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## COVID19 and UN Peacekeeping: Posing Existing Global Governance Questions with New Urgency



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On 23 March 2020, UN Secretary-General António Guterres appealed for “an immediate global ceasefire,” arguing that the spread of COVID19 meant that “[i]t is time to put armed conflict on lockdown and focus together on the true fight of our lives.” The Security Council endorsed the appeal, though it took until 1 July to agree on a supporting resolution. However, many armed actors ignored the initiative, including in states hosting UN peacekeeping operations. The Central African Republic faced violent clashes in its north-east and north-west from April 2020 onwards. Mali witnessed a coup in August. Conflicts and tensions persisted in the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Abyei, Lebanon, and beyond. The UN’s thirteen active peacekeeping missions – which in

August 2020 deployed some 70,000 troops, 9,000 police officers and 11,000 civilians – thus had to seek ways of continuing to deliver on their priority mandates while mitigating the challenges posed by the pandemic.

This essay begins with a brief overview of some of the immediate impacts of COVID19 on UN peacekeeping operations. It goes on to argue that the pandemic has also highlighted deeper tensions in UN peacekeeping, posing existing global governance questions with renewed urgency. It highlights two particular areas of tension: the risk of unintended harm and the impact of financial constraints on peacekeeping operations.

## Immediate Impacts

COVID19 forced UN peace operations to review, adjust and restrict their activities. Some tasks were suspended, either because they required close contact with local populations or because severely constrained missions had to prioritize activities deemed more immediately critical. COVID19-related activities, such as awareness campaigns and medical equipment donations, increased. Patrols continued with new physical distance protocols, but decreased in frequency due to personnel shortages and movement restrictions imposed by host governments.

Within missions, COVID19 has had multiple impacts. Some peacekeepers have become sick. The UN announced the first two COVID-related deaths among peacekeepers on 29 May. By 6 July, there were 550 confirmed COVID cases among UN peacekeepers, but fewer than 10 fatalities. As of 1 October, there were 463 cases, including three deaths, among MINUSCA peacekeepers in the Central African Republic. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, MONUSCO recorded 171 cases, including 6 fatalities, by 25 November.

Missions had to adjust to keep both peacekeepers and local populations safe. A battalion arriving in Lebanon in late March underwent preventive quarantine. Two UN bases impacted by COVID19 in Mali were put into quarantine in May. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, a formed police unit was quarantined in October. In Cyprus, peacekeepers from Argentina deployed a decontamination tunnel to keep their base Covid-19 free.

To reduce the risk of infection, missions moved towards remote working for designated “critical staff”, while staff identified as “non-critical” were not asked to work but continued to receive pay. In April, rotations for uniformed personnel – repatriating and replacing individuals at the end of their (typically 12-month) deployment – were suspended for several months, leaving some peacekeepers deployed well beyond their expected tour of duty. International civilian staff faced leave postponements and international travel restrictions, which made it impossible to see their loved ones at home. Locally recruited national staff, who account for some 60% of civilians in UN missions, have faced difficulties telecommuting because of limited local internet access; some reported feeling pressured to report physically to work despite the health risks.

## Global Governance Challenge 1: Unintended Harm from Peacekeeping

There is very robust empirical evidence that UN peacekeeping operations can limit and contain armed violence, reduce atrocities against civilians, shorten civil wars, and reduce the risk of conflict reignition. However, the COVID19 pandemic served as a powerful reminder that even peace operations that make significant contributions to peace and security in their host state may simultaneously risk causing unintended harm.

This issue extends beyond COVID19. Peace operations may unintentionally undermine democratization in host states by supporting increasingly authoritarian incumbent regimes to promote political stability. Peacekeepers’ military operations against armed groups can cause civilian casualties. Cooperating with peacekeepers may put local civilians at risk for reprisals. In 2010, UN peacekeepers unwittingly sparked a cholera epidemic in Haiti. Sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) by UN peacekeepers is a perennial and pervasive issue, with 753 allegations recorded in the period between 2007-2020.

COVID19 foregrounded the risk of unintended harm from peacekeeping in an exceptionally salient and systematic way. The virus spread relatively late to Africa, where most major UN missions – and 85% of UN peacekeepers – are deployed. The continent’s first confirmed cases occurred in mid-February and early March, primarily linked to travelers arriving from Europe. Civilian and uniformed UN peacekeepers traveling to their African duty stations from regions more heavily impacted by COVID19 thus posed a significant risk of spreading the virus to host states, whose fragile institutions, weak healthcare systems, and widespread poverty and displacement created major challenges for addressing. These capacity concerns remain, though robust early public health

measures and community health structures developed against other diseases (including Ebola) appear to have helped limit infection and fatality rates in many African countries, at least to date.

