Protection of Civilians in Peace Operations

Introduction

For a quarter of a century, the Protection of Civilians (POC) has been a defining feature of United Nations (UN) peace operations. Yet as the global security environment shifts—with increasingly fragmented and asymmetric conflicts, limited host-state cooperation, waning political will (especially among great powers), and growing resource constraints—the role and relevance of POC face significant tests. Addressing these challenges requires more than incremental adjustments; it calls for a bold, forward-looking approach that anticipates emerging risks, adapts to evolving political and operational dynamics, and strategically allocates resources to sustain and enhance the impact of efforts to protect civilians in contemporary conflict. It also requires a response to intensifying demands for a major shift in the global and regional architecture for peace operations.

The urgency of this moment is underscored by the scale and severity of protection crises globally. If the 25th anniversary of the first Security Council resolution on POC was meant to mark progress, it instead highlighted the steep deterioration of the protection landscape. From Gaza to Sudan, Ukraine to the DRC, civilian casualties, displacement, and violations of international humanitarian law have surged. In 2023, civilian deaths rose by 72%—the sharpest increase since 2015—and the number of active conflicts reached its highest point since 1946. These grim markers reflect both the intensification of violence and the erosion of long-standing norms. In this context, ensuring that POC remains central and responsive to evolving threats to civilians is not just timely—it is imperative.

This briefing paper critically examines the trajectory of POC in UN peacekeeping[1] and highlights opportunities for more agile, integrated, and context-sensitive protection strategies. These reflections come ahead of the strategic review of peace operations as called for by the *Pact for the Future*—a key moment to rethink how the UN can effectively respond to complex crises with POC remaining a central tenet of that response.

The paper is structured in three parts. Section II traces the evolution and distinctiveness of POC in peacekeeping, highlighting its achievements but also enduring challenges. Section III draws on cutting-edge research and field lessons to identify five forward-looking priorities—deployment and intelligence, local engagement, policing, strategic communications, and partnerships—critical to maintaining POC effectiveness amid growing operational constraints. The final section distils key insights and offers targeted recommendations to all peacekeeping stakeholders to strengthen POC's future impact.

Background: 25 Years of POC Practice

The Distinctiveness of POC in Peacekeeping

The UN's POC agenda has become one of the most defining and distinctive features of contemporary peacekeeping. While other actors may engage in protection-related activities, UN peace operations are uniquely positioned to integrate military, police, and civilian

[1] This paper draws on "Twenty-Five Years of Protecting Civilians Through UN Peacekeeping: Taking Stock and Looking Forward," written by Emily Paddon Rhoads and Jennifer Welsh in collaboration with the Policy, Evaluation and Training Division (DPET), UN Department of Peace Operations, 2024. See also, Emily Paddon Rhoads, "The Future of Protection in UN Operations," *Ethics & International Affairs,* 38, no. 4 (2024).

capacities within a coherent, mandate-based framework. Today, the UN pursues a multi-tiered approach to POC through peacekeeping, consisting of: 1) protection through dialogue and engagement (through national and local conflict resolution and mediation, the use of good offices, reporting and advocacy); 2) provision of physical protection (through protective presence, inter-positioning, and the threat or use of force); and 3) establishment of a protective environment (for example, through capacity building and support for the rule of law).[2] This integrated architecture enables missions to pursue protection not just as a reaction to particular threats to civilians, but as a strategic, mission-wide objective embedded in multi-level political and community engagement.

Three features in particular set POC in peacekeeping apart. First, UN missions can offer *direct physical protection* to civilians through the presence and, when necessary, use of force by uniformed personnel. Recent analysis of multiple missions indicates that it is not so much the overall quantity of peacekeepers that matters for protection, but rather the troop-to-population ratio in a given area and the way in which perpetrators of violence are confronted. The protection impact is greatest when the type of force used by peacekeepers is tailored to the threat and responsive to perpetrators' motivations.[3] At the same time, however, the UN's capacity for force is bounded by host-state consent, mission capabilities, and the need to preserve legitimacy and impartiality, making the civilian dimension all the more critical. Civilian staff identify threats, monitor and identify patterns in human rights violations, mobilize early warning systems, mediate disputes, and reinforce local resilience. Protection through peacekeeping is not only about stopping violence; it is about shaping the conditions that prevent it from recurring.

Second, and related, POC is operationalized through an integrated, *multi-tiered approach*, with each component's activities mutually reinforcing. While uniformed personnel create a security umbrella, civilian actors expand humanitarian access, foster community dialogue, and help rebuild trust in public institutions. Effective protection depends not only on individual actions, but on how military, police, and civilian components operate together, adaptively and in close coordination, across all three tiers.

Third, UN peacekeeping offers a degree of *multilateral legitimacy and impartiality* that few other actors can replicate. Security Council mandates, combined with multinational deployments and adherence to the principle of impartiality, help build trust among host populations and create space for political solutions. While regional or ad hoc coalitions may field comparable military capacities, few possess the sustained civilian expertise, mandate authority, or institutional structure that define POC in UN peacekeeping.

Track Record of Effectiveness

Understanding what makes POC in peacekeeping distinctive also helps explain *why* it has achieved measurable impact—even in some of the world's most volatile settings. Across a wide body of research, the presence of peacekeepers correlates with reductions in civilian

[2] United Nations, Department of Peace Operations, *The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping Policy* (New York: United Nations, 2023), 9.
[3] Stian Kjeksrud, *Using Force to Protect Civilians: Successes and Failures of UN Peace Operations in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023). This study is based on a dataset of 200 military protection operations across 10 missions, between 1999 and 2017.

casualties, containment of violence, and increased access to basic services.[4] These impacts stem not only from visible deterrence but also from quieter—yet no less consequential—forms of engagement: sustained political pressure, community outreach, and operational flexibility.

