

BACKGROUND PAPER

Building Networked UN Peace Operations



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.

Challenges Forum consists of Partners from:

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Networked peace operations offer one response to political and financial pressure facing the UN. However, they are not a solution in themselves. Distributing tasks may reduce the risk of duplication, but without sufficient coordination, it can also risk fragmenting political strategy, diffusing responsibility and shifting costs to UN agencies. A credible model should include regional organisations and partners, rather than remain an internal UN exercise. For such a model to work, there must be a clear centre of strategic coherence and accountability. The UN should retain political direction, impartial presence and strategic oversight, while negotiated agreements allocate tasks, resources and responsibility. The test is not whether missions become smaller, but whether a networked model can deliver the mandate more coherently, accountably and effectively than existing arrangements.

The United Nations (UN) is indispensable not because it routinely resolves international divisions, but because it provides common rules and institutions through which they can be expressed and, at times, managed. Its near-universal membership and standing capacity for collective action make it unique. Yet universality is also a constraint: disagreement within the organisation reflects divisions among its members. Reform should therefore begin with the UN's political purpose and limitations, while recognising that institutional capacities dismantled in the current political climate would be difficult, if not impossible, to rebuild.

This tension is especially pressing for peace operations, which face declining political support, financial pressure, contested host-state consent, and conflicts poorly suited to established approaches. These pressures have shaped a wider reform debate reflected in *Our Common Agenda*¹, *A New Agenda for Peace*² and the independent study on *The Future of Peacekeeping, New Models, and Related Capabilities*.³ The UN80

report *Shifting Paradigms: United to Deliver* proposed a move towards “networked multidimensional operations”.⁴ The Secretary-General's *Review on the Future of All Forms of United Nations Peace Operations* builds on that proposal.⁵

The Review addresses two strands relevant to a networked approach: the delegation of programmatic tasks within the UN system and partnerships with regional organisations and other actors. Yet it stops short of connecting them into a single operational concept.

This paper argues that a genuinely networked model must integrate these two strands into a single approach encompassing the UN system, regional organisations and other partners. It asks how responsibilities should be allocated and governed across autonomous actors, how political and strategic coherence can be maintained, and which functions and institutional qualities should remain with the UN.

1. United Nations. 2021. *Our Common Agenda: Report of the Secretary-General*. A/75/982. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/75/982>;

2. United Nations. 2023. *A New Agenda for Peace*. Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 9. <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/our-common-agenda-policy-brief-new-agenda-for-peace-en.pdf>;

3. Wane, El-Ghassim; Williams, Paul D.; and Ai Kihara-Hunt. 2024. *The Future of Peacekeeping, New Models, and Related Capabilities*

4. United Nations. 2025. *Shifting Paradigms: United to Deliver*. Report of the Secretary-General. A/80/392. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/80/392>

5. United Nations. 2026. *Review on the Future of All Forms of United Nations Peace Operations*. Report of the Secretary-General. A/80/798-S/2026/600. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/80/798>

1. From delegation to a networked approach

Delegating selected civilian programmes to other UN entities could reduce duplication, draw on specialist expertise and established country presence, and sustain engagement after a mission closes. However, these gains are not automatic. Delegation could also shift costs to agencies that are themselves dependent on voluntary funding, disconnect human rights and peacebuilding activities from broader political strategy, marginalise gender expertise and obscure who is responsible for what.

Jenna Russo argues that not every peacebuilding task must be implemented by a peace operation. She nevertheless warns that narrower mandates can undermine critical human-rights, gender and climate work, while delegation can disrupt peacebuilding during transitions when other UN entities depend on mission funding.⁶ Efficiency must therefore be judged across the operation as a whole: whether the arrangement advances its political purpose, sustains essential capacities through transition and accounts for the full institutional and financial costs. A smaller mission budget is not, by itself, evidence of greater efficiency.

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Nor is "best placed" self-explanatory. Tasks should be allocated according to an actor's comparative advantage, including mandate and expertise, local acceptance and access in the conflict setting, operational capacity, sustained presence, predictable funding, consistency with the agreed political strategy, and willingness to

meet common reporting and accountability requirements. The appropriate actor may be a UN agency, the peace operation itself or an external partner. Its role must be defined through arrangements that preserve coordination and strategic coherence.

When tasks are delegated to UN agencies in a country, no single official necessarily has authority over their collective implementation. The Resident Coordinator, who coordinates the UN agencies operating in the country, plays a central role in bringing their work together, while agencies retain authority over their respective mandates. The Head of Mission leads the peace operation but likewise has no authority over those agencies. A networked model must therefore specify who sets priorities, resolves disagreements and reports on results. Peacebuilding actors, including the Peacebuilding and Peace Support Office and programmes financed by the Peacebuilding Fund, as well as UN human rights bodies, should help design these arrangements from the outset rather than receive tasks after key decisions have been made.

The Review discusses regional partnerships largely alongside its model of networked implementation.⁷ In practice, they belong within it. Regional organisations may bring political legitimacy, good offices, local knowledge and leverage with conflict parties, although their members may also have direct interests in a conflict.⁸ A broader networked approach should therefore specify how tasks, authority and accountability are divided between the UN and regional partners. Resolution 2719 offers one possible, but contested, route for connecting UN financing and standards with AU operational responsibility. Its application depends on case-by-case Security Council agreement, and it does not provide a general model for networked operations.