Three aspects of the responses to the risk of UN peacekeepers becoming a vector for COVID<sub>19</sub> highlight broader issues related to the global governance of unintended harms from peacekeeping. First, the UN made substantial efforts to mitigate the risk of spreading COVID<sub>19</sub> through its peacekeeping operations. Policies ranged from travel restrictions and other measures discussed above to detailed logistics guidelines, including for managing COVID<sub>19</sub> infected wastes. Such risk management strategies are appropriate and important. The UN has developed similar policies to address other areas of potential unintended harm, including strategies to reduce the environmental impacts of peace operations, a “do no harm” approach to mission interactions with local civilians, a requirement for detailed civilian risk assessments before military operations, and a “Zero Tolerance” stance on SEA.

Yet risk management strategies policies can only reduce the likelihood of unintended harm, not eliminate it, which raises the question of how the UN does, can, and should respond if its peacekeeping operations do inflict harm. To date, the UN appears to have avoided this scenario with COVID<sub>19</sub>: UN peace operations are not known to have been at the origin of any major COVID<sub>19</sub> outbreaks. Past experience on other issues, however, suggests that the UN’s capacity and willingness to offer redress for unintended harms lags significantly behind its ability to promulgate risk mitigation policies. The UN has declined to pay compensation to cholera victims in Haiti. The SEA case highlights not only important limitations on the UN’s ability to hold peacekeepers accountable for violations of the Zero Tolerance policy – for uniformed personnel, any punishment beyond repatriation depends on national authorities – but also a lack of responsiveness to victims and “woefully inadequate” measures for offering them redress.

Second, the initial call to restrict UN troop rotations reportedly came from a peacekeeping host state, not the UN. South Sudan’s Chief of Staff appears to have written to the UNMISS Force Commander on 3 March requesting that rotations from several countries experiencing a high incidence of COVID<sub>19</sub> be suspended. On 6 March, the UN asked nine countries (Cambodia, China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Nepal, South Korea and Thailand) to suspend their UN troop rotations before suspending all rotations on 7 April. This timeline raises the question of how much influence host states can and should exercise over UN peace operations in the name of risk management.

Host state consent has been a key principle of UN peacekeeping since the Cold War, and UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld explicitly conceded that consent might include conditions about the composition of a UN force. Host state consent is also a pragmatic necessity for peace operations, which cannot operate without at least a minimal acquiescence from host governments. Thus, both principle and pragmatism lent weight to South Sudan's request for a suspension of particular states UN troop rotations. Yet host governments' assessments of, and reactions to, the risk of unintended harm from peace operations can be heavily political. When the African Union began deploying to Darfur in 2005, the government of Sudan expressed concerns that peacekeepers might bring HIV/AIDS to the region and proposed screening troops before deployment. Given its support for Janjaweed militia engaged in widespread atrocities in the region, these objections are most credibly interpreted as efforts to delay the AU mission. Conversely, when the UN Security Council created MONUSCO's Intervention Brigade in 2013 and mandated it to "neutralize" armed groups in the DRC, the host government's assessment of the attendant risks was likely shaped by its interest in eliminating these groups: its own forces' record suggests that it was prepared to countenance civilian casualties in the process. Thus, host state governments are not always unbiased arbiters of what is – and is not – an acceptable level of risk of unintended harm from UN peace operations.

Third, local populations in several host states have reacted with deep fear and suspicion to the risk of UN peacekeepers spreading COVID19. In South Sudan, reports in April 2020 of the country's first four COVID19 cases occurring among UN staff triggered. In Central African Republic, COVID19 was dubbed the "Minuscavirus". Similar backlash has been reported in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mali. UN efforts to counter such reactions are, ironically, complicated by COVID19-related physical distancing measures, though UN radio stations may play an important role in facilitating contact-free communication. UN missions have also sought to counter negative perceptions by publicly supporting local authorities' efforts to fight the virus. Fundamentally, however, the underlying popular hostility and distrust towards the UN that helped fuel COVID-related protests also makes effective communication difficult. In this sense, the pandemic illustrates the broader challenge of conducting peace operations in an environment where they face significant and persistent popular mistrust.

## Global Governance Challenge 2: Peacekeeping Financing

Global governance institutions typically require funding. Financing is both a prime arena for politics within the funded institution (including burden-sharing debates and

competition for influence) and an important determinant of how that institution functions. The COVID19 pandemic has highlighted these two dynamics within the institution of UN peacekeeping.

COVID19 has struck UN peacekeeping during a period of contraction and financial constraint. Total authorized UN peacekeeping expenditures decreased by over 21% between 2015 and 2019, from \$8.47 billion in 2014/2015 to \$6.65 billion in 2019/2020. This decline reflected both the closure of missions in Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire and Haiti and persistent pressure from major financial contributors to cut costs in on-going operations, including those facing significant political and security challenges. The USA, which is currently responsible for almost 28% of UN peacekeeping expenses, has often led these demands.

