

The Politics of A4P

BACKGROUND PAPER

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1. Introduction: Whose politics matters?

The *Declaration of Shared Commitments on UN Peacekeeping Operations* emphasizes “the primacy of politics” to conflict resolution.¹ This is not a surprise: The phrase, popularized by the 2015 High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) is now standard UN language. But what is the main political problem that Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) is supposed to solve?

The Declaration addresses two distinct levels of political debate. Much of the section ostensibly focusing on “political solutions to conflict” (paras 4-10) actually dwells on smoothing diplomatic interactions among “peacekeeping stakeholders” in New York. It concentrates on (i) Security Council decision-making, (ii) the links between mandates and resource debates in the General Assembly; and (iii) consultations with Troop and Police Contributing Countries (TCCs and PCCs).²

By contrast, the rather shorter section of the Declaration on the “impact of peacekeeping on sustaining peace” (paras 16-17) refocuses attention on how UN operations engage in politics on the ground. This emphasizes the need for (i) missions to cooperate better with governments; (ii) work with civil society and (iii) ensure that the plethora of UN actors in theater coordinate their actions more effectively. This section is probably more faithful to the vision of the primacy of politics tabled by the HIPPO Report, which underlines the need for the UN to engage closely and creatively with national authorities and non-state actors, as well as addressing social tensions.³

In sum, the Declaration encompasses two quite different visions of what the politics of peacekeeping is all about. We can call the first one the “diplomat’s vision”, with a focus on sustaining the inter-governmental framework for mandating and managing missions. The second is the “SRSG’s vision”, prioritizing the political and operational dilemmas of life in the field. This is unfortunate because, as Adam Day and Jake Sherman argue, peace operations should adopt political strategies that reflect both

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views, opinion or position of the Challenges Forum Partnership.



¹ Available at <https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/a4p-declaration-en.pdf>.

² While TCC/PCC consultations are a persistent political headache, I will not deal with them here, as Alexandra Novosseloff covers military issues at length in her parallel Challenges Forum paper.

³ UN document A/70/95 – S/2015/466* (2015), paras 43-58.

(i) strategic realities in New York, and (ii) facts on the ground:

Overly prescriptive mandates can reduce the political space in which the SRSG, and by extension, the mission, operate. The political strategy—how the overarching political goals defined by the Council will be met—should be informed by an understanding of the drivers of conflict as well as possible points of influence, leverage, and opportunity. It should be driven by the SRSG, drawing on analysis of conflict drivers, including international, regional, national, and local dimensions, and input from a range of stakeholders both inside and outside the country. This does not preclude advice and guidance from UN Headquarters, which will often be more attuned to political dynamics in the Council and other international stakeholders than the field, but a political strategy should not be led from New York.⁴

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The Security Council has taken steps to communicate better with the field – by, for example, having SRSGs brief them by videoconference – the cultural divide between endures.⁵ The new Declaration also tries to draw together divergent political perspectives on peace operations (para 4) but it is not clear that the document will genuinely erase the differences between them.

These differences are important, and anyone who has worked on UN peace operations sees it play out day-to-day. Diplomats in New York, haggling over geopolitical issues and juggling budgetary pressures, have little time for the minutiae of life in the field. I recall one P5 diplomat responding to the HIPPO’s emphasis on the “primacy of politics” with a succinct putdown: “Politics is what we do in the Security Council.” Conversely, field operators think the New York crowd are remote and unrealistic. I also have fond memories of one former SRSG telling a group of diplomats discussing mandating as part of the HIPPO process that he had never taken the mandates he got from the Security Council seriously. He had decided to work on the bits he liked.