More than two decades on from the first protection mandates, POC has in some ways become a victim of its own success. Its effectiveness is now often taken for granted, even as the political commitment underpinning it has waned. To ensure that POC remains central in the reimagining of peace operations under the Pact for the Future, Member States must be reminded of what has worked—and why renewed support is essential to carry those gains forward.

Effectiveness rests on three interlinked factors. First, presence. Peacekeepers often deter violence simply by being proximate to vulnerable populations. Second, posture. Missions have become more mobile and responsive, using tools like temporary bases, long-range patrols, and rapid deployments. But posture also requires mindset, leadership, and risk tolerance. Third, integration. Where civilian, police, and military actors coordinate—especially in conflict analysis, operational planning and local engagement—protection is stronger and more durable.

The civilian dimension is especially vital. Civilian personnel sustain local relationships, gather information, support early warning, assist with thematic protection training (e.g., in areas like child protection), and help navigate complex local dynamics—roles uniformed components cannot fulfill alone. Without these efforts, military presence risks becoming static or misaligned with evolving threats and sources of civilian resilience.

Protection strategies must also reflect diverse vulnerabilities. Certain groups—including internally displaced persons (IDPs), women, children, persons with disabilities, and ethnic or religious minorities—are disproportionately affected by violence and insecurity. Women and girls face heightened risks of sexual and gender-based violence; children are especially vulnerable to recruitment and trafficking. IDPs often reside in underserved areas with limited access to protection. At the same time, strong self-protection capacities among some groups may offset certain vulnerabilities, meaning that those who appear most vulnerable may not always face the highest protection risks. These intersecting and variable risks demand tailored strategies that move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches—grounded in inclusive analysis, targeted engagement, and sustained partnerships with affected communities. Recognizing this heterogeneity is not enough; every tier of the UN's protection approach must reflect it in both strategy and practice.

Still, gaps remain. Peacekeepers are generally more effective in deterring non-state armed groups than in addressing violence by host-state forces—a pattern shaped by the constraints of consent-based operations, which can erode impartiality. Although missions have, at times, responded to state-led violence, these interventions tend to be less systematic and effective. [5] In contexts like IDP camps or counterterrorism operations, the blurred lines between combatants and civilians complicate the use of force and expose missions to reputational risk

[4] Lisa Hultman, Jacob Kathman and Megan Shannon, "United Nations Peacekeeping and Civilian Protection in Civil War," *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no.4 (2013): 875–91; Lisa Hultman, Jacob Kathman and Megan Shannon, "Beyond Keeping Peace: United Nations Effectiveness in the Midst of Fighting," *American Political Science Review* 108, no.9 (2014): 737-753; Hanne Fjelde, Lisa Hultman and Desirée Nilsson, "Protection Through Presence: UN Peacekeeping and the Costs of Targeting Civilians," *International Organization* 73, no.1 (2019): 103-131.

[5] Lisa Hultman and Ornella Corsant-Colat, "Being Present Where It Counts: POC Responsiveness to Violence against Civilians," *Issue Brief,* International Peace Institute, forthcoming.

and accusations of indiscriminate action.[6] POC efforts also frequently falter when government's view mission mandates as misaligned with their priorities—or when state actors themselves pose threats to civilians.

Protection outcomes also vary across missions, shaped by factors such as force posture, mandate clarity, and local context. And although missions have adapted to the challenge of geographic scale, experience shows that finding the right mix of presence and projection—and of civilian, police, and military assets—remains a work in progress.[7] In short, mission coordination of all personnel and tiers of action is both the linchpin of effective protection and a recurring challenge.

Finally, willingness to act remains a concern. In some cases, peacekeepers have prioritized force protection over civilian protection, undermining mandate delivery and mission credibility. Clear rules of engagement, accountable leadership, and political backing have all been identified as important ingredients to ensuring that missions act decisively in the face of civilian harm.

POC in a Changing Landscape for Peace Operations

Looking ahead, the future of POC in peacekeeping will be shaped by how the UN navigates a set of strategic and operational challenges.

First, missions must find more effective ways to balance presence and projection—ensuring protective capacity (both uniformed and civilian) reaches dispersed or high-risk populations, while maintaining mobility to respond to emerging threats and sustained local engagement.

Second, protection strategies must be both more integrated and anticipatory, addressing not only conventional armed violence but also emerging risks such as digital incitement, organized crime, and climate-related insecurity.

Third, these strategies must be more attuned to the potential unintended negative consequences of different kinds of protective action—including decisions to use force robustly, to create 'safe areas' for particular civilian populations, or to shift geographical focus—and incorporate plans to proactively mitigate those effects.[8]

Fourth, as mission models diversify and the number of large-footprint multidimensional operations declines, there is a need to reassess whether—and how—the core tenets of POC as developed in peacekeeping should be adapted to other forms of UN engagement, including Special Political Missions and the on-going work of UN Country Teams. Not all mission types may be suited to the same protection approach, but all UN entities—as stipulated by the organization's *Agenda for Protection*[9]—are responsible for prioritizing protection, raising

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[6] Civilian harm mitigation is a growing area of practice within peace operations. While POC encompasses protection from all threats, CHM specifically refers to preventing and responding to unintended civilian harm caused by mission personnel or operations and is essential to maintaining trust and effectiveness.

