

Forum: Political Committee

Issue: Enhancing state sovereignty and civilian protection in UN Peacekeeping Missions

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Introduction

Since the United Nations deployed its first peacekeeping mission in 1948, the institution has evolved from a tool of ceasefire observation into a multidimensional instrument of conflict management. Yet, this evolution has brought with it growing tensions between two foundational principles of international law: the sovereign equality of states and the imperative to protect civilians from mass atrocities. In an era of increasingly complex intrastate conflicts, UN peacekeeping missions are regularly deployed into environments where host state governments are either unwilling or unable to protect their own populations, giving rise to difficult questions about the scope, legitimacy, and limits of international intervention.

The doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), endorsed at the 2005 World Summit, attempted to reconcile state sovereignty with civilian protection by reframing sovereignty not merely as a right but as a responsibility. However, the doctrine's application in Libya in 2011—and its subsequent invocation to justify regime change—generated widespread backlash among states in the Global South, who argued that R2P had been weaponized as a pretext for regime change. This controversy has deepened divisions in the Security Council and cast a shadow over subsequent peacekeeping mandates.

Today, UN peacekeeping missions such as MINUSMA in Mali, MONUSCO in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the now-concluded MINUSCA in the Central African Republic face simultaneous pressure from host governments asserting sovereignty over their territories and from civil society demanding meaningful civilian protection. As these missions operate in increasingly hostile environments, understanding the structural tensions at the heart of UN peacekeeping—and identifying mechanisms to address them—has become an urgent priority for the international community.

Definition of Key Terms

State Sovereignty: State sovereignty refers to the supreme authority of a state to govern its territory and conduct its affairs without external interference. Under the UN Charter, sovereignty is a foundational principle of the international order, enshrined in Article 2(1), which affirms the sovereign equality of all member states (UN Charter).

Civilian Protection: Civilian protection, within the context of UN peacekeeping, refers to all activities aimed at ensuring the safety and dignity of civilians at risk of physical violence and human rights violations during armed conflict, irrespective of their nationality or the identity of the perpetrators (UN DPKO).

Responsibility to Protect (R2P): The Responsibility to Protect is an international norm established at the 2005 World Summit stipulating that states bear the primary responsibility to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity, and that the international community has a responsibility to act when states manifestly fail to do so (UN General Assembly, A/RES/60/1).

Host State Consent: Host state consent is the principle that UN peacekeeping missions require the agreement of the host government to operate within its territory. Consent is considered a foundational pillar of traditional UN peacekeeping alongside impartiality and non-use of force except in self-defense (UN Peacekeeping Principles).

Rules of Engagement (ROE): Rules of engagement are directives governing the circumstances and limitations under which UN peacekeeping forces may initiate or continue the use of force. They define the boundaries of lawful action for peacekeepers in the field and are derived from the mission's mandate (UN Department of Safety and Security).

Peacekeeping Mandate: A peacekeeping mandate is the formal authorization granted by the UN Security Council outlining the objectives, functions, and scope of a peacekeeping operation, typically under Chapter VI or Chapter VII of the UN Charter (UN Security Council).

Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA): A Status of Forces Agreement is a bilateral or multilateral treaty between a host government and the troop-contributing nations or international organization governing the legal status, privileges, and immunities of foreign military personnel operating on the host state's territory (UN Legal Office).

General Overview

The Evolution of UN Peacekeeping

UN peacekeeping has undergone three broad phases of development. During the Cold War, missions were primarily observer operations, monitoring ceasefires between state parties with the explicit consent of those involved. The end of the Cold War unlocked the Security Council and gave rise to a second, more interventionist phase in the 1990s—culminating in missions in Somalia, Bosnia, and Rwanda. The catastrophic failures of these missions—particularly the genocide in Rwanda and the massacre at Srebrenica—demonstrated that traditional peacekeeping tools were grossly inadequate for intrastate conflicts involving deliberate violence against civilians.

The third phase, beginning in the 2000s, is characterized by multidimensional peacekeeping mandates explicitly tasked with civilian protection. Missions such as MONUSCO in the DRC have received Chapter VII authorizations permitting the use of force to protect civilians. However, the translation of these broad mandates into effective action has been complicated by persistent gaps in resources, political will, and coherent command structures. Host state relations have also deteriorated in several cases, with governments expelling missions or restricting their movement, citing violations of sovereignty.

Sovereignty vs. Civilian Protection: The Core Tension

The structural tension at the heart of modern peacekeeping is rooted in the competing logics of state-centric and human-centric international law. Westphalian sovereignty holds that states are the primary subjects of international law and that their territorial integrity is inviolable. Human security norms, by contrast, locate the referent object of security in individual human beings rather than states. UN peacekeeping missions are caught between these two frameworks, required simultaneously to uphold the host state's authority and to protect its citizens from that same authority when necessary.