Scholars working on peace operations highlight the growing gap in political priorities between headquarters and the field as an obstacle to effective peacekeeping. The most common complaint from UN officials is that the Security Council drafts lengthy and ambitious mandates disconnected from realities on the ground. In 2016, Security Council Report complained that the most recent mandate for the UN Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) “lays out more than 20 tasks for the mission in a 15-page document.”⁶ Despite much talk in the council about pruning mandates, the latest MONUSCO resolution is 18 pages long.⁷

As Day and Sherman note, such mandates frequently fail to reflect the “small, and often shrinking, space for the UN to play a constructive and meaningful role in advancing the political objectives of the Security

4 Adam Day and Jake Sherman, “Political Solutions Must Drive the Design and Implementation of Peace Operations,” IPI Global Observatory, 20 June 2018.

5 For a more academic discussion of “systemic” and “field” issues affecting peacekeeping, see Richard Gowan, “Peace Operations,” in Thomas G. Weiss and Sam Daws, eds., *The Oxford Handbook on the United Nations*, 2nd edn (Oxford University Press, 2018), pp428-437.

6 The Security Council and Peace Operations: Reform and Deliver (Security Council Report, 2016), p10.

7 UN document S/RES/2409 (2018).

Council” in intractable and complex conflicts.⁸ Recent studies also suggest that, even in such unpromising environments, UN officials can still help build peace but only if they are willing to collaborate closely with local actors and where necessary, “circumvent standard operating procedures put in place by their headquarters or donors.”⁹ Yet the council’s tendency to place more demands and duties on missions makes them less flexible.

Diplomats respond that mission leaders on the ground – caught up in complex wheeling-and-dealing, often with uncooperative national “partners” – do not give them clear, honest or strategic information on local dynamics. This is in spite of the facts that (i) UN missions are increasingly comfortable with information and intelligence gathering, meaning that they should have more to report; and (ii) the UN secretariat has recently taken steps to improve its information and analysis, including launching a new series of strategic reviews of missions. But the secretariat has resisted sharing the findings of these reviews with the council and Member States, and there are suspicions that UN officials are concealing unpleasant findings. One council diplomat complains that when he asks for strategic analysis from the field, he gets “lists of who senior UN officials have met,” providing no context or guidance on the political dynamics at play.

In sum, effective peacekeeping continues to be hampered by the distance between the political worlds of headquarters and the field. The inter-governmental system in New York with the Security Council at center is not giving missions on the ground the political back up they need. Missions on the ground are not feeding information and analysis to offer more useful strategic direction. These are not new complaints – versions of them can be found in UN reform studies going back to the 2000 Brahimi Report and beyond – but they are a heavy drag on the UN’s work.

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2. Can A4P bridge the headquarters/field divide?

The A4P process is an opportunity to overcome these divisions. The negotiation process leading up to the Declaration was already a step in the right direction, as UN officials used a series of seminars to lay out field-level problems to New York-based diplomats. Attending a few of these events and related discussions, I noted many diplomats showing a little more sympathy for field perspectives. While the resulting Declaration acknowledges both New York-level and mission-level political concerns, it makes an effort to bridge the divisions between them (paras 5-6):

- A call for the Security Council to “pursue clear, focused, sequenced, prioritized and achievable mandates” implicitly pushing the council to focus more on what is realistic on the ground;

8 Adam Day and Jake Sherman, “Political Solutions,” (see note 5).

9 Susanna Campbell, *Global Governance and Local Peace: Accountability and Performance in International Peacebuilding* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), p4.

- A commitment by the Secretary-General to offer “comprehensive analysis with frank and realistic recommendations,” including more fully sharing the findings from strategic reviews;
- An intriguing proposal that states should support “Security Council resolutions through our bilateral and multilateral engagements,” pointing out that governments have capabilities and responsibilities to affect events in UN mission areas, not just wait for peacekeepers to act.

