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The future of UN peace operations: Principled adaptation through phases of contraction, moderation, and renewal

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the future of UN peace operations through a complexity theory lens. In the short-term peacekeeping will have to adapt to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the fall-out of the Trump presidency. In the medium-term peacekeeping will go through a phase of uncertainty and turbulence due to geopolitical power shifts in the global order. In the longer-term peacekeeping will have to adapt to a new multipolar global order characterized by coexistence, and a changing security landscape shaped by, among others, climate change, urbanization, and new technologies. Throughout these contraction, moderation, and adjustment phases, UN peacekeeping is likely to be guided by a principled adaptive approach, that allows it to adapt to the realities of the moment whilst staying true to its core form and identity. As a result, UN peacekeeping is likely to remain one of the most visible symbols of global governance and international cooperation.

KEYWORDS Peacekeeping; COVID-19; stabilization; adaptation; complexity

In this article I will consider how UN peace operations may evolve over the short (next 5 years), medium (5-15 years), and longer-term (beyond 15 years). In particular, I will analyze how peacekeeping operations, the UN Secretariat that deploy them, and the UN members states that authorize, contribute personnel and equipment, and pay for these operations, are likely to adapt to setbacks and shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic; the economic recession that will follow in the wake of COVID-19; slow onset but tectonic shifts in geopolitical power relations, such as the rise of China, and a changing security landscape due to, amongst others, climate change, urbanization, and digitalization.

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In order to analyze how the international system of states, multilateral organizations like the United Nations, and institutions like peacekeeping respond and adapt to change, I will employ a number of insights from complexity theory (de Coning, 2020b; Hunt, 2020). Complexity theory provides us with a theoretical framework for analyzing how complex systems, like societies, organizations, and institutions, function under stress, including how they react to turbulence and disruptions in their environment (Brusset et al., 2016; Kavalski, 2015). Complexity theory helps us understand how social systems respond to external stimuli, and how their resilience and adaptive capacity influence the likelihood that they will maintain functioning despite significant changes in their operating environment (Folke, 2006).

Complexity theory holds that uncertainty and unpredictability are inherent characteristics of complex systems (Cilliers, 1998). This uncertainty is an intrinsic quality of complex systems, not a result of imperfect knowledge, inadequate planning, or implementation (Popolo, 2011). The optimal way to effectively manage such uncertainty is to engage in an adaptive process that is emergent from experience and experimentation, and that facilitates the co-evolution of UN peace operations with changes in the global order and systemic shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic (de Coning, 2020a).

Principled adaptation refers to a process of evolutionary change, in response to transformations in a system's environment where the adaptive process is guided by a set of principles that help the system to maintain its core identity and function (Folke, 2006). In the UN peacekeeping context, these are the core doctrinal principles of consent, impartiality, and minimum use of force (de Coning et al., 2017). Peter (2019) argues that UN peacekeeping has remained true to its core principles, and maintained its core identity, despite significant adaptations since it was conceived 73 years ago. During the post-Cold War period peacekeeping evolved from a limited conflict management tool to a comprehensive conflict resolution instrument. With the contemporary focus on protection of civilians and stabilization, it has now started to swing back to conflict management (Peter, 2019, p. 40). Over the course of this journey the principles of peacekeeping has been interpreted differently, but the principles themselves, and the core blue helmet identity of UN peacekeeping, has been remarkably resilient (de Coning & Peter, 2019).

Resilience is a concept that enhances our understanding of how institutions like UN peacekeeping react to shocks, setbacks, and slow onset but significant shifts in its environment (Chandler, 2014). In this context, resilience refers to the capacity of an institution to absorb and adapt to shocks and change whilst sustaining an acceptable level of function, structure, and identity under pressure (Dahlberg, 2015; Joseph, 2018). Resilience in this sense can be seen as persistence, but it may involve both adaptations and

transformations, where transformability is the capacity to cross thresholds into new trajectories (Folke et al., 2010). I will argue that throughout the forthcoming short-term contraction, medium-term moderation, and longer-term renewal phases, UN peacekeeping is likely to be guided by a principled adaptive approach, that will enable it to adapt and transform to the realities of the moment whilst remaining resilient and staying true to its core form and identity. As a result, UN peacekeeping is likely to maintain, throughout this period of transition, its core role, function, and identity as one of the most established and visible symbols of global governance and international cooperation (Coleman & Williams, 2021).