COVID19's immediate financial impact on UN peacekeeping operations is ambiguous. Missions have faced unexpected expenditures on COVID19-prevention efforts, but some of these could be financed through existing means. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, MONUSCO used Quick Impact Project funds to donate equipment and materials for combatting COVID19 to South Kivu's provincial government. Suspended activities and delayed uniformed personnel rotations may also constitute short-term savings. Most crucially, budget negotiations in May and June 2020 – conducted online due to the pandemic – did not result in major reductions in approved expenditures. States agreed on mission budgets totaling almost \$6.6 billion, \$60 million more than the General Assembly approved the previous year.<sup>[1]</sup> This was just \$78 million less than the Secretary-General had requested in April and aligned closely with the recommendations of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, which reportedly provided a key negotiating focus given the exceptional online setting.

In the longer term, however, significant peacekeeping budget cuts appear likely as the economic repercussions of the pandemic fuel further demands for cost reductions. The effects of such financial pressures will be felt both at UN Headquarters in New York and within UN peace operations.

At UN Headquarters, financial debates are also political debates. As noted, the USA is the largest financial contributor to UN peacekeeping, as well as to the (separate) regular UN budget. Multiple US administrations – including the Trump administration – have argued that the US share is excessive and demanded more burden-sharing. In the 1990s, US refusal to pay its full assessed share of peacekeeping expenses precipitated a deep

financial crisis within the UN. In October 2020, slow US payments of regular budget dues created a severe cash flow crisis in the UN system. Joe Biden's victory in the November 2020 US election diminished the risk of this crisis persisting and extending to UN peacekeeping operations, but he is likely to face domestic opposition to UN payments given the economic impact of the pandemic. European powers, who are also important financial contributors but face their own pandemic-related economic downturns, may be unwilling or unable to shoulder additional UN financing burdens. One possible outcome is a reduction in UN peacekeeping activities and a shift to smaller operations and other conflict management tools, such as political missions and regional peace operations. Some suggest that the era of large, expensive multidimensional UN peace operations – already waning before the pandemic – may now be over.

Yet similar debates about the continued relevance of UN peacekeeping in the 1990s ended with a dramatic resurgence in the 2000s. If the demand for peacekeeping increases again – potentially due to crises precipitated by the pandemic's longer-term impacts – while Western reluctance to fund such operations persists, the result could be a realignment of peacekeeping funding. China has already allowed its assessed share of UN peacekeeping expenses to increase from under 2% in 2001 to over 15% in 2020 and is currently the second largest financial contributor to UN peacekeeping. It is also the largest UN troop contributor among the five permanent Security Council members and the 10th largest personnel contributor overall. These commitments amplify China's prominence in peacekeeping debates and broader UN politics. That prominence would be further augmented if China increased its financial contributions again to offset US reluctance, with repercussions not only for UN Headquarters politics but also for the nature of UN peacekeeping, given China's opposition to human rights and democracy support mandates.

Within UN peacekeeping operations, financial austerity had already produced strains before the pandemic began. Military, police and civilian UN peacekeepers express frustration at being inadequately resourced to accomplish mandated tasks, a concern also frequently raised at UN Headquarters. For civilian peacekeeping staff – who unlike their uniformed counterparts are UN employees – downsizing has become a recurrent and deeply demoralizing reality. Between 2010 and 2018, the number of civilian peacekeeper positions shrank from 22,437 to 14,162 – a 37% decline – and in 2019 hundreds more positions were eliminated. The result has been increased stress, diminished motivation, heightened management distrust, and exacerbated tensions among civilian peacekeepers, including between national and international staff.

The pandemic has exacerbated many of these challenges. Military, police and civilian peacekeepers face the frustrations of working online and/or trying to implement in-person tasks despite escalating obstacles. They may also face increased worries about becoming sick in an environment with limited healthcare resources, COVID19-related restrictions on daily life, and heightened local hostility to UN missions. Postponed rotations and leaves extend these hardships over time. In addition, job insecurity is likely to increase among civilian peacekeepers. Redundancy fears may be especially high among those designated as “non-critical” staff, struggling to work online, or worried that UN member states will conclude from the COVID19 experience that their position can be cut because their functions can be performed remotely. Yet all peacekeepers will also recognize the risk of future funding cuts arising from COVID19-related economic downturns.

In short, the COVID19 pandemic has not only posed immediate challenges to UN peacekeeping operations but also placed in stark relief two broader tensions in UN peacekeeping: the risk of unintended harm – both real and as perceived by local populations – and the political and operational repercussions of financing constraints. Both tensions raise about the global governance of UN peacekeeping that predate COVID19 and are likely to persist after the pandemic subsides.

## Notes

[1] How yearly total approved expenditures compare will depend on the second six-month allocation for UNAMID, expected in December 2020.

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*The essay can be found online at:*

<https://wccias.northwestern.edu/covid-19-research/covid19-and-un-peacekeeping-posing-existing-global-governance-questions-with-new-urgency.html>

*The **Global Governance in the Age of COVID** essay symposium can be found online at:*

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