[7] See the in-depth studies of MINUSCA, MINUSMA, MONUSCO and UNMISS by the Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network (EPON). https://www.nupi.no/en/projects-centers/effectiveness-of-peace-operations-network. See also Lotte Vermeij et. al., "UN Peacekeeping Operations at a Crossroads: The Implementation of Protection Mandates in Contested and Congested Spaces," *Norwegian Institute of International Affairs* (2022). https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/un-peacekeeping-operations-at-a-crossroads

[8] Adam Day and Charles T. Hunt, "Distractions, Distortions and Dilemmas: The Externalities of Protecting Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping," *Civil Wars*, 24, no.1 (2021): 97-116; Jennifer Welsh, Emily Paddon Rhoads and Juan Masullo, "Risky Business: The Dilemma of International Support for Civilian Self-Protection," *Perspectives on Politics* (in press).

[9] United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *A UN Agenda for Protection: Strengthening the ability of the United Nations system to protect people through their human rights* (18 March 2024). https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/tools-and-resources/united-nations-agenda-protection-strengthening-ability-united-nations

important questions about mandate scope, capabilities, and accountability for protection outcomes.

Fifth, UN peacekeeping is experiencing a period of contraction: recent drawdowns, reconfigurations, and withdrawals have highlighted the real risk of intensifying protection threats—for instance, by creating security vacuums that can be exploited by armed groups. Given that peacekeeping missions also serve as key enablers for the essential work of other protection actors, including humanitarian workers and human rights staff, the drawdown or departure of missions raises significant concerns about the sustainability of broader protection initiatives.

Finally, as regional actors and new coalitions take on greater security roles, questions of interoperability, transparency, legitimacy, and responsibility for protection will become more pressing: how protection mandates are framed and adopted—and by whom—will shape the credibility and effectiveness of future efforts to protect populations.

These challenges are not abstract. They require strategic choices about resource allocation, operational models, and institutional priorities. The following section explores these issues in greater depth, focusing on underexamined but critical areas that will determine the relevance and effectiveness of POC in an evolving global landscape for peace operations.

Core Thematic Areas for the Future

1. Planning, Deployment, Mobility, and Intelligence for Effective POC

Effective POC begins with presence. Yet the presence of a mission alone is insufficient—what matters is *where* peacekeepers are, *when* they arrive, and *how* they operate. Recent research by Hultman and Corsant-Colat confirms that the spatial and temporal responsiveness of UN deployments is central to their protective impact. As peacekeeping adapts to more fluid, fast-evolving conflict environments, stronger planning capacity is essential. This 'Planning for POC' will increasingly depend on the strategic alignment of deployment patterns, mobility, and actionable intelligence.

UN mandates authorize peacekeepers to use force to protect civilians under imminent threat—*within their areas of deployment*. The implication is clear: peacekeepers must be present where violence is occurring or likely to occur. A growing body of evidence confirms this. Subnational analyses across African POC-mandated missions from 2000 to 2011 show that deployments tend to follow patterns of violence by non-state armed groups, and that military presence significantly reduces the risk of further attacks in those areas.[10] Recent analysis of the 2012 to 2022 period reinforces these findings and adds a new layer: peacekeeping missions do respond to escalating threats by reinforcing or redeploying troops, particularly in response to violence by non-state actors.[11]

However, responsiveness remains uneven. While missions have shown some willingness to reinforce deployments in areas where state forces have attacked civilians, the level of response is weaker. Political constraints continue to limit operational flexibility in confronting state-sponsored violence—an enduring structural challenge for POC mandates.

Terrain, infrastructure, and risk to peacekeepers themselves also shape deployment decisions. Non-state actors frequently exploit difficult terrain and seasonal weather to conduct attacks in areas where UN mobility is hampered. During the rainy season, for example, armed groups increase attacks as peacekeepers' ability to reach affected populations declines.[12]

[10] Hultman, Kathman and Shannon, (2013).
[11] Hultman and Corsant-Colat, forthcoming.
[12] Hultman and Corsant-Colat, forthcoming.

Recent data from the Geo-PKO dataset underscores these dynamics. While new base deployments or troop reinforcements often follow prior patterns of violence, many high-risk areas remain uncovered. In the Central African Republic, MINUSCA adjusted its deployment posture in response to shifting violence from 2014 to 2022, strengthening presence in areas like the central-south where non-state actors intensified attacks. Yet large portions of the country remain effectively ungoverned and beyond peacekeeping reach, limiting the UN's ability to prevent armed group consolidation or offer credible deterrence.

Planning for more effective POC must therefore address not only *where* uniformed personnel are deployed, but also *how quickly* and *how flexibly* they can be reoriented. Mobility is key. Temporary Operating Bases (TOBs), long-range patrols, and rapid deployment mechanisms can extend reach and demonstrate presence in volatile zones without requiring permanent infrastructure. These tools have become increasingly important in missions like MONUSCO and MINUSCA, but they remain underutilized or insufficiently resourced, often shaped by the security concerns of T/PCCs, and frequently driven by military logistics rather than POC priorities. Their protective impact is also diminished when civilian and police components are not co-located or operationally integrated, in part due to resource and safety constraints, reducing early warning, local engagement, and responsiveness to community concerns.[13]

This underscores the importance of intelligence—both technical and relational. While UN missions have made progress on Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, many still struggle to integrate this data with insights from civilian staff and local networks. Without integrated and dynamic analysis, mission planners risk deploying to the wrong areas or failing to anticipate shifts in violence. The use of spatial grid analysis, as demonstrated by recent research, offers a promising model for evaluating risk and adjusting deployments over time. But real-time responsiveness will require mandates, resourcing models and a mission leadership posture that prioritize anticipatory action, not just reaction.