Short-term contraction: Adapting to disruption caused by COVID-19 and the Trump presidency

In the short-term (next 5 years), UN peacekeeping operations will have to continue to adapt to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the fall-out of the Trump presidency. According to a financing model based on GDP, which the United States have negotiated and agreed too, the United States should contribute approximately 28% of the UN peacekeeping budget. The second largest contributor is China with approximately 15%. The Trump administration decided not to pay more than 25% of the UN peacekeeping budget and to withhold some of its contributions to the UN's regular budget, and as a result the United States has accumulated an arrears of almost \$2 billion dollars by the end of 2020 (Lieberman, 2021). This has caused a cash crunch in the UN Secretariat that has negatively affected peacekeeping operations. The net effect is that those countries that contribute the bulk of the UN's peacekeepers (e.g., Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, and Rwanda), are in effect carrying a significant share of the financial burden as the UN is unable to reimburse them within a reasonable period for the costs they have incurred (Williams, 2018).

In addition, the Trump administration used the key role of the United States in the UNSC and 5th Committee of the General Assembly to reduce the overall UN peacekeeping budget by scaling down the size and scope of current missions, and by bringing missions to a close as soon as possible. As a result, between 2015 and 2019 the Trump administration contributed to a 21% contraction of UN peacekeeping expenditure, amounting to approximately \$2 billion, which resulted in a 20.5% reduction in uniformed and a 24% reduction in civilian personnel (Coleman, 2021). Complexity theory shows that due to the importance of initial conditions and the influence of path dependencies, flows like the financing of UN peacekeeping, tend to continue for some time even after steps have been taken to interrupt them. In this context the implication is that even if the new Biden

administration reverses these policies, it would take the UN years to recover from the consequences of this loss of peacekeeping capacity (Meadows, 1999).

UN peacekeeping was already under significant financial pressure when COVID-19 was declared a pandemic in March 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted UN peacekeeping operations. The UN had to take urgent steps to avoid its peacekeeping operations becoming a vector for the spread of the virus. The UN Secretary-General took the drastic step of freezing all rotations between March and July 2020 (Khare & Lacroix, 2020). In addition, UN peacekeeping missions reduced internal movements to only the essential; made an assessment of the most critical operations it needed to continue to carry out its mandate; made adjustments to how those activities were carried out to contain the spread of the virus; and changed the way the rest of the staff worked in order to achieve social distancing. Thus, in a very short period of time, plans and activities at the UN headquarters, regional service centers, and in peacekeeping missions were adapted to reduce mission activities to the most critical tasks only (de Coning, 2020a).

Most of the peacekeeping missions have adapted remarkably well, taking into account that this disruption affected not only their operations, but simultaneously also the UN decision-making and logistical system, as well as the host country. The COVID-19 pandemic has also resulted in closer cooperation and planning among peacekeeping operations and the rest of the UN system. UN agencies turned to peacekeeping missions for medical treatment, protection, and evacuation, and missions and agencies cooperated on the procurement and distribution of personal protection equipment and other COVID-19 related supplies. At UN headquarters adaptation was facilitated in a number of ways, including by identifying and sharing early lessons and emerging best practices among missions, and by establishing an informal clearing house mechanism for sharing lessons among the African Union (AU), European Union (EU), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the UN.

The most severe COVID-19 related disruption to UN peace operations is, however, likely to be caused by another side-effect of the crisis, a looming global economic recession. The World Bank anticipate that advanced economies will shrink by 7%, and that this will spill over to emerging markets and developing economies, which are forecasted to contract by 2.5% in 2021 (The World Bank, 2020). There is thus likely to be less money available for UN peace operations in the short- to medium-term.

Many of the more than 120 countries that have contributed peacekeepers in the past, including big contributors like Ethiopia, Rwanda, Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2020), may also come under domestic pressure to reduce troop numbers for financial and

coronavirus risk-related reasons (Kenkel, 2021). The UN may consequently face a situation where it has much less funding and personnel available than in the past.

