Challenges
Annual Forum
2026



# Turning the Tide: Building Momentum for Peace Operations in a Demanding World

# Key Takeaways

The 2026 Challenges Annual Forum (CAF26) was hosted by the Permanent Missions of Sweden, Pakistan, and Denmark to the United Nations (UN) in New York on 8 October 2026. It provided a platform for some 200 Challenges Forum partners and key stakeholders, including representatives of Member States, UN, regional organisations, think tanks, research institutions, and civil society, to discuss the challenging political and operational environment for peace operations, and how to build renewed momentum behind them.

CAF26 followed the long-anticipated report of the Secretary-General on the Review on the future of all forms of UN peace operations and took place against the backdrop of a severe financial crisis and the selection of the next Secretary-General. Across a pre-Forum discussion on the Review, three panel discussions, and a post-Forum session on networked peace operations, there was broad support for adapting and strengthening UN peace operations to respond to increasingly complex conflict environments, including rising interstate conflict and persistently high levels of battle-related deaths.

## Strengthening political solutions

Many of the challenges faced by peace operations are fundamentally political in nature. Peace operations, the Secretariat, and the Secretary-General in particular, can and should play a more proactive role in building political solutions, with sustained support from Member States.

- **Leadership, trust, and calculated risk:** A prevailing culture of risk aversion constrains the Secretariat's ability to analyse conflicts, plan effectively and develop options for UN engagement. The next Secretary-General should champion peace operations and promote responsible, calculated risk taking. This requires prioritising political engagement from the outset. Member States

should provide the trust and space needed for the Secretary-General to exercise strategic leadership and offer candid advice.

- **Maintaining norms and principles:** At a time of diverging views among Member States on the form and function of peace operations, flexibility and pragmatism are essential to finding viable approaches, including for UN missions supporting non-UN operations. However, these must not come at the expense of fundamental UN norms and principles, including impartiality. Member States and the Secretariat must also be prepared to say no when a proposed deployment would require compromising these principles.

- **Protection of civilians:** Protection of civilians is often central to maintaining the credibility of peace operations and their ability to pursue political solutions. Yet delivering on physical protection mandates can be particularly challenging when missions face severe resource and capability constraints. Member States and the Secretariat should set realistic expectations, align mandates with available resources and capabilities, and maintain the political support needed for missions to deliver on their protection mandates while supporting political solutions.

## Aligning mandates with resources and capabilities

Peace operations must be understood first and foremost as instruments for the political resolution of conflict. Mandated tasks and short-term objectives should therefore remain anchored in a broader political strategy, with priorities and approaches regularly reassessed and adapted as contexts evolve. Current budget cuts and funding shortfalls pose a particular challenge. Improving efficiency and effectiveness through reform is necessary and legitimate, including to sustain domestic political support from contributing Members States' taxpayers and accountability. However, drastic expenditure cuts in response to unforeseen funding shortfalls risk disproportionately undermining missions' operational capabilities and their ability to deliver on their mandates, regardless of their type or configuration.

- **Maintaining readiness:** Over decades, the UN has built up the infrastructure, expertise, policies and doctrine needed to plan, deploy and finance peace operations. This capacity must be preserved to ensure that peace operations remain available as part of the international peace and security toolkit. Without credible peace operations capacity, the Security Council loses much of its ability to translate decisions into presence and influence on the ground.

- **Mandate renewals as strategic opportunities:** Peace operations mandates should be focused, realistic and adaptable, and anchored in a desired political end state. Mandate renewals should therefore be informed by an honest assessment of the political strategy, host state cooperation and mission performance. They should serve as strategic opportunities for Member States and the Secretariat to reassess priorities and reposition missions in support of political processes.

- **Gap between mandates and resources:** Mandates, resources, and expectations must be better aligned, and missions should be given the flexibility to better adapt to changing circumstances. This requires a strategic direction built on delegated authority, calculated risk-taking and trust between the Security Council, the Secretariat and missions.

- **Safety, security, and new threats:** Technological developments are outpacing mission capabilities, affecting both mandate implementation and the safety and security of peacekeepers. Missions need access to new technologies and capabilities to implement their mandates more effectively and counter actors seeking to undermine them.

## Managing consent as a dynamic political relationship

Consent is not a binary condition. Rather than being static, it is a dynamic political relationship that must be actively managed over time to foster cooperation and enable mandate implementation. Maintaining consent and cooperation with parties to a conflict is therefore as much a political and strategic challenge as it is an operational one. Moreover, consent is not a one-sided arrangement. It entails both rights and responsibilities, involving the Security Council, the Secretariat, host states and peace operations themselves.