In short, strategic deployment is not just a logistical function—it is a political act. It signals who is seen, whose lives matter, and where the UN is willing to project power. Enhancing responsiveness means developing more agile operational tools and reinforcing political commitment—within missions, at Headquarters, and in the Security Council—to support deployment decisions that prioritize the protection of populations, even when "politically difficult."

As the UN, its partners, and other peacekeeping stakeholders consider future mission models and force configurations, embedding POC into the earliest stages of planning—and resourcing for mobility and responsiveness—must become the norm. Civilian-military integration, mobility-enhancing tools like TOBs, and intelligence-informed planning are not optional add-ons. They are prerequisites for credible, effective protection in today's volatile environments.

Recommendations

For Member States and peace operations stakeholders

- Revive and prioritize regular inter-departmental scenario and contingency planning, focused on protection considerations and outcomes, to better advise and inform the Security Council and other UN bodies of options to enhance the protection of civilians.

[13] Lauren Spink, "Moving Toward Mobility. Providing Protection to Civilians Through Static Presence and Mobile Peacekeeping in South Sudan," *Center for Civilians in Armed Conflict* (March 2019). https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/MovingTowardMobility.pdf.

- Embed POC considerations into the earliest stages of mission planning and mandate design.
- Equip missions with the right resources, policies, and training to utilize multi-dimensional mobile deployments—including TOBs, long-range patrols, and rapid response units—and ensure decisions on where and when to deploy them are grounded in POC threat analysis.
- Support UN leadership at HQ and mission level to prioritize POC-related deployment and resource allocation decisions.

For peace operations personnel at headquarters and in the field

- Improve coordination between civilian, military, and police components to enhance situational awareness, early warning, and rapid response.
- Institutionalize dynamic, real-time conflict analysis by integrating tools such as spatial grid risk mapping and regular monitoring of key risk factors for violence against civilians into existing systems like SAGE.
- Accelerate adoption of technologies such as aerial surveillance, predictive analytics, and decentralized alert systems.

2. Local Engagement and Civilian Perceptions of Peace Operations

Alongside the development of POC doctrine and guidance at UN headquarters, field-level innovation has played a critical role in advancing protection through peacekeeping. A central element in this evolution has been strengthening connections between peacekeepers and local communities—not only to improve situational awareness and threat identification, but to build trust and local ownership of protection.[14] This has led to initiatives such as the creation of community liaison assistants (CLAs), first piloted in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)—national staff hired to support communication between the mission and local communities—as well as community alert networks (CANs), which enhance early warning capacities. In addition, missions have invested in local conflict management processes, engaging communities to address violence stemming from locally rooted grievances and mediating disputes overlooked by national peace processes. In the Central African Republic, for example, MINUSCA facilitated Local Peace Committees (LPCs) that helped monitor security, foster intercommunal dialogue, and provide early conflict warnings. Military engagement tools have also evolved, including the use of engagement platoons and female engagement teams to build rapport, gather information, and expand access in otherwise hard-to-reach areas.[15]

As the footprint of peace operations evolves, continuous community engagement and sustained local responsiveness must be central to mandate implementation in today's conflict environments. While local engagement is often shaped—and sometimes constrained—by broader national dynamics, including stalled political transitions and contested authority structures, a community-based approach can make a difference. Recent research shows that even when host-state consent is partial or compromised, missions can still deliver meaningful

[14] Emily Paddon Rhoads and Aditi Gorur, "UN Peacekeeping, Community Engagement and Civilian Protective Agency," in *Civilian Protective Agency in Violent Settings: A Comparative Perspective,* ed. Jana Krause, Juan Masullo, Emily Paddon Rhoads and Jennifer Welsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023): 227–243.
[15] United Nations, *UN Engagement Platoon Handbook* (October 2022). https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/2022_11_un_engagement_platoon_handbook_october_2022.pdf.

protection through localized engagement, community dialogue, and support for bottom-up peace initiatives.[16]

In contexts where national state capacity is weak or the commitment to protection is uneven, the protection focus of peace operations should pivot to local actors, empowering communities and administrations to take decisions that tangibly reduce civilian vulnerability. This 'community-first' approach should inform strategic, operational, and tactical dimensions of mission planning. Simultaneously, mission components working at the local level should regularly conduct civilian perception studies to assess the effectiveness and credibility of their protection strategies—and to course correct as needed. Too often, insights from community engagement fail to meaningfully shape operational decisions or mission priorities. Strengthening feedback loops is therefore essential. Above all, missions' community-focused strategies should be grounded in a clear understanding of how civilians act to protect themselves, so as not to inadvertently undermine or displace local coping mechanisms.

All three tiers of POC—protection through dialogue and engagement, protection from physical violence, and the establishment of a protective environment—can and should be applied where civilian vulnerabilities are most acute. Prioritizing local engagement and community-based protection requires not only clear policy frameworks, but operational approaches that foster social cohesion, support local governance, and invest in local conflict resolution. This is particularly critical for remote or underserved areas, where integrating protection with humanitarian and development efforts—as seen in emerging nexus approaches in contexts like the DRC—can enhance responsiveness and sustainability. When communities are actively involved in early warning and response systems, their capacity for self-protection increases, strengthening both local resilience and the mission's legitimacy.[17]

In sum, sustained and meaningful community engagement is not a supplemental peacekeeping activity—it is a cornerstone of effective protection. As missions recalibrate and adapt, placing local voices and perceptions at the heart of POC will be essential for building resilient, trusted, and inclusive approaches to civilian security.

