UNU-CPR, Assembly for Peace, https://unu.edu/sites/default/files/2024-08/Assembly%20for%20Peace_GA%20Digital%20Handbook%20on%20Peace%20and%20Security.pdf.

13. Albeit, remaining connected to the UNSC debates and decision-making processes.

14. UN. ‘Review on the future of all forms of United Nations peace operations’, Report of the Secretary-General, 22 July 2026, A/80/798-S/2026/600, paragraph 31(b), p.13

15. The idea of a ‘compact’ agreement between host governments and the UN – either at the mission, HQ or even UNSC level – has been discussed for over a decade. See, e.g. HIPPO Report (2015), para. 151, p.52.

Second, determining compact participants can be difficult where political authority is contested. Even when conflict parties are clear, identifying appropriate signatories amid divided or rapidly changing governments can be challenging. Selecting local representatives is equally sensitive, potentially empowering some while marginalising others.

Third, government changes – constitutional (e.g. DRC elections) or otherwise (e.g. Mali coups) – threaten continuity. New leaders may reject a predecessor's compact or be less open to UN cooperation, making agreements potentially ephemeral.

Fourth, building different degrees of punitive measures into compacts to increase the incentives for compliance may generate perceptions of paternalism rather than promote host-country cooperation.

Fifth, compacts risk becoming simply another document – alongside mandates and mission strategies – that ends up sitting on a shelf.

Finally, the content of the compact and the way it is developed and negotiated must not give the host country an effective veto over the mission's strategic purpose or core capabilities or provide leverage to obstruct mandate implementation.

Recommendations

To overcome the challenges and harness the potential benefits, a strategic level compact should incorporate the following principles.

Iterative process rather than fixed product

A compact should in certain aspects be a 'living document' that reflects how the context might be changing and formalises an on-going dialogue. Focusing on process avoids the straitjacket of a technical, one-size-fits-all approach and promotes a flexible tool tailored to context. It also allows iterative adaptation of the agreement to changing circumstances on the ground and political conditions. This would move consent away from being treated as a one-off authorisation at deployment toward something continually negotiated and politically maintained.

However, effective compacts need to include and spell out a set of foundational prerequisites for mutual consent and constructive and respectful cooperation between the Council, the host state and the UN mission.

As inclusive as practicable

The dialogue between key stakeholders to generate and update a compact agreement should allow for broad-based participation and ongoing relationship management. This means involving other host-country constituencies, such as opposition political parties, and ideally more systematically incorporating civil society and local community input. It should also seek greater involvement of influential neighbouring countries and regional organisations and arrangements – without whom political solutions are unlikely to be attainable or durable. Likewise, bringing in a wider set of actors such as the International Financial Institutions (IFIs), UN AFRPs through the relevant UNCTs, the Peacebuilding Commission and Peacebuilding Fund would promote coherence and alignment.

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Importantly, a more inclusive process would help mitigate the risks associated with over-dependency on partnerships with host states. This includes missions involuntarily becoming locked into positions where they might be perceived as supporting governments that contribute to instability and hamper the implementation of the peace process, thus extending state authority and delivering short-term stabilisation while indirectly enabling autocratic regimes, reinforcing conflict dynamics and undermining longer-term political solutions.¹⁶ A more inclusive agreement

16. 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.

can help prevent missions retaining formal consent while losing the political and operational space needed to implement their mandates and advance political solutions. Particularly in contexts where host state authorities favour increasingly securitised responses to insurgencies and instability.¹⁷

'Carrots' not 'sticks': outlining the incentives and dividends of peace

The opportunities for countries coming out of conflict are often poorly understood. Including the IFIs and other donors in the compact process could facilitate financial assistance and stabilization/peacebuilding support, also from Peacebuilding Fund programming, alongside longer-term support from the World Bank and other multilateral development banks. Making the economic opportunities at stake explicit can incentivise compliance and raise the political costs of reneging on obligations without relying on possible punitive measures.¹⁸ This requires a focus on 'mutuality' rather than 'conditionality'.

More than just an integrated development framework

Alignment around a shared vision of strategic outcomes and prerequisites for constructive and mutually supportive consent and cooperation is essential to a compact arrangement. In many ways, this reflects what is pursued through integrated development, peacebuilding and sustaining peace strategies (e.g. Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks) backed by donor conferences. However, peace operations are different to development programmes. Mandates to undertake sensitive activities including facilitating political processes, human rights monitoring and the protection of civilians irrespective of the source of threats, place missions in a unique position vis-à-vis host country constituencies. Compacts are therefore not just about articulating a more coherent cooperative approach. The political agreements underwriting these distinctive relationships must also be bespoke to serve as mutual guidance for all key stakeholders on the implementation of the peace process.

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Cannot become a sine qua non for new missions

The often-dire needs of conflict-affected countries and societies will not always 'fit' the mold. A compact should therefore not become a non-negotiable prerequisite for a UN mission where deployment could otherwise help to end conflict and/or protect civilians. The nature of UN peace operations demands risk tolerance, and any move towards instantiating strategic level compacts should not militate against continued agility and proven flexibility. The possibilities to achieve a compact should be continuously sought out, and this should be used as a lever and an incentive in the broader international dialogue on the developments in the conflict-affected country.

17. Kjeksrud, S., & Vermeij, L. (2017). Protecting governments from insurgencies: the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mali. In C. d. Coning, C. Aoi, & J. Karlsrud (Eds.), *UN Peacekeeping Doctrine in a New Era* (pp. 227–245). Routledge.

18. NB: Geopolitical shifts in Council means that the 'sticks' (e.g. targeted sanctions, arms embargoes, etc) have gone away. Further, some countries are too geostrategically important to ever really be denied aid (e.g. Mali).

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