6. Russo, Jenna. 2026. "Five Themes from the Secretary-General's Review of UN Peace Operations." IPI Global Observatory, 25 August. <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2026/08/review-of-un-peace-operations/>

7. United Nations, Review on UN Peace Operations, UN Doc. A/80/798-S/2026/600, paras. 37 and 63.

8. Tadesse, Bitania. 2026. "What Is the Vision for the UN-AU Partnership in the Secretary-General's Peace Operations Review?" IPI Global Observatory, 27 August. <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2026/08/vision-for-un-au-partnership/>. Albrecht, Peter. 2026. "Making the Case for Peacekeeping as Proxy Intervention." *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 20(3): 334–354. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2026.2628291>.

The same governance considerations arise in relation to other independent partners, including financial institutions, donors, coalitions and civil society organisations. Because the UN cannot direct them, cooperation will need to be grounded in negotiated responsibilities, clear incentives, access to shared analysis and resources, and participation in reviewing the common strategy. Their different relationships with conflict parties may provide political leverage unavailable to the UN alone, but their interests and influence should remain transparent.

This raises a broader governance question. The Security Council remains the principal authority for mandating UN peace operations. Yet, a mandate does not by itself determine how a network of autonomous actors will be governed. The Secretary-General's proposal establishes distributed implementation as a principle, but does not specify who allocates tasks, coordinates participants or bears responsibility in practice.⁹

2. Defining the UN's distinctive role

A networked approach raises a fundamental question: if responsibilities are distributed across different actors, which functions should the UN peace operation continue to perform, and which institutional qualities must it preserve? Peace operations cannot manufacture political settlements or reconstruct social relations from outside. When they present particular institutional models as universal solutions, they become intrusive and weaken the consent on which they depend. A more credible role for UN peace operations is to create and preserve the political space in which locally grounded settlements can be negotiated, tested and sustained, while cultivating the relationships and consent needed to operate effectively. Gender norms shape who can enter that space and whether the security priorities of women, men, girls and boys are recognised.

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This is not normative agnosticism: the UN should not support arrangements that institutionalise violence, exclusion or violations of international law. Peace and security, human rights, the rule of law, and economic and social development remain its purposes. These principles are not self-interpreting and may be understood and applied differently across contexts, although not without limits. They should not be used to prescribe a single, externally defined model of political order. Experience with externally designed settlements calls for political modesty: the UN should uphold the principles underpinning its mandate without claiming to determine the final political order.

Three institutional qualities should guide decisions about what remains with the UN in a networked operation. First, near-universal membership gives it unusual convening power and a distinctive basis for legitimacy. It can bring conflict parties, neighbouring states, regional organisations, major powers, countries contributing troops and police, and donors into a shared framework. Yet the breadth that underpins this legitimacy also makes agreement difficult, turning universality into both a source of authority and a constraint on collective action.

Second, the UN has an institutional basis for impartiality because it is not formally the instrument of a single state or bloc. Universality does not guarantee impartiality, nor does the UN hold a monopoly on it. Impartiality is established through conduct: consistent application of the mandate and international standards, transparent decisions and continued engagement across political divisions. Experiences in Mali, the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo illustrate the consequences of perceived alignment with a government or coercive campaign, including the contraction of an operation's political space.

9. United Nations, Review on UN Peace Operations, UN Doc. A/80/798-S/2026/600, paragraphs 37, 40(a) and 66(e)

Third, institutional reach and continuity allow the UN to connect field engagement to regional and global diplomacy, political and security measures to humanitarian, human-rights, peacebuilding and development work, and immediate intervention to engagement after a mission closes. These qualities are not automatic advantages. They provide benchmarks for judging whether a networked arrangement preserves coherence across political levels, fields of work and phases of engagement rather than dispersing responsibilities in ways that create new institutional and political disconnects.

3. Governing the network

A networked operation requires a UN core that retains overall political direction, mediation and convening, impartial monitoring and verification, and coordination across political, humanitarian, human-rights, peacebuilding and development work. This does not mean that military or police functions, protection of civilians, civilian programmes or technical tasks must be transferred to others. These functions would remain with UN peace operations when the mandate, consent and capabilities make the UN the appropriate actor. Elsewhere, other UN entities or external partners may be better placed.

Governance begins with the Security Council establishing political objectives, authorised tasks and reporting expectations. The Secretary-General should translate the mandate into negotiated implementation agreements with the best-placed actors. These agreements should allocate responsibilities, authority and resources, define reporting lines, provide for joint and gender-sensitive analysis, and set common standards for conduct, human rights and protection. They should specify who is accountable for decisions and harm, how allegations will be investigated and how those harmed can obtain remedy. They should also set conditions for revising or suspending support.

Partners retain operational control over their own personnel and activities and remain accountable to their governing bodies, while participating in agreed arrangements for coordination, information-sharing and review. The Secretary-General should report to the Security Council on implementation of the mandate as a whole. This would preserve organisational autonomy without fragmenting political oversight of the wider operation.

UN support to a partner-led operation does not invariably sacrifice impartiality, but it can do so when the partner is a conflict party or the UN becomes indistinguishable from its political project. Support should therefore depend on the actor, purpose and degree of operational involvement. The UN must retain an independent political and monitoring role, clearly separate responsibilities, apply human-rights due diligence, disclose the conditions attached to support and be able to suspend it.

Resources must follow delegated responsibilities; otherwise, networking transfers risk rather than securing continuity. The model is also difficult to retrofit once budgets, posts and incentives have formed around an established mission. It is most credible when designed for a new operation or during a planned transition or drawdown, before capacities and financing disappear.

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Finally, the test of networked operations is not whether they make the UN smaller, but whether they enable peace operations to fulfil their political purpose under increasingly difficult political and financial conditions. A networked model should concentrate the UN's role on what its institutional position distinctively enables: convening divided actors, preserving an impartial political presence and sustaining engagement across institutions and over time. Distributed implementation is worthwhile only if it strengthens these functions and enables the wider peace and security system to adapt without sacrificing political coherence or accountability.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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