This tension has been exacerbated by the practice of deploying peacekeepers into contexts of ongoing civil war, where host governments may themselves be parties to violence against civilians. In such situations, impartiality—a foundational peacekeeping principle—becomes difficult or impossible to maintain. Missions in the Central African Republic, South Sudan, and the DRC have all faced accusations of favoring government forces, thereby undermining their neutrality and local legitimacy.

Structural Challenges

Several structural challenges compound these tensions. First, the financing and composition of peacekeeping missions often reflect geopolitical interests rather than operational necessity, with major powers exercising disproportionate influence over mandate design while contributing relatively few troops. Second, the reliance on troop-contributing countries (TCCs) with varying levels of training, equipment, and commitment to civilian protection results in inconsistent performance. Third, the absence of a standing UN military force means that missions must be assembled ad hoc, impairing rapid deployment and unity of command. Fourth, accountability mechanisms for peacekeeping conduct—including the deeply troubling record of

sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers—remain weak, damaging the legitimacy of operations and the communities they are mandated to protect.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

United Nations Secretariat and DPKO

The UN Secretariat, through the Department of Peace Operations (DPO, formerly DPKO), designs and administers peacekeeping missions under mandates granted by the Security Council. The Secretariat has increasingly advocated for the primacy of civilian protection and has developed frameworks such as the Protection of Civilians Policy (2015) and the Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) initiative to strengthen mission coherence. Nevertheless, the Secretariat remains constrained by member states' political and financial decisions.

Permanent Members of the UN Security Council

The five permanent members of the Security Council hold veto power over peacekeeping mandates and have divergent views on sovereignty and intervention. The United States and France have generally been more supportive of robust civilian protection mandates, while China and Russia have consistently emphasized non-interference and host state consent as inviolable principles. This divergence frequently results in lowest-common-denominator mandates that are vague or insufficiently resourced, undermining operational effectiveness.

African Union and Regional Organizations

The African Union (AU) has emerged as a significant actor in African peace operations, deploying missions in Somalia (AMISOM/ATMIS), Sudan, and elsewhere. The AU has developed its own peacekeeping frameworks, including the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), which take a more permissive stance on intervention to stop mass atrocities. Collaboration and burden-sharing between the UN and AU has been an important area of policy development, though funding and capacity gaps remain significant challenges.

Troop-Contributing Countries

States such as Bangladesh, India, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Pakistan are among the largest contributors of troops and police to UN peacekeeping missions. These countries have a direct interest in the design of missions, Rules of Engagement, and accountability mechanisms. Many TCCs from the Global South are also vocal advocates for the primacy of host state consent, reflecting their own historical experiences of colonial intervention and their broader foreign policy commitments to non-interference.

Host States

Host state governments have increasingly pushed back against peacekeeping missions they perceive as encroaching on sovereign prerogatives. Mali expelled MINUSMA in 2023 after accusing the mission of complicity with rebel forces and of undermining national sovereignty. The DRC has periodically restricted MONUSCO's freedom of movement and demanded accelerated drawdown of the mission. These developments reflect a broader pattern of host state assertiveness and underscore the fragility of consent-based peacekeeping frameworks in politically contested environments.

Timeline of Events

29 May 1948	The United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) is established as the first UN peacekeeping mission, monitoring ceasefires in the Middle East.
November 1956	The first armed UN peacekeeping force, UNEF I, is deployed to the Sinai following the Suez Crisis.

April 1994	The Rwandan genocide begins; UNAMIR's mandate prevents effective intervention, resulting in the deaths of an estimated 800,000 people.
July 1995	The Srebrenica massacre occurs despite the UN declaring it a 'safe area'; approximately 8,000 Bosniak men and boys are killed.
September 2000	The Brahimi Report is released, calling for fundamental reform of UN peacekeeping including robust mandates and realistic resource commitments.
September 2005	The 2005 World Summit Outcome adopts the Responsibility to Protect doctrine, establishing a new international norm.
March 2011	The Security Council authorizes a no-fly zone over Libya (Resolution 1973), cited as the first invocation of R2P; subsequent regime change generates controversy.
July 2016	A major protection failure in Juba, South Sudan, occurs when UNMISS forces fail to protect civilians during targeted violence.
March 2019	The Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) initiative is launched by the Secretary-General to improve the effectiveness and accountability of UN missions.
June 2023	Mali's military government demands the withdrawal of MINUSMA, citing violations of sovereignty; the mission ends in December 2023.

