



POLICY BRIEF

PB 20 - 50
May 2020

PEACEKEEPING MISSIONS IN THE TIME OF CORONAVIRUS: NEW CONFIGURATIONS AND NEW CHALLENGES

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Peacekeeping Missions in the Time of Coronavirus: New Configurations and New Challenges

Introduction

In discussing the potential role of peacekeeping missions in the context of the threat of the Coronavirus pandemic, two main issues arise. The first is of a legal nature, and the second is linked to the management of expenditures and budgets.

Legally, the duties of peacekeeping missions are defined by the United Nations Security Council resolutions that mandate the creation of a mission.

Financially, UN member states have become less willing to finance peacekeeping operations (PKO) or to deliver pledged financial contributions to stakeholders on time, putting missions at risk.

By the end of 2018, the budget deficit of the United Nations peacekeeping forces, an external link of \$ 6.7 billion, was estimated at \$ 1.4 billion.

On June 5, 2019, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned that many peacekeeping missions are severely underfunded, and that the current financial crisis is preventing the United Nations from paying the necessary compensation to troop- and police-contributing countries—mostly low-income countries—at appropriate dates and in advance, impeding the ability of these forces to carry out their much-needed security tasks.

More than 105,000 soldiers, policemen and other individuals from around the world currently deployed as part of peacekeeping missions, in areas from Haiti to parts of India and Pakistan. Most of them are stationed in African countries. At the top of the list of countries contributing to these forces are Ethiopia, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Rwanda. In addition to the financial problems faced by these forces, they must also, and equally importantly, adapt to the new generation of non-traditional threats.

PKOs and COVID-19

In a bid to prevent COVID-19 transmission among its personnel, the United Nations Secretary General (UNSG) on April 7 decided to suspend the rotation and deployment of uniformed personnel, including police and soldiers, until June 30, 2020. According to the UNSG's spokesman, the decision applied to all troop- and police-contributing countries, and to all 13 active peacekeeping operations underway in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Europe.

The decision was taken to:

- Ensure that people are not infected with the virus, and reduce infections' risks,
- To maintain UN peacekeeping operational capabilities,

However, some limited exceptions were considered, based on strict conditions to prevent the spread of the virus.

It is important to review the different mechanisms and procedures governing such decisions, which have major impacts. The UNSG has broad discretion in directing the activities of peacekeeping forces, after consulting with experts, specialized bodies within the United Nations, and participating countries. However, theoretically, the UN Security Council remains a more decisive authority over matters related to peace and security, since the UNSC authorizes the creation of any peacekeeping operation, and defines its extent, budget, and timetable.

Despite internal tensions (mainly between the U.S and China), the UN Security Council was scheduled to meet on April 9 by videoconference to formulate a joint response to the Coronavirus pandemic.

The UNSG's decision came two days ahead of this meeting. The Secretary-General may have decided to issue instructions to peacekeeping forces two days prior to the Security Council meeting because of his concerns about differences between China and the United States. He might also have wanted to separate technical and operational decisions from political disagreement between UNSG members, and consequently to avoid any delay in putting in place measures to protect the human and operational capabilities of peacekeeping missions in an environment characterized by panic, after a number of countries decided to close their airports and ports and declare states of emergency.

In fact, the UNSG agreed his decision with the Department of Peace keeping Operations, the Department of Operational Support— specifically the Office of Military Affairs and the Police Division—and the Division of Healthcare Management and Occupational Safety and Health, All of these are leading the process of reviewing all troop and police rotations scheduled for the next six months. In addition, some countries had asked to delay rotations by three months to maintain operational strength and execute their mandated tasks.

According to the Under-Secretary General for Operational Support, the priorities of peacekeeping operations are the following **first**, to do everything possible to avoid the

introduction or the further spread of COVID-19 in the country being supported. **Second**, to control the spread of the virus among the personnel engaged in peace missions. **Third**, to provide treatment to any personnel who might contract the virus. **Finally**, within their **mandates and capacities**, PKOs should **try to** provide assistance to the countries where they are located

We can also assume that the Assistant Secretary-General's statement was very cautious, with legal considerations taken into account, linked to the limits of the capabilities of PKOs, and to the limits of their capabilities and competence in the area of health-crisis management.

UN peace missions' new responsibilities during the COVID-19 outbreak include:

- Securing peacekeepers' sites
- Strict health monitoring of visitors to the sites
- Tightening of hygiene measures for personnel
- Imposing social distance between workers at sites
- Creating a safe environment for ongoing duties

According to the UN peacekeeping guidance on COVID-19, the Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions (OROLSI) has required critical preparedness and a coordinated response, particularly in prisons.