- **Consent of the parties:** Consent is a cooperative undertaking, and mandate implementation is a shared responsibility between a peace operation and its host state. However, consent and cooperation must be fostered not only with host states but also with the parties to the conflict.

- **Inclusion and accountability:** Beyond maintaining the consent and cooperation of conflict parties, missions must build and sustain legitimacy from the ground up through engagement with local populations, including communities, traditional authorities, women and youth. Community perception tracking and civil society monitoring can help identify early signs of declining trust and consent.

- **Strategic compact:** A light, flexible and incentive-based compact could help manage consent and cooperation by setting out mutual commitments and responsibilities. Such a compact must not become a means of imposing preconditions for deployment or give any party an effective veto over the capabilities or strategies required by a peace operation.

- **Living political process:** Any compact should be treated as an ongoing political process, rather than a one-off agreement, allowing parties to assess changing circumstances, address friction and revisit commitments. Member States and the Secretariat could explore piloting such a compact through dialogue with an interested host state.

## Planning and managing sustainable transitions

Too often, political and financial pressures drive mission drawdowns and closures despite continued conflict and fragility. Transitions should instead be understood as deliberate reconfigurations of the UN's presence and toolbox, guided by sustainable progress against agreed benchmarks. A long-term transition perspective, including different pathways and operational options, should therefore be built into political processes and mission mandates from the outset.

- **Integrated planning:** A stronger planning culture is needed across the Secretariat, supported by adequately resourced analysis and planning capacities that work across UN pillars and entities. Planning for transitions must begin from the outset and meaningfully involve partners, including host country institutions, UN country teams, regional organisations, and civil society. Collaborative planning should underpin the entire process.

- **Handover of results and tasks:** Host state institutions and partners, including UN country teams and regional organisations, often assume responsibilities following a peace operation's departure. Transferring responsibilities to actors without the necessary capacity risks reversing hard won gains and a relapse into violent conflict. The Secretariat and Member States should ensure that transferred responsibilities are matched by the necessary capacities and resources, rather than allowing drawdowns to create gaps that receiving actors cannot fill.

- **Assessing transitions beyond the limitations of reporting:** A mission's physical presence affects both mandate implementation and situational awareness. A greater presence can improve protection for local communities while strengthening monitoring and reporting. When mission footprints are reduced, declining reports of incidents do not necessarily indicate improved conditions; they may instead reflect reduced monitoring capacity. Transitions should therefore be based on comprehensive assessments of conditions on the ground and the mission's ability to monitor them, rather than reported incident levels alone.

## Making networked approaches work

Networked approaches offer opportunities to draw on the complementary capabilities of UN entities, regional organisations and other partners to support mandate implementation and facilitate transitions by reducing the number of activities requiring handover after mission exit. However, ensuring coherence across different actors, while maintaining clear responsibilities and accountability, remains a key challenge.

- **Looking beyond the UN system:** Many partners, both inside and outside the UN system, are present in countries before, during and after the deployment of UN peace operations. The Secretariat should look beyond the UN system to identify potential partners for networked approaches,

including regional organisations, host state institutions, non-governmental organisations and the private sector.

- **Operationalizing networked approaches:** Networked approaches could help address current political and operational challenges, improve mission efficiency and strengthen mandate implementation. Much of the necessary expertise already exists. The priority now is to jointly develop practical approaches with relevant UN stakeholders and external partners. This requires clarity on shared responsibilities, accountability and reporting.

- **Maintaining political coherence:** Networked approaches must remain anchored in common political objectives. The head of mission should retain strategic oversight and responsibility for coordinating different UN actors' contributions to the agreed strategy. Activities that may appear technical or programmatic, including gender equality, security sector reform and local governance, can have significant political implications and should remain connected to the mission's political mandate and engagement.

## Next steps

The incoming Secretary-General's first six months in office offer a critical window to shape priorities for UN peace operations and advance implementation of the Review. Seizing this opportunity will require strategic leadership, proactive engagement by the Secretariat and sustained political support from Member States around shared priorities.

The Challenges Annual Forum 2027 could provide an early opportunity to take stock of progress and support the translation of the Review's recommendations into practice. The priority is to turn the momentum generated into concrete action and strengthen peace operations as an effective instrument of multilateral action for international peace and security.

### ABOUT THE EVENT

The 2026 Challenges Annual Forum (#CAF26NewYork) explored 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 United Nations Secretary-General, the Forum examined 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 was 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. The Challenges Forum International Secretariat is hosted by FBA – the Swedish Agency for Peace and Security.

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