Thus far Africa, where the bulk of UN peacekeepers are deployed, has been spared the brunt of the pandemic, but this may change over time as the number of infections increase. In several areas where UN peace operations are deployed, including in the Central African Republic and Mali, and in other countries like Burkina Faso and Ethiopia, violence increased in 2020 (Raleigh & Kishi, 2021). The demand for UN peacekeeping may therefore increase in the short to medium-term, at the same time as COVID-19 and financial pressures force UN peacekeeping to contract (de Coning, 2020a). However, the financial constraints, together with other pressures on the international system, make it less likely that the UNSC will deploy new peacekeeping operations or significantly increase the capacity of existing operations. Complexity theory suggests that it would require a crisis of significant scale to dislodge the UNSC from this pathway. This does not mean that the UNSC will ignore these crises, but that it is likely to use instruments other than large costly UN peacekeeping operations, such as mediation, Special Political Missions, sanctions, peacebuilding, and humanitarian assistance, to try to manage these crisis situations. The UNSC is also likely to increasingly turn to regional organizations like the AU or other ad hoc arrangements when larger security operations are necessary.

UN headquarters and peacekeeping missions have thus demonstrated remarkable resilience in the way they have coped with, and adapted to, the COVID-19 crisis. Some of the new innovations and practices that have emerged in this process are specific to the pandemic. Others are likely to be more lasting, including a prioritized-task approach to mandate implementation, a more adaptive approach to planning and mission management, and greater utilization of digital technology. The most dramatic change over the short- to medium-term, however, may be a significant further reduction in funding and personnel as UN peacekeeping contracts in lockstep with a COVID-19 induced global recession. Changes in the operational environment and in the resources and capabilities available to UN peacekeeping will require significant further adaptations to the way peace operations have been conceived and conducted over the past 20 years. The most likely adaptation is a shift away from the large peacekeeping and stabilization operations of the 2000s towards a variety of smaller more specialized peace operations.

Medium-term moderation: Adapting to the turbulence of a global order in transition

In the medium-term (5–15 years) peace operations are likely to go through a conservative phase as a result of the uncertainty and turbulence associated

with a global order in transition (Osland & Peter, 2021). It will also still be affected by the financial tail of the COVID-19 crisis and the downsizing of the Trump administration. The uncertainty and turbulence associated with a significant shift in the power-distribution in the global order that regulate the international system, and the way this plays out in fora like the UNSC, will make most states favor a conservative stance. This implies that it will be unlikely that the UN will be mandated to launch robust, large, and costly new UN peacekeeping operations or reform processes. In order to avoid confrontations in the UNSC that can further escalate tensions among permanent members, or other states that have influence in the system, the UN system and member states are likely to self-regulate themselves by self-censoring the proposals they put forward, negotiate and support in order to avoid controversy and confrontation. As we can see from the Cold War period, when only 13 new peacekeeping missions were deployed, peacekeeping during a period of transition is likely to be conservative (Kertcher, 2012).

Some of these dynamics are already starting to emerge. No new peacekeeping operation has been deployed since 2014. The new missions that have been deployed, for example the UN verification mission in Colombia and the UN mission to support the ceasefire in Hodeidah, both of which are essentially ceasefire and peace implementation operations that have traditionally been the domain of peacekeeping, have been deployed as special political missions. The new political mission (UNITAMS) that will replace the joint African Union and United Nations peacekeeping mission in Darfur is another case in point (Mamiya et al., 2020). Political missions are potentially less controversial because they are seen as less of an imposition on the sovereignty of the host state. In addition, these types of missions do not include armed units and there is thus no use of force issues. Should the peace process or ceasefire fail, the blame is more squarely on the parties to the conflict as the UN presence is small and mandated only to support the process. There is no expectation that they will physically protect civilians and less likelihood of sexual abuse by peacekeepers or other such negative unintended consequences (Aoi et al., 2007). It is thus easier to obtain approval for special political missions in the UNSC because they are seen as less of an imposition on national sovereignty, they are significantly smaller, have a lighter footprint, and are less costly.

One of the innovations—or perhaps rather a mutation—of UN peacekeeping in the early twenty-first century that is unlikely to survive this phase of moderation is stabilization operations. The UN has deployed four peacekeeping operations, in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA, 2014-), Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO, 2010-), Haiti (MINUSTAH, 2004–2017), and Mali (MINUSMA, 2013-), that have included stabilization in their names. The UN Secretariat has resisted

pressure to give doctrinal clarity to what stabilization means in the UN context, despite specific recommendations to do so, including from the 2015 UN High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations.