The Operational Toolbox: COVID-19 Preparedness & Response in Places of Detention provides communication tools with clear and concise information and visuals, which can be used by prison administrators and staff in their efforts to prevent COVID-19 from entering prisons, and to mitigate the impact in case of an outbreak.

Among other measures taken are steps to enhance remote communication with host countries' public authorities and their partners, excluding the critical security cases.

In order to maintain their visibility on the ground, peace missions have focused on providing support to countries in health campaigns, and communication with communities, while reducing direct-contact operations as much as possible, and by expanding use of different media channels. Peace missions have also worked to coordinate more with local civil society in activities that aim to expand awareness about the epidemic.

- Reducing movement and travel
- Postponing or canceling all non-essential travel
- Evaluating the necessity of all proposed travel arrangements
- Weighing the risks to the traveler of any travel to or from meetings in affected areas experiencing ongoing transmission of COVID-19.
- Teleworking for civilian workers (excluding health personnel)

Significant Contributions of Peace keeping Operations in Supporting Host Countries

In the new environment resulting from the outbreak of the coronavirus, peacekeeping missions have not limited their interventions to their traditional tasks, but have worked since early April to implement a series of mitigation measures to enhance the safety, security, and health of all United Nations personnel, while maintaining their daily duties in the field (even if on a limited basis). Concretely, operations have been adapted to the priorities imposed by the pandemic, with activities structured around four areas:

- **Communication monitoring and information-sharing about the pandemic**

Missions have focused their efforts on making use of appropriate local communication channels, whether radio, social media, or otherwise, to reach communities and share accurate and up-to-date information about COVID-19. Examples include the MONUSCO radio station Okapi in the Democratic Republic of Congo; UNAMID's sponsoring of radio programs; the UNMISS mobile awareness-raising campaign, with key messages on effective steps to prevent the spread of Coronavirus, also using local radio stations operating in different languages; MINUSMA's radio Mikado FM in Mali, which broadcasts programs aimed at consolidating peace and promoting harmony and coexistence, and informing the population about good conduct to beat the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Community awareness-raising**

Most keeping missions, including UNIFIL, UNFICYP, UNMISS, MINUSMA, MINUSCA, UNMIK, and MONUSCO, are engaged in campaigns to raise the awareness of local populations about prevention measures and COVID-19 mitigation.

- **Creation of quarantine spaces**

Most peacekeeping missions have created special spaces for quarantine and sanitary isolation, whether they are intended for potential cases of infected personnel from the missions, or are precautionary, in case health conditions in local communities deteriorate, and local authorities lose control of the spread of infection.

In addition, all peacekeeping missions have improved shelter conditions within their detention centers, and have arranged the conditions to enable social distancing to prevent infection.

- **Preparation of necessary medical equipment**

Since the Secretary-General stressed the need for caution within different peacekeeping missions, the missions have worked without exception on meeting their own needs for protective and preventative material needed against COVID-19. Some have also managed to obtain medical and preventive materials to support host countries, or their vulnerable communities.

For example, in South Sudan, UNMISS has received a donation of medical equipment, including 20,000 testing kits, 100,000 masks, and 1,000 protective suits and face

shields. This mission has provided logistical assistance to troop- and police-contributing countries, working closely with the Department of Operational Support and other UN partners.

UNMISS has also provided valuable support to local authorities in Yambio, where there is a lack of proper infrastructure. The mission tasked its engineers with clearing the surroundings of the potential isolation site.

In Central Africa, the DRC and Mali, there has been more significant engagement on the part of PKOs. The three missions (MINUSMA, MONUSCA, and MINUSCA) have redoubled their efforts to preserve the pace of their conventional work related to maintaining security, fighting armed organizations, and then assisting local authorities and residents in confronting the Coronavirus pandemic.

Although these missions do not have a legal mandate to expand their tasks to include managing the health crisis, they have been, in our estimation, inspired in their work by previous UN resolutions related to the Ebola pandemic, and by the invitation from the Secretary General of the United Nations to take part in collective action to protect the public health of populations.

The Legal Framework and UNSG Disagreement on Considering COVID-19 as a Threat to International Security

Did disparities between the members of the UN Security Council hold back peacekeepers from taking more pioneering roles in fighting the COVID-19 epidemic? Should the Security Council's decision-making follow the same approach adopted for the management of Ebola pandemic, when peace missions were given powers to tackle the health crisis, and of course were assisted with financially to cover the needs of the war against it?