Recommendations

For Member States and peace operations stakeholders

- Expand investment in community-based protection mechanisms, including Community Alert Networks and Local Protection Committees, while also strengthening initiatives that support sustained communication and trust-building with local populations—such as increasing the number and geographic reach of Community Liaison Assistants and, where feasible, deploying engagement platoons with integrated language and interpretation support.
- Invest in a better understanding of what makes community-engagement effective and support key enablers of that engagement in mission contexts.

For peace operations personnel at headquarters and in the field

- Integrate civilian perception studies into mission-level planning and decision-making processes to inform responses and adapt approaches.
- Systematically assess existing civilian self-protection strategies and mechanisms, and ensure that these are safely and effectively supported as a central aspect of protection activities by peace operations.

[16] Allard Duursma, Sara Lindberg Bromley and Aditi Gorur, "The Impact of Host-State Consent on the Protection of Civilians in UN Peacekeeping," *Civil Wars* 26, no.1 (2024): 16–40.
[17] Paddon Rhoads and Gorur, "UN Peacekeeping, Community Engagement," 227–243.

- Where consent is fragile, prioritize decentralized protection activities that engage local actors and support community mediation.
- Strengthen local protection actors to act as a frontline against threats during and after missions withdraw—while proactively assessing and mitigating potential risks.
- Leverage digital tools to sustain community engagement in remote or high-mobility settings.

3. Policing as an Underleveraged Asset in POC

UNPOL has been a crucial element in peace operations with POC mandates. In contexts as varied as Haiti, Central African Republic (CAR), DRC, Abyei, and South Sudan, police units have proven effective in reducing violence, engaging communities, and supporting host-state law enforcement.

UNPOL have worked to serve these objectives in five key ways.[18] First, in environments where threats are non-military—such as IDP camp protection, anti-gang operations, and urban patrols—Formed Police Units (FPUs) offer a flexible security presence and are often more effective than military forces. Second, UNPOL's mobility and adaptability can in some cases allow for quick deployment in response to outbreaks of violence and security threats, making them more adaptable than military and civilian counterparts. Third, UNPOL collaborates with national law enforcement to promote protection-focused policing and reinforce local protection systems. Fourth, close engagement with local populations helps UNPOL build trust, improve intelligence-sharing, and enhances efforts to prevent threats to civilians. This includes support for local self-protection mechanisms, such as community watch groups and customary courts. Finally, UNPOL supports other mission components—escorting civilian personnel, reinforcing early warning mechanisms, and contributing to integrated protection responses.

In the context of peace operations transitions—where security tasks being performed by UN actors shift back to national authorities—UNPOL has become increasingly central. Police units can help bridge critical protection gaps as military components draw down, offering continuity and reducing the risks of security vacuums. In Liberia, for example, UNMIL temporarily increased police deployments to deter attacks on civilians during drawdown. UNPOL has also played key roles in successor settings such as Haiti (MINUJUSTH) and Sudan (UNITAMS), where it provided security, capacity-building, and advisory support to follow-on SPMs and other partners in UN Country Teams (e.g. UNDP).

Yet many transitions have underutilized UNPOL's potential, failing to define or support its POC role and leaving gaps in protection. The abrupt closure of MINUSMA in Mali illustrates how constrained political conditions—not just inadequate planning—can jeopardize protection continuity and police presence.

Despite its potential to serve protection goals, UNPOL faces several operational and structural challenges. Chief among them is the growing militarization of UNPOL deployments: nearly 70% of UNPOL personnel serve in FPUs, which function more as paramilitary units than as community-oriented police. While FPUs can offer a politically acceptable alternative to military deployments in some contexts, their prominence risks crowding out investment in police with specialized skills—such as community engagement, support to state institutions, and GBV response. This can undermine UN efforts to promote democratic, rights-based policing and may weaken public trust. In addition, language and

[18] Charles Hunt, "Protection of Civilians by Police in UN Peace Operations," *Issue Brief,* International Peace Institute, forthcoming.

cultural barriers continue to hamper meaningful police engagement with local communities, with reliance on interpreters limiting effective communication and reducing opportunities for intelligence gathering.

Political and institutional constraints compound these issues. Host-state sovereignty concerns, bureaucratic inertia, and overlapping (sometimes competing) mandates among UN entities constrain UNPOL operations and coordination. Past experiences, such as with MINUJUSTH in Haiti, underscore how these challenges can hamper effective transitions: underutilized UNPOL roles during drawdown left critical gaps in protection and eroded earlier gains. Data-related limitations—including inadequate assessment tools, weak integration with UN monitoring systems, and poor data-sharing practices—also undermine efforts to evaluate and enhance police contributions to POC.

UNPOL remains an essential but underutilized tool for POC in UN peace operations. In line with the *Pact for the Future*'s call for more flexible and adaptive mission models, peacekeeping stakeholders should focus on leveraging police capacity more strategically for protection. UNPOL can expand its preventive role by addressing growing threats such as urban violence, organized crime, and cyber insecurity. It can also support (sub-)regional security initiatives—as seen in Sudan and Somalia—by providing training and advisory support to parallel missions as part of multi-actor peace operations. There is growing scope for UNPOL in hybrid and/or sequenced deployments, including through the use of Specialized Police Teams (SPTs) as a bridge between UN field presences. And because policing is inherently community-facing, UNPOL is well-placed to contribute to long-term civilian protection by strengthening community mechanisms—such as customary courts, community watch groups, and local protection committees—which are critical in fragile security environments.

Recommendations

For Member States and peace operations stakeholders

- Further leverage the role of UNPOL in the implementation of POC mandates. This should be accompanied by greater inclusion of UNPOL in high-level policy processes—including Security Council deliberations, C-34 discussions, and broader reform dialogues on the future of peace operations.
- Clarify and strengthen UNPOL's role and capabilities in mission transition planning and in bridging to successor missions or SPMs.