UN stabilization operations represent a far more significant departure from UN peacekeeping doctrine than the UNSC and Secretariat are willing to recognize (de Coning et al., 2017). They differ in important ways from the core principles from UN peacekeeping. Firstly, they do not have the consent of the parties to the conflict in the form of a ceasefire or peace agreement that includes a request to the UN to support the implementation of the agreement. The only form of consent they have is an agreement with the host state. As the host state is the only party that have provided consent, it is also the only party that can withdraw consent, which provides the host state with significant leverage.

Secondly, these missions are not impartial. They are specifically tasked to protect the state and its people against certain identified aggressors and have the mandate in some of these missions to proactively disrupt them. Whilst these missions attempt to act impartially towards the various political parties and factions in the country, they are not impartial towards the parties to the conflict.

Thirdly, these missions have been authorized to use force under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Whilst normal UN rules of engagement still require the proportional use of force, they are no longer limited to use force only in self-defense or only to protect civilians in imminent threat of violence. In some missions they are tasked to pro-actively use force to disrupt the aggressors, in order to prevent future threats to the government or people. In the case of the Force Intervention Brigade of MONUSCO the mission was mandated to “neutralize and disarm” the M23 rebel group (Karlsruud, 2018).

UN stabilization operations have been unable to bring an end to the conflicts where they are deployed because the more successfully these operations stabilize, the less incentive ruling elites have for seeking a political settlement. The result is a no peace/no war stalemate, which leaves the UN with no exit path. The longer the UN operation lasts, the more a political economy develops around it—including wider UN system and bilateral donor engagement—that benefits the elites in power, and those that seek their patronage. Some ruling elites in these contexts thus prefer a no peace/no war outcome because a settlement will require compromises and power sharing that will reduce their power and access to sources of revenue (Pospisil, 2019). At the same time, they can blame the external actors for not solving the problem. These perverse side-effects of UN stabilization operations harm the credibility of the UN and undermine the reputation of UN peacekeeping. Their cost, these negative side-effects and the overall lack of effectiveness of UN stabilization operations helps to explain why the UNSC have started to pivot to special political missions. During

the medium-term, there is thus unlikely to be much appetite or political space for significant new doctrinal developments, or large-scale ambitious stabilization or peacekeeping operations.

Longer-term: Finding a new role in an era of coexistence

In the longer-term (beyond 15 years), when the transition in the global order has settled into a new pattern and there is a greater sense of stability, the UN system, and peacekeeping as an institution, is likely to have space again to play a more prominent role in maintaining international peace and security. Complexity theory suggests that “stability” in the context of the international system does not imply that there will be no conflicts, or that there will be no rivalry amongst countries and ideologies. It only means that, in comparison with the period of uncertainty and turbulence during the transition from a unipolar to a multi-polar era, that the international system has settled into a more predictable state of coexistence (Coleman et al., 2013). The need to prevent and manage conflict and maintain international peace and security will not disappear. During the preceding transition phase, the credibility and values of the international system would have been under pressure and thus the demand for peacekeeping would have been limited. Once a new order has emerged there will be a need to consolidate, stabilize and maintain it, and accordingly the scope for peace operations is likely to increase.

If we are entering a new multipolar era characterized by the coexistence of multiple powers, then the UN system in general, and peacekeeping in particular, will need to adapt to and become symbols of the values that reflect this new global order. A new understanding will need to emerge around the role of the international system in international conflict management, resolution and enforcement. Coexistence implies tolerance for a number of different ideologies or models. In the post-Cold War era and into the present, UN peacekeeping was used as a tool to promote the unipolar era’s liberal peace ideology (Osland & Peter, 2021). In the medium- to longer-term UN peacekeeping will shed its liberal identity and adjust itself to reflect the values of coexistence, which implies a focus on political accompaniment, third-party impartial mediation, stability, and technical assistance with recovery and state-building that is perceived as neutral (i.e., free from ideologically pre-determined institutional models), so that national systems can emerge that build on local cultural, historic, and contextual foundations.

New emerging security challenges

Regardless of the constraints over the short, medium, and longer-term highlighted here, and because complex systems tend to innovate and adapt under

pressure, it is likely that the UN secretariat, and specific UN missions, will experiment with different ways in which they can be more effective throughout these phases. Thus, despite these overall conditions and constraints, peace operation as a practice is likely to continue to evolve, innovate and adapt. Throughout these phases, peace operations will have to contend with a number of new emerging peace and security challenges, some of which are already now starting to emerge, including climate change, urbanization and new technologies.