UN Involvement

The United Nations is the central institutional actor in this issue area, deploying peacekeeping missions through the Security Council and managing them through the Department of Peace Operations and the Department of Operational Support. Key UN bodies and documents relevant to this topic include the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the UN Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations (C-34), and the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS).

The Secretary-General has played a significant role in norm development, issuing reports on civilian protection, accountability, and mission design. The Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP) obliges the UN to withhold support from national security forces credibly accused of serious human rights violations, representing an important attempt to reconcile UN assistance with protection imperatives. Nevertheless, enforcement of the HRDDP has been inconsistent.

Relevant UN Documents

United Nations Charter, Articles 2(1), 2(4), 24, 42, 51 (1945)
 Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations (Brahimi Report), A/55/305-S/2000/809 (2000)
 2005 World Summit Outcome Document, A/RES/60/1 (2005)
 Secretary-General's Policy on Protection of Civilians in UN Peacekeeping (2015)
 Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) Declaration of Shared Commitments on UN Peacekeeping Operations (2018)
 Security Council Resolution 2436 (2018) on peacekeeping performance and accountability

Treaties and Events

The Convention on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel (1994)

This treaty obligates states to take measures to protect UN peacekeepers and associated personnel operating in their territory. It reflects the growing danger faced by peacekeepers and represents an important component of the legal framework governing mission safety. However, its provisions do not resolve the broader question of what peacekeepers may do to protect civilians when host state consent is withdrawn or contested.

The 2005 World Summit and Responsibility to Protect

The adoption of R2P at the World Summit marked a paradigm shift in the international normative framework, establishing that sovereignty entails responsibility and that the international community may act through the Security Council when states manifestly fail to protect their populations. However, the doctrine has proven deeply contested in practice, particularly following its application in Libya and the subsequent regime collapse. Its selective and politically conditioned application has led many states to question whether R2P serves as a genuine protective norm or as a tool of geopolitical manipulation.

Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) Initiative (2019)

Launched by Secretary-General António Guterres, the A4P initiative seeks to improve the performance, accountability, and safety of UN peacekeeping through a framework of shared commitments between member states, TCCs, and the Secretariat. The initiative covers areas including political engagement, protection of civilians, performance, accountability, and the safety of peacekeepers. While it represents an important attempt to reform peacekeeping governance, its effectiveness depends on sustained political will from member states.

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

Prior reform efforts have produced mixed results. The Brahimi Report of 2000 generated significant institutional changes, including the expansion of the DPKO and the development of clearer mandate frameworks. However, its core recommendation—that the Security Council must provide missions with sufficient resources to implement robust mandates—has not been consistently followed. Subsequent missions have repeatedly been deployed with inadequate personnel, logistics, and financial support.

The development of civilian protection frameworks and the HRDDP represented important normative advances but have suffered from inconsistent implementation. Host state resistance to protection activities has grown rather than diminished, as evidenced by the Mali and DRC cases. The structural problem of accountability for peacekeeping misconduct—particularly sexual exploitation and abuse—remains largely unresolved, with disciplinary authority resting with TCCs who have often been slow to act.

The broader normative project of R2P has stalled following the Libya controversy. Efforts to develop a more consensus-based interpretation of R2P, such as Brazil's 'Responsibility While Protecting' proposal, have not been formally adopted. This normative stalemate has left peacekeeping missions operating in a contested legal and political space, without clear guidance on how to balance state sovereignty against civilian protection in practice.

Possible Solutions

Addressing the tensions between sovereignty and civilian protection in UN peacekeeping will require action at multiple levels. At the normative level, member states should work toward a more precise and consensual definition of the thresholds that trigger enhanced civilian protection measures, building on R2P while addressing the sovereignty concerns that have led to its contestation. This may involve institutionalizing clearer criteria for Security Council decision-making on protection mandates, reducing the scope for selective application.

At the operational level, the establishment of performance benchmarks and independent monitoring mechanisms—beyond those currently provided by the OIOS—could improve accountability and mission effectiveness. Strengthening the training standards for TCCs, particularly in areas of civilian protection and human rights law, would improve the consistency of mission performance. The introduction of joint UN-TCC accountability tribunals for serious misconduct, including sexual exploitation and abuse, could address the current impunity gap.

Improving host state relations requires a more systematic approach to political engagement, including the early involvement of host governments in mandate design and the development of clear exit strategies linked to measurable benchmarks. Greater investment in national capacity-building—so that host states can progressively assume responsibility for civilian protection—would align peacekeeping more closely with long-term sovereignty goals. Regional organizations such as the AU should be more consistently resourced and empowered to take the lead in contexts where UN-host state relations have broken down, with the UN providing financial and logistical support under hybrid arrangements.

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