At the time of writing, the Netherlands and Côte d’Ivoire are reportedly developing a Security Council resolution detailing these commitments, although five permanent members (P5) of the council are suspicious of proposals that might constrain them. Not all observers believe that A4P will transform the way the council does politics. “Stating that political engagement is important is unlikely to increase it,” as Jake Sherman warns, and “without more concrete ideas for making mandates more realistic, this is another empty call that will not result in meaningful change.”¹⁰

There are good reasons for this skepticism. If many current complaints about poor field-headquarters relations are very familiar to anyone who has followed peacekeeping in the last two decades, so are the proposed solutions and their inherent flaws. Policy reviews regularly exhort the Secretary-General and SRSGs to “tell the Security Council what it needs to know, not what it wants to hear” or similar. But when senior UN officials try to be “frank and realistic” with the council, they often encounter immediate pushback (to take a historical example that still has consequences for peacekeeping, the secretariat repeatedly queried the wisdom of deploying blue helmets to Darfur and Chad in 2005-2007, but the council overruled them). Meanwhile, it is easy enough to say that the council should shrink its lengthy mandates in theory, but not quite so simple in practice. You could slice a page out of MONUSCO 18-page mandate if you deleted all its tasks on human rights, to be crude about it, but this would send a dire signal to Kinshasa.

There are further reasons to question whether this is a good time to reframe the way the Security Council mandates missions and deal with the field. Tensions among the P5 are high and although these center on issues without a peacekeeping dimension – such as Syria, Iran and the Koreas – they have bled into recent mandating processes. Disputes with France over the mandates for MONUSCO and the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) allegedly led the U.S. to threaten to veto the continuation of both missions in 2017. In 2018, China and Russia abstained on resolutions renewing the mandates of the UN operations in Haiti and the Western Sahara, specifically criticizing the American approach to mandate negotiations in the latter case.¹¹ Even more concerning, P5 divisions also held up the latest mandate for the UN Stabilization Force in the Central African Republic – a force under severe

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¹⁰ Jake Sherman, *Action for Peacekeeping: Will Political Consensus Lead to Change in Practice?* (International Peace Institute, 2018), p4.

¹¹ Dulcie Leimbach, “John Bolton Cracks the Whip on the UN Mission in the Western Sahara,” *PassBlue*, 15 May 2018.

pressure from armed groups – this year.

These cases suggest that the inter-governmental tensions are likely to complicate mandating processes further in the years ahead, rather than enable more rational negotiations. Equally difficult diplomatic dynamics are at work in the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly, which negotiates UN peacekeeping budgets in the second quarter of the year. Always somewhat dysfunctional, this body has become even more chaotic in recent years, in part reflecting the recent U.S. push to cut UN costs. While the Declaration call for “greater coherence between mandates and resources”, and council and Fifth Committee representatives could coordinate more closely more formally, the chances of restoring sanity to UN budgetary talks are quite low.¹²

Looking at this rather bleak picture, those who take a “diplomat’s vision” of the politics of peacekeeping may conclude that it is best to avoid complicating already difficult talks in the coming period with big ideas about UN procedures. And those who take an “SRSG’s vision” may think that it is best to keep New York splits out of their affairs and see what they can do locally.

Nonetheless, A4P has at least created a minimum of inter-governmental consensus about the need to address the politics of peacekeeping at both the headquarters and field levels. What can those countries that want to see real change, and their allies in UN system, do to build on this?

3. Political strategies: Information, consultation and field engagement

If A4P is going to have a significant legacy, it will likely be because small numbers of states find ways to work with the secretariat and field missions to promote action on the Declaration. Without prejudging the Dutch-Ivorian draft resolution on A4P, it is possible to identify three openings for change. The first rests on the Secretary-General and UN missions, while the second and third pivot on the willingness of Member States – notably elected council members – to act:

3.1. A radical upgrade in UN information and analysis

While the Secretary-General and his Special Representatives face many political constraints both in New York and the field, they have one tool to help overcome the divisions between New York and the field. This is their ability to “shape the narrative” about how missions are developing through their information and analysis. The current system of Secretary-General’s reports and council briefings appears to be burdensome and uninformative for all concerned. While there is a lot of solid facts in those reports that should be preserved, the Secretary-General and SRSGs should respond to the Declaration’s call for “comprehensive analysis” of field mission through:

12 Jake Sherman, “With Peacekeeping Budget Approved, More Contentious Negotiations Lie Ahead,” IPI Global Observatory, 13 July 2018.