Climate change exacerbates existing vulnerabilities and adds additional stress to vulnerable communities and societies, and this may at times contribute to conditions conducive to violent conflict (Krampe, 2019). Peace operations will have to factor climate-related security risks into their analysis and planning, and adapt their programmatic and operational actions to ensure that they are climate-sensitive. Peace operations will also have to pay more attention to their own environmental footprint, and change the way they generate and consume energy, dispose of waste and manage their carbon emissions (Holt & Hopkins, 2021).

Increased urbanization—75% of the global population is expected to be urbanized by 2050 (Saghir & Santoro, 2018)—implies that most of the violent conflicts that future peacekeepers will be tasked to manage are likely to take place in urban contexts. This may require a significant adaptation from the type of large-territory mobile military peacekeeping that is characteristic of contemporary peacekeeping, to a future urban public security type peacekeeping model.

Lastly, digital technology is changing the way our social systems connect, communicate and process information. Digitalization can contribute to community resilience and to sustaining peace in many ways, but it can also be used to disseminate misinformation, stroke hatred and undermine social cohesion (Hirblinger, 2020). Peacekeepers are tasked to prevent conflict, and this may require that they disrupt those that use hate speech and other forms of violence inducing rhetoric. On the other hand, they may support those that promote peaceful means to resolve tensions and that advocate for moderation and tolerance. Either way, peace operations will have to become more adaptable at operating simultaneously in the physical and cyber domains.

This is likely to result in the next major doctrinal revision—the current capstone doctrine was finalized in 2008—which will most likely be preceded by a strategic review along the lines of the High Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations of 2015 (de Coning et al., 2017).

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that throughout the potential short-term contraction, medium-term moderation, and longer-term renewal phases, UN

peacekeeping is likely to be guided by a principled adaptive approach, that allow it to adapt to the realities of the moment whilst remaining resilient and staying true to its core form and identity. As a result, UN peacekeeping is likely to maintain, throughout this period of transition, its role as one of the most visible symbols of international cooperation.

In the short-term (next 5 years), UN peacekeeping will have to adapt to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the downsizing of the Trump presidency. These will include the most significant economic recession since the end of the World War II, which is likely to imply a further significant contraction in the peacekeeping budget. Changes in the operational environment and in the resources and capabilities available to UN peacekeeping will require significant adaptations to the way peace operations work and may signify a lasting shift away from the large peacekeeping and stabilization operations that have characterized the first 20 years of the twenty-first century.

In the medium-term (5–15 years), peace operations are likely to go through a phase characterized by uncertainty and turbulence due a global order in transition. During this phase there is unlikely to be much political space or appetite for significant new policy or doctrinal developments, or large-scale ambitious peacekeeping operations, and this is thus likely to be a period of moderation. At the same time peacekeeping, even scaled-down, is expected to remain one of the most established and visible symbols of global governance and international cooperation.

In the longer-term (beyond 15 years), peace operations will adjust too and reflect the global order characteristics of the era. If we are entering a new multipolar era characterized by coexistence, then the UN in general and peace operations in particular will have to reflect and promote these values. There will be a need to consolidate, stabilize and maintain the new international system, and international peace and security, and peace operations will have a role to play in this process.

Throughout these phases, UN peace operations will have to adapt to changes in the security landscape such as the growing influence of climate change and its peace and security related risks, the positive and negative roles of new technologies and increased digitalization, and a shift in violent conflict from rural to urban settings. UN peace operations will also have to adapt to developments in the international peace and security practice, such as a shift from large-scale multidimensional and integrated peacekeeping operations, to smaller specialized missions that form part of a broader network of peacebuilding or stabilization activities; a greater focus on data and performance and a shift to people-centered or bottom-up context-specific approaches to peacebuilding.

UN peace operations have shown a remarkable resilient capacity to continuously adapt to new challenges over the past 70 years, and there is no

evidence to suggest that it will not continue to do so into the future. As Peter and I (2019) argue, despite the significant changes currently underway in the global order, and the uncertainties that come with such turbulence, most countries and regional blocs, such as the AU, EU, the Nordic region, and the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), agree on and repeatedly emphasize the importance of the UN, and UN peace operations, as the centerpiece of global governance and a rules-based multilateral order.

Despite the short-, medium-, and longer-term changes UN peace operations are likely to undergo, UN peacekeeping is likely to remain the flagship enterprise of the UN. This is because UN peacekeeping has become one of the most remarkable achievements, and thus symbols, of the post-World War II multilateral system of global governance.

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