For peace operations personnel at headquarters and in the field

- Ensure the skills of UNPOL officers deployed to missions match the environment in which they are deployed and the priority tasks that they will perform. Avoid excessive militarization and prioritize police units with community-policing, engagement, gender, and rule of law expertise.
- Expand training for all UNPOL personnel on POC, community engagement and gender sensitivity.
- Improve data collection and performance monitoring to better assess and communicate UNPOL's contributions to POC mandate implementation.

4. Strategic Communications as a Tool for Protection

Strategic communications have become an increasingly vital component of protection through peacekeeping.[19] In environments where misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, and hate speech (MDMH) restrict communities' access to credible information, UN messaging can (re)build trust, shape the actions of civilians, and deter violence. Recent studies confirm this impact: UN radio broadcasts have been shown to reduce violence against civilians both in proximity to troop deployments and—critically—even in areas beyond peacekeepers' reach.[20]

Research points to multiple ways in which strategic communications support POC. They can reassure communities of UN protection, counter incitement to violence, promote behavioral change among civilians and armed actors, and publicize accountability mechanisms related to civilian harm —such as information about how to report incidents, the role of human rights monitoring, and efforts to pursue justice or redress for violence committed by armed groups or state actors. In Mali, for instance, UN radio helped mitigate communal violence by promoting reconciliation messages. In Côte d'Ivoire, broadcasts helped to deter militia attacks, particularly where peacekeepers were co-located. Importantly, these effects did not require extensive physical presence, demonstrating how strategic communications can act as a force multiplier—especially when mobility is constrained or troop coverage is limited.

However, these benefits depend on trust, credibility, and local resonance. In short, the source and quality of communications matter. Messaging is most effective when it is perceived as impartial, culturally grounded, and relevant to the particular conflict context. In settings where anti-UN sentiment is low and access to alternative sources of information are limited, UN communications are more likely to shift attitudes and behavior.

Timeliness is also critical. Delays in launching mission communications—often due to capacity or mandate gaps—can blunt their impact. Early, proactive messaging not only shapes expectations but also inoculates communities against disinformation. While decentralized communication allows for tailored local messaging, a lack of policy-level guidance can lead to fragmented narratives. Mixed signals—such as calls for dialogue from public information officers alongside more forceful messaging from a mission's military leadership—can erode the credibility of both. Strategic communications must be tightly aligned with overall POC strategies, with strong coordination between political, military, police, and civilian actors.

At the policy level, strategic communications remain under-resourced and insufficiently prioritized. Despite their recognized value, few missions are equipped to scale these efforts to meet the magnitude of protection challenges. Media assistance remains absent from most peacekeeping mandates. Supporting independent, professional successor media outlets—particularly during mission drawdown—can sustain the protective effects of UN communications but doing so requires early planning, donor commitment, and safeguards for editorial independence. At the same time, building state capacity to communicate with local populations can help foster trust between governments, civilians, and peace operations.

Strategic communications will never replace the need for physical protection—but they significantly extend the reach, responsiveness and legitimacy of peace operations. In volatile, information-scarce environments, the ability to shape narratives and respond to misinformation is not a secondary function—it is central to the success of POC. To leave it

[19] This section is based on Hannah Smidt and Marc Werner, "UN Strategic Communications and the Protection of Civilians," *Issue Brief,* International Peace Institute, forthcoming.
[20] Ibid.

underfunded or secondary is to risk ceding the narrative terrain to those who incite or distort violence.

Strategic communications must also operate at the global level. In addition to engaging local audiences, the UN must do more to communicate the positive impact of peace operations to Member States and to reinforce POC as a 'core business' of peacekeeping. Too often, the message that peacekeeping protects civilians and reduces harm is lost amid broader critiques of UN effectiveness. This weakens the political will necessary to sustain peacekeeping as a core conflict management tool and undermines support for particular mission mandates. Articulating the successes of POC—backed by evidence—is essential to maintaining Member State engagement.

Recommendations

For Member States and peace operations stakeholders

- Make strategic communications a core pillar of protection mandates through adequate resourcing, staffing and closer integration into protection strategies.
- Support independent, context-sensitive media initiatives—particularly during mission transitions—to help sustain accurate, protective messaging and trusted information-sharing beyond mission exit, in coordination with local actors and within national media landscapes.

For peace operations personnel at headquarters and in the field

- Ensure strategic communications are culturally grounded and built around a stronger understanding of the local media and social media environment, including through partnerships with civil society actors who are well-placed to understand the information context.
- Coordinate efforts to identify and prevent the spread of harmful MDMH through strategic communications as a whole-of-mission endeavor.
- Invest early in scalable platforms—radio, SMS, social media—to counter disinformation and build civilian confidence.

5. Partnerships, Regional Approaches, and Emerging Models

"Partnership peacekeeping" has become the norm rather than the exception in today's global peace and security landscape.[21] One notable trend is the rise of non-UN missions, many of them regional, operating alongside or in place of UN deployments. This reflects a shift endorsed in the Secretary-General's *New Agenda for Peace*[22] and reinforced by Security Council Resolution 2719 (2023), which opens the door to sustainable financing for AU-led Peace Support Operations (PSOs).[23]

A strong UN-AU partnership will be essential to the future of peace operations in Africa—particularly in anchoring POC mandates. Over the past two decades, the two organizations have developed shared frameworks, such as the 2017 Joint Framework for an Enhanced Partnership in Peace and Security, and now embed POC into mission planning. Both institutions have also formalized POC policies.[24] The UN's policy applies to all UN missions

[21] Maurice Schumann and Corinne Bara, "A New Era: Power in Partnership Peacekeeping," *International Studies Quarterly*, 67, no. 3 (2023).
[22] *A New Agenda for Peace,* 12.
[23] United Nations Security Council*, Resolution 2719*, S/RES/2719 (2023).
[24] United Nations Department of Peace Operations, *Policy on the Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping* (New York: United Nations, 2023); African Union, *African Union Policy on Protection of Civilians in Peace Support Operations* (Addis Ababa: African Union, 2023).

with a POC mandate; the AU's policy applies to AU-led PSOs and serves as a guide for PSOs led by regional economic communities (RECs) and ad-hoc security initiatives (ASIs).

