

Taking UN Peace Operations to the Next Level: Strategic Revitalization and Reinforcement of UN Military and Civilian Observers¹

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The world is in turmoil. As a strategic response to the rapidly deteriorating trajectory in international peace and security and how it is impacting UN peace operations, UN Member States through the adoption of the Pact of the Future confirmed their commitment to: “...adapt peace operations to better respond to existing challenges and new realities”³. Since then, geopolitical polarization has deepened, causing further deterioration in international relations, and bringing substantial funding cuts of UN programmes and activities in its wake. That UN peace operations are now entering a new period of retrenchment is clear, how best to realign and reposition UN peace operations for an impactful future, is less so.

This study note makes the case for revitalizing and reinforcing one of the longstanding value added of the United Nations and its peace operations capabilities, namely the Military Observers and their Civilian equivalents. Although peace operations have grown in scope of operations and range of capabilities over the years, the most frequent mandated task of UN peacekeeping 1948-2023 was to “observe, monitor, report on military activities”⁴. In addition, Military and Civilian Observers are identified in the study on *Future of Peacekeeping, New Models and Related Capabilities* as key components for successfully delivering the envisioned 30 different models for future peace operations.⁵

The value of UN Military Observers was recently confirmed by several studies focused on the very first and still operating peacekeeping mission, the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO).

¹ This study note draws on findings of the Annual Senior Officers Seminar 2024 on *Future Peace Operations: Trends, Options and Considerations*, GCSP and Swiss Armed Forces (September 2024); Annika Hilding Norberg, A.K. Bardalai, Robert Mood, *UNTSO: The Role, Relevance, Function and Utility – Lessons for Future Peace Operations*, EPON Study, NUPI (May 2024); Summary Report of International Peacekeeping Day 2024 High-Level Seminar and Expert Symposium session on *Nimble, Adaptive and Effective Peacekeeping: Lessons from UNTSO for Future Options and Models for Peacekeeping*, UN HQs in New York (May 2024); and El-Ghassim Wane, Paul D. Williams and Ai Kihara-Hunt, *The Future of Peacekeeping, New Models, and Related Capabilities*, United Nations (November, 2024).

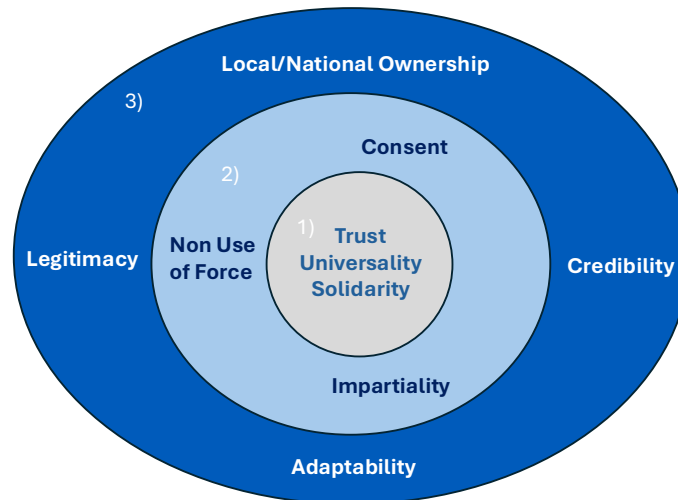
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³ Pact of the Future, Resolution A/Res/79/1, 22 September 2024, p. 17.

⁴ UN Peace Missions Data Set, <https://www.peacemissions.info> hosted by Geneva Graduate Institute and ETH Zurich, accessed 20 April, 2025.

⁵ Wane et al, *The Future of Peacekeeping, New Models, and Related Capabilities* (United Nations, 2024).

**The New Agenda for Peace and the UN Principles for Peacekeeping as Applicable to UN Military Observers:
Centred by 1) Core Values, Guided by 2) Principles, and Mandates Achieved through 3) Factors of Success**



Source: A. Hilding Norberg, Maj. Gen. Dr (R) A.K. Bardalai, Lt. Gen. (R) R. Mood

Despite decades of geopolitical challenges, UNTSO's core mandate has remained relevant and its operational approaches - as measured against its mandate – effective and low cost. Evaluations by the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO) Office of Military Affairs (Military Capability Study), by the UN DPO Office of Peacekeeping and Strategic Partnership (General Inspection Report) and the independent GCSP-led Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network (EPON) study, all in complementary ways found that UNTSO hold several characteristics, which has proven useful.⁶ They include that UNTSO has a 1) flexible and secure mandate, 2) nimble and high-quality reporting, 3) high acceptance by the populations, 4) a Center of Excellence for In-theater training, and 5) is a start-up mission incubator (14 new missions).⁷