- Pooling data and analysis from UN and non-UN sources to offer more strategic and dynamic overviews of the political, security and other dynamics facing UN operations;
- Sharing the new generation of UN strategic reviews with the council in full, if necessary in closed consultations to maintain their confidentiality;¹³
- More confidently sharing strategic ideas with the council by, for example, sending options papers for various missions (possibly as letters from the Secretary-General to the President of the Council to give them official status) half way through a mission's mandate period.

3.2. More substantive discussions of mandates in the council

In response to improved information and analysis from the UN system, the Security Council could considerably strengthen its consultations on peace operations. At present, the three Western permanent members of the council (P3) hold mandate-drafting closely, and often only share their texts with other about a fortnight before they need to be approved. Elected members of the council, TCCs and PCCs often grouse about this situation but often lack expertise or targeted ideas about how to improve the drafts. At times they are guilty of promoting vague extra paragraphs for resolutions with no clear strategic logic. While the International Peace Institute, Stimson Center and Security Council Report now co-host strategic discussions of missions in advance of mandate processes, elected council members could do more to inform mandate discussions by:¹⁴

- Regularly combining analytical resources and inputs from their diplomats in the field (see below) to table joint papers on missions and mandates in advance of mandate processes;
- Convening more Arria Formula (unofficial council briefings) meetings of the council to hear opinions from independent security analysts on sensitive missions;
- Exercising restraint in tabling proposed additions to mandates that do not address clearly identified problems to avoid further cluttering up and extending resolutions unnecessarily.

3.3. Enhancing Member State engagement on the ground

One interesting aspect of the Declaration is its call for Member States to back up council resolutions through their other “bilateral and multilateral” policies. In many cases, even council members do not much to coordinate their UN policies and the work of their diplomatic missions in affected countries. As I have noted elsewhere, council members took a much more direct role in implementing mandates in the early years of the UN – for example appointing “consular commissions” and “good offices missions” of national representatives to conflict-affected countries – and

¹³ The council has recently called for greater access to the reviews. See para 13 od S/RES/2436 (2018).

¹⁴ See, for example: <https://www.ipinst.org/2018/10/prioritizing-and-sequencing-peacekeeping-mandates-minusca>.

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these precedents may have renewed value today.¹⁵ While not all council members have national presences in states where UN forces are deployed, council visiting missions offer a chance to engage. In this context, P5 and elected council member may consider:

- Making more systematic and strategic use of council missions to address problems facing peacekeeping – by, for example, sending missions to follow up on the UN strategic reviews;
- Instructing national representatives in host states to (i) engage jointly with national authorities and UN officials around mandating processes; and (ii) where possible submit joint position papers on challenges and options to their counterparts in New York;
- Reflecting the Declaration’s reference to “multilateral” policies, Council members should organize at least one annual round-table with their counterparts at the World Bank, to address common peacebuilding concerns, reflecting the Bank’s new focus on fragility.

4. Conclusion

Even if Member States and the UN system put their combined weight behind implementing A4P, the process of designing mandates will always be haphazard. “By definition, crisis management is a disorderly and imperfect political business that can be improved at the margins but not made into a science,” as I concluded an earlier study of the Security Council and peacekeeping. “The Council will never truly escape its constraints.”¹⁶ The growing range of actors involved in crisis management – most obviously regional organizations and coalitions, duly acknowledged in the Declaration (para 18) – only adds to the complexity of the world the UN faces. But if both diplomats and UN officials in the field are willing to work together a little more closely they may mitigate some of the recurrent tensions that make the politics of peacekeeping hard at all levels.

15 Richard Gowan, *Diplomacy in Action: Expanding the UN Security Council’s Role in Crisis Management and Conflict Prevention* (NYU Center on International Cooperation, 2017), pp5-6.

16 Richard Gowan, “The Security Council and Peacekeeping,” in Sebastian von Einsiedel, David M. Malone and Bruno Stagno Ugarte, eds, *The UN Security Council in the 21st Century* (Rienner, 2016), p768.