Operational distinctions, however, remain significant.[25] The UN typically deploys multidimensional peacekeeping operations to support host states and all conflict parties in maintaining peace. As a result, UN missions prioritize protecting civilians from both non-state armed groups and state actors that pose a threat to populations. Military, police, and civilian components are jointly tasked with proactive protection, including through political engagement. In contrast, many African-led operations[26] are deployed to fight alongside host-state forces in counterinsurgency campaigns. Their protection strategies often focus on mitigating harm caused by the actions of their own forces, rather than proactively deterring threats to civilians.[27]

Going forward, more effective alignment of UN and AU protection policies requires a broader redefinition of the strategic roles of each institution in peace operations and PSOs. This is especially important for addressing current and emerging civilian protection challenges—particularly in counterterrorism and other highly kinetic contexts. A critical piece of this reset is the re-establishment of political support for peace efforts in the policy organs of both institutions. Dwindling political will and lack of consensus increasingly constrain the core objectives and functions of peace operations, including POC. In 2024 alone, the UN Security Council vetoed ceasefire resolutions for two major conflicts, prolonging crises and worsening civilian suffering.

But the different configurations of "partnership peacekeeping" also need to be assessed according to their protection outcomes. For example, one recent study found that non-UN missions alone have not significantly reduced violence by non-state armed groups—and in some cases, parallel deployments have undermined the effectiveness of UN missions.[28] What is more, scholars warn that the UN's support for regional and ad hoc coalitions has eroded the principle of impartiality, making the organization appear complicit in regime defense and counterterrorism campaigns that in some cases have led to human rights abuses.[29]

These critiques underscore the urgent need to revisit when, how, and under what conditions the UN supports operations led by partners. Protection mandates must not be subordinated to political expediency. At minimum, support to non-UN missions should be contingent on clear protection safeguards, human rights vetting, and operational transparency.

As partnership peacekeeping moves forward, three core priorities should guide efforts to strengthen POC effectiveness in Africa—for both the UN and regional actors.

1. *Comparative advantages*: Different actors bring different strengths. Investing in region-specific, scenario-based planning—especially in the Sahel, Horn, and Central Africa—is key to strengthening and aligning early warning systems for timely, effective responses.
2. *Non-kinetic protection*: Political engagement, human rights monitoring, and trust-building should be foundational, not peripheral. Addressing gaps in policing and rule of law capacities—particularly in AU and REC-led missions—should be a shared priority, with UNPOL playing a greater support role where appropriate.

[25] This section draws on Andrew E. Yaw Tchie and Lauren McGowan, *The United Nations–African Union Partnership and the Protection of Civilians*, International Peace Institute (March 2025).
[26] The term "African-led PSOs" is used here to refer to all operations led by the AU, RECs, and ASIs.
[27] Not all UN peacekeeping operations and African-led PSOs fit neatly into these categories.
[28] Corinne Bara, "Protection of Civilians in Partnership Peacekeeping," *Issue Brief*, International Peace Institute, forthcoming.
[29] John Karlsrud, "UN Peacekeeping and Impartiality: A Fading Relationship," *Ethics & International Affairs*, 38, no.4 (2024): 433-443.

3. *Community engagement:* Empowering local actors through institutionalized networks, civil society partnerships, and scenario-based training is essential—especially for regional missions—to navigate asymmetric threats and blurred civilian-combatant lines.

Partnerships will define the future of peacekeeping. But to protect civilians effectively, they must be grounded in shared principles, clear mandates, and the will and capacity to both confront imminent threats to civilians and invest in building a broader protective environment.

Recommendations

For all peace operations stakeholders

- Follow through on requirements for robust protection safeguards—including accountability mechanisms and human rights vetting—for any UN support to regional or partner operations.
- Clarify respective POC responsibilities in hybrid, sequential, or joint deployments between the UN, AU, RECs, and others.
- Avoid sacrificing core peacekeeping principles—such as consent, impartiality, and legitimacy—in pursuit of short-term operational gains, as doing so risks undermining long-term protection efforts and broader mission credibility.
- Support capacity-building across regional organizations and national security institutions in T/PCCs to institutionalize protection from HQ to field level.
- Strengthen early warning systems and communications between the UN and partner organization deployments in volatile contexts.
- Establish a UN–AU POC technology and innovation platform to help scale up adaptive protection technologies—ranging from early warning systems to AI-enabled communications—and promote interoperability and skills exchange across institutions.
- Promote modular partnerships that pair complementary capabilities—for example, matching regional troop deployments with UN-provided air assets, medical teams, interpreters, and other technology support—to address operational gaps and maximize collective impact.