More specifically, the EPON Study on UNTSO proposed that UN peace operations could be further enhanced by recognizing, revitalizing and reinforcing the UN Military and Civilian Observers capability. This study note suggests that the time is ripe for:

1. Institutionalizing UNTSO's ad hoc practice of mission support (UNTSO started 14 new missions) by creating a Vanguard Rapid Deployment Capacity of Military and Civilian Observers and other required specialists (Civilians, Police, etc..). This unit would provide an effective, low-cost, and minimally intrusive mechanism for quickly deploying trained personnel to establish or reinforce missions.
2. Establishing a UN Centre of Excellence (CoE) for Military and Civilian Observers as a hub for advanced in theater training, research, and knowledge-sharing. The center would refine observer practices in the field, consolidate lessons learned, and provide mission-specific

⁶ UN Chief of Staff/Head of Mission UNTSO Maj. Gen. Patrick Gauchat, presentation made at Annual Senior Officers Seminar 2024, GCSP, Maison de la Paix, Geneva, 26 September 2024.

⁷ Ibid.

training, complementing but not duplicating the nationally led UNMOC courses responsible for the basic training. While UNMO courses remain national peacekeeping centers and UNHQ responsibilities, the CoE would help the continuous training of the Military and Civilian Observers during the induction in the field and continuous training during the mission time. Helping 1) military observer missions, 2) integrated missions with military and civilian observers and 3) special political missions, the CoE could extend its exchanges and services across the potential 30 models of missions and with regional organizations, i.e. missions under chapter 8 of the UN Charter.

3. Connected while separate, a concrete link between the Vanguard Concept and the CoE would create multiple synergies and could foster and further strengthen the development of partnerships with regional organizations.

The UN Vanguard Rapid Deployment Capacity of Observers would support mission startups or transitions through rapid deployment (within 10 days) of a mobile military command and staff headquarters element. The element would consist of a Head of Element (command), staff specialists for personnel, intelligence, plans and operations, training, logistics and media relations, and an appropriate number of military observers to initially establish observer presence. The element could be reinforced by Civilian Observers, and civilian logistic, information, technology and communications and other specialists, as needed.

The UN Centre of Excellence personnel, augmented by UNTSO Military Observers, would help with the training and complement the sourcing. The element would receive, train, equip and deploy incoming military and civilian observers provided by UN Member States and would ultimately – within 90 days – be replaced by those observers and redeploy to the UN CoE.

The main recommendations of the EPON UNTSO Study were referenced and endorsed by the *Future Peacekeeping, New Models and Related Capabilities* study as it discussed the need to strengthen UN standby and rapid deployment capabilities.⁸ It stated, “when peacekeepers are required for new missions or to reinforce existing ones, they are usually needed quickly. The UN must improve its human resource processes and structures to get the right people in the right place quickly, including via standby capacities and mechanisms for surge deployments... Another interesting proposal [*Read, the UNTSO study recommendations*] is establishing a center of excellence for (uniformed and civilian) observers to generate a cadre of specialized personnel who are prepared for rapid deployment”⁹.

To this end, in an age of resurgence in inter-state conflict on the horizon and constrained by having to “do more with fewer peacekeepers”, the quality, credibility, legitimacy and adaptability of UN peacekeepers will be critical. Retaining, refining and reinforcing a key UN high-quality comparative advantage, such as the UN Military Observers Capability and its Civilian equivalents, should be a priority.

Earlier potential concerns raised by some about establishing a CoE outside of the UN Headquarters in New York should now come into different light. As the UN Secretariat is required to move staff and functions from New York for cost saving measures, the establishment of the CoE, with agile

⁸ Future Peacekeeping, New Models and Related Capabilities, p. 43.

⁹ Ibid.

mobile training teams to support as and where required, could help in the transition, globalizing the UN peace operations mechanism, presence and impact, further.

The goal of the UN Peacekeeping Ministerial 2025 in Berlin is to “shape a peacekeeping model that is more agile, intelligent and resilient”.¹⁰ UN peace operations preparedness and predictability, which lies at the heart of legitimacy and credibility, need to be further enhanced. The 1) codification of the Vanguard Rapid Deployment Capacity of Observers, and the 2) augmenting of the already de facto existing Centre of Excellence for Observers, are two small, low cost, but high-quality and high-impact, opportunities to make UN peace operations ready for the **New Era of UN Peace Missions and Operations** to come.

¹⁰ [As budgets shrink, UN Peacekeeping looks to the future | United Nations Peacekeeping](#), UN.org website accessed on 2 May 2025.