There are two opinions on this. The first considers that the extent of the global security threat posed by the COVID-19 epidemic remains unclear while so much is still unknown about the characteristics of the epidemic, the pace of its spread, and the ability of the virus to transform. Therefore, it is difficult to shift the functions of peacekeeping missions (beyond the attributes defined for each mission by Security Council resolutions) towards fighting the epidemic. In addition, any change to the attributes of peacekeeping missions must take into account financial resources, which are difficult to modify. Given the UN's financial difficulties, financial rescheduling remains almost impossible. Another challenge would be that switching the priorities of peacekeeping missions to tackling the challenges of the pandemic would make it necessary to redeploy human resources, in particular by increasing the number of medical personnel, since fighting the pandemic requires people more experienced in civil engineering and medicine, rather than weapons bearers.

In this context, there are fears that issuing a Security Council resolution could give the United States an opportunity to make accusations against China under the umbrella of the resolution. This would widen the gap between countries that support the United States, and countries that see trade war between the United States and China as an issue that should be excluded from any discussion about global security.

The second opinion, promoted by France and some developing countries, is that a Security Council resolution would enhance global solidarity in the face of the spread of COVID-19, and would reduce the burden on countries struggling to cope with it, either because of the fragility of their health infrastructures, weak financial capabilities, or their fragile security climates.

The lack of fluidity in Security Council decision-making process is not new. In practice, on all issues, permanent members are unable to find common ground. But the pandemic has notably exacerbated already-existing tensions, especially between China and the United States. The United States has taken an aggressive stance on the possible Chinese responsibility for the spread of the epidemic. For several weeks, Washington continues to bring the issue as a national security concern instead of dealing with the problem through technical channels.

From the other side, China and Russia have been reluctant to organize a resolution on the pandemic, explaining that international health is outside the mandate of the Security Council.

It is at the end a question of political will, since the Security Council has already positioned itself on health crises, during the HIV/AIDS crisis in 2000, and in response to the Ebola crisis in 2014, in both cases declaring them to be «threats to peace and international security”.

The activities of peacekeeping missions remain restricted to the powers that the Security Council assigns to these missions, and are limited to specified, renewable time periods. It is evident that the margins allowed to these missions to start campaigns against the pandemic threat remain limited.

Near-Future Challenges:

Expecting a PKO Human Resources Crisis in 2021-2022

Despite the ongoing need peacekeeping missions have for regular troop and police rotations, the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations has decided to review all scheduled rotations for the upcoming six months and to delay the coming of new peacekeepers by three months to maintain operational strength and execute their mandated tasks. The argument is that the review will ensure the appropriate personnel are deployed to each mission, and will allow missions to continue fulfilling their mandated tasks safely.

In fact, there is a serious fear that the review might lead to a decline in the contribution of state members in terms of providing their usual quotas under several pretexts, such as their need for their own forces to remain at home confront the pandemic, especially when it comes to senior officers skilled in disaster management and health crises.

In the light of the intentions of some western countries to withdraw their forces from a number of zones of tension, we conclude that such a move could be contagious and could disturb the human resourcing of peacekeeping missions. If this happens, it could lead to significant imbalances and a reduction in the human capabilities resourcing of peacekeeping operations during 2021-2022.

Decline in mission budgets

A global economic and financial crisis in the wake of the economic recession caused by the Coronavirus pandemic will certainly deepen the United Nations' ongoing financial difficulties, especially in relation to the financing of peacekeeping missions.

It is worth noting that more than 90% of the troop- and police-contributing countries are countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, while countries that do not respect their financial pledges are mostly western countries.

According to Catherine Pollard, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance, peacekeeping operations also face increasing liquidity pressure, and the current cash position of about \$1.4 billion is "barely sufficient" to maintain field operations through the end of June 2020.

Increasing Tensions and New Waves of Violent Extremism

The Sahel remains relatively little affected by Coronavirus, especially countries such as Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, compared to the countries of North Africa or South Africa. However, the lack of health infrastructure in the Sahel, along with limited resources and poor health outcomes, could mean that the spread of the epidemic contributes to deepening insecurity in those countries, which are already facing a serious humanitarian crisis caused by ongoing armed conflicts.

The armed terrorist groups in the region want to avoid the damage that could be caused if COVID-19 spreads among their followers, but they also want to take advantage of the psychological climate in Islamic communities to increase recruitment among young people. In addition, those extremist groups have shown themselves willing to take advantage of the preoccupation of governments with combating the epidemic in order to reconstruct themselves and gather their forces for a new wave of extensive operations in the future.

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The views expressed in this publication are the views of the author.



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