Conclusion: Reaffirming and Reimagining POC – Priorities for the Future

As the UN embarks on a strategic review of peace operations, the Protection of Civilians must be reaffirmed not just as a core commitment but as a renewed ambition. The current moment demands more than marginal adjustments—it calls for bold, forward-looking reforms that respond to evolving protection challenges and the complex realities of today's operational environments. In an era of shrinking missions, contested consent, and evolving threats, the future of POC lies in more flexible, community-driven, and civilian-led approaches —supported, in some contexts, by uniformed components. These efforts must also reinforce the host state's primary responsibility to protect civilians. UN support should enable, not replace, national efforts—and must be designed with exit in mind, to avoid creating dependencies or delaying local accountability.

The proposals below aim to reimagine how protection is conceived, resourced, and delivered—anchoring the next generation of peace operations in strategic foresight, field innovation, and inclusive operational design.

Recommit to POC as a Cross-cutting Responsibility
These recommendations apply not only to Member States but also to the UN Secretariat—particularly DPO, DPPA, and EOSG—as well as UN Resident Coordinators and key external stakeholders.

- **Reaffirm member state commitment to POC as a political priority.** Establish a renewed group of champions—formal or informal—to drive coordinated diplomacy, resource mobilization, and policy alignment around protection goals. Member States should reflect POC priorities not only in multilateral diplomacy but also through bilateral engagement. Embassies in mission settings can play a pivotal role by advocating for protection goals, coordinating closely with peace operations, and reinforcing messaging to host-state actors. Similarly, embedding POC in national foreign policy frameworks can institutionalize sustained support for civilian protection across diplomatic, development, and security domains.
- **Reconsider the role and relevance of POC within the "Future of Peacekeeping, New Models, and Related Capabilities" study**. Elaborate how each model can contribute to the protection of civilians—even where models do not have an explicit protection mandate—and identify what would be required to deliver protection.[30]
- **Create a cross-institutional network for POC analysis and learning.** Regularly convene policymakers, researchers, practitioners, and civil society in a 'Global POC Network' to bridge policy and practice, build evidence, and support timely, context-sensitive protection strategies.
- **Break down silos across the UN system.** In an era of scarce resources, integrated approaches to building a collective responsibility for protection, rather than institutional divisions of labor, are paramount. In line with the *Agenda for Protection* and the *New Agenda for Peace*, ensure that DPO and DPPA collaborate meaningfully on protection mandates and practice. Civilians do not distinguish between peacekeeping and political missions—and the peace operations of the future should reflect that reality.
- **Integrate protection into broader policy conversations.** Ensure that POC is not treated as a niche issue, but as integral to discussions around sustaining peace, climate and conflict, atrocity prevention, and humanitarian response. Make specific efforts to link protection to the ongoing review of the UN's peacebuilding architecture.

Elevate Civilian Expertise and Improve Protection Strategy Design

- **Strengthen civilian capabilities.** Protection is not solely a military function. Member States should support more agile, mobile, and civilian-focused mission configurations—especially during transitions or in settings where large-scale uniformed deployments are not feasible. Police units will also be a critical resource in future configurations depending on context and mandate.
- **Embed civilian expertise in operational decision-making**. Ensure that senior civilian protection staff are consistently integrated into planning, threat analysis, and

[30] Lisa Sharland, "Future 'Models' of Peace Operations and Protection of Civilian Considerations," Stimson Center, DRAFT (March 2025).

deployment decisions, including in joint strategic planning units and operations centers, as well as in liaison functions in Force and Police planning cells.

- **Enhance surge capacity for civilian protection roles**. Expand and better coordinate existing rosters and standby arrangements to ensure rapid deployment of civilian protection experts to support missions and SPMs in emerging or deteriorating contexts. This will also require addressing HR and logistical constraints that limit mobility, including restrictions on remote deployments and how civilian staff are equipped and supported in the field.
- **Ensure that protection strategies are both coherent and responsive to different civilian vulnerabilities and capacities.** Improve joint analysis and develop integrated strategies to address the particular protection risks facing different segments of the civilian population (e.g., IDPs in camps or local communities; women and girls; those with disabilities). Design strategies in close coordination with non-mission protection actors, including host government institutions as appropriate.
- **Invest in analytical capacity to anticipate unintended impacts**. Missions and external actors should strengthen their ability to analyze the impact of POC mandates on local conflict dynamics and civilian vulnerabilities—supporting more adaptive, conflict-sensitive protection strategies.

Protect Beyond the Mission

- **Deepen the implementation of community-based protection approaches.** Make community engagement not only a guiding principle but a consistently resourced and operationalized practice across all phases of mission planning and execution. This includes supporting and scaling community-based protection initiatives—particularly in hard-to-reach areas and in contexts with limited or contested host-state consent.
- **Launch a Global Protection Fund or Financing Window for National-Local Partnerships.** Initiate a new multilateral funding stream— either as a standalone initiative or a dedicated window within the Peacebuilding Fund or other pooled funding arrangements—that focuses specifically on POC. This stream would prioritize flexible, frontline investments in locally driven protection initiatives in mission and post-mission contexts. It would also support civil society actors, municipalities, and UN components in building protection infrastructure (e.g., alert systems, safe spaces, community mediation platforms), especially in volatile or under-resourced environments. Key to this funding would be its ability to link short-term protection to longer-term resilience.
- **Create a Civilian Protection Contingency Mechanism (CPCM).** Establish a contingency response mechanism triggered when protection indicators decline post mission withdrawal, ensuring a minimal re-engagement threshold through SPMs, civilian teams, or regional policing support.
- **Demand implementation of the UN's *Agenda for Protection***: Support the UN protection mechanisms outlined in the *Agenda for Protection*, including the establishment of a Protection Support Hub and holding the UN accountable for protection work. Emphasize the goal of delivering 'full protection' that goes beyond legal compliance to include preventive and proactive protection.

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