



Evaluating the Effectiveness of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations in Maintaining International Peace: Successes, Failures and Future Challenges

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Abstract

United Nations peacekeeping is one of the key tools of multilateral conflict management, but its efficiency in ensuring international peace is becoming a controversial issue. This article states that peacekeeping is a conditionally effective institution and not a universal success or failure. The paper will assess peacekeeping in five dimensions based on official policy documents of the United Nations and a comparative analysis of key missions, namely, containment of conflicts, protection of civilians, political transition support, institutional stabilization, and post-exit durability. It demonstrates that peacekeeping works relatively well when a mission is linked to a plausible political process, with coherent Security Council support, with host-state cooperation, and with a mandate that is commensurate to available civilian, police, and military resources. Conversely, peacekeeping fails miserably when it is sent into an active war with no plausible peace to maintain, with divided approval, or with exaggerated expectations that surpass the operational capabilities. The article is a synthesis of doctrinal and comparative case evaluation of Namibia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Rwanda, Srebrenica and Mali. It concludes that the most convincing account of effectiveness is the interplay between politics and operations: consent, legitimacy, mandate design, regional diplomacy, mobility, intelligence, and accountability all contribute to outcomes. The article concludes that the United Nations peacekeeping is still essential to the modern peace and security architecture, but its future usefulness lies in adaptation and not rhetorical growth. The reform priorities are politically oriented mandates, enhanced capability matching, enhanced partnerships, situational awareness that is technology enabled and increased accountability to both the host populations and deployed forces.

Keywords: United Nations peacekeeping, international peace, civilian protection, mandate design, Security Council, peace operations.

1. Introduction

Peacekeeping has been a practical tool of the United Nations (UN) since 1948 to manage armed conflict, oversee ceasefires, assist political transitions, and assist war-affected societies to transition to more stable forms of order. Over seventy operations have been developed during this time and peacekeeping has changed to be less armed interposition forces to multidimensional missions that incorporate military, police and civilian elements. By January 2026, the UN had eleven peacekeeping missions with 53,856 staff members representing 121 countries and funded by an approved annual peacekeeping budget of approximately US\$5.4 billion (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2026). Over 95 per cent of the current peacekeepers are deployed under the mandate that incorporates the protection of

civilians (United Nations Peacekeeping, n.d.-b). These statistics affirm that peacekeeping is at the heart of the peace and security structure of the UN.

But the modern history of peacekeeping is highly disputed. On the one hand, peacekeeping is often referred to as one of the most visible and cost-effective contributions of the UN to the world order. Missions in Namibia, Sierra Leone, and Liberia assisted in the implementation of ceasefires, supervision of elections, demobilization of combatants, and the reestablishment of state institutions. Large-N studies have also discovered that peacekeeping is able to extend peace following civil war, lessen violence in the battlefield, and enhance civilian security when credible individuals are deployed (Fortna, 2004; Hultman, Kathman, and Shannon, 2013, 2014). Across the river, the Rwandan and Srebrenica historical memory remains a symbol of disastrous international failure, and events in other places like Mali demonstrate how missions can become caught between ambitious mandates, host-state consent that is contested, and worsening security situations. Critics believe that peacekeeping is too frequently requested to stabilize wars which lack any actual political settlement, and that legal authority on paper cannot offset constrained resources, ineffective intelligence, or fragmented geopolitical support.

This conflict indicates a key analytical issue. The discussion of peacekeeping is frequently caught in the binary conclusions: either peacekeeping is effective, or it is not. These judgments are misguided since missions are conducted in radically different political and military environments. It is not whether peacekeeping succeeds in the abstract, but under what conditions it succeeds, what aspects of success are most important, and why similar missions produce such radically different results. This paper thus considers effectiveness to be conditional and multidimensional. A mission can lessen mass combat but not establish lasting institutions; it can facilitate an electoral transition but still be feeble in terms of civilian protection; it can deter escalation over years but still leave a fragile political settlement when it withdraws. These differences must be reflected in a serious evaluation.

The article makes three connected assertions. To begin with, UN peacekeeping is not outdated or universal; it is a useful multilateral instrument that can only be successful when there is political and operational congruence. Second, mandate language is not the strongest predictor of mission performance but rather the combination of four factors: the quality of political consent, the realism of the mandate, the sufficiency of capabilities, and the conflict environment. Third, the modern reform cannot be presented as the process of strengthening peacekeeping in the abstract. Rather, reform must be directed at politically coherent strategy, mission designs that are appropriate to the conflict, enhanced protection capabilities, and enhanced accountability.

The article is methodologically a mixture of doctrinal and policy analysis of the UN peacekeeping structure and a comparative evaluation of six cases: Namibia, Sierra Leone, and Liberia as relative successes; Rwanda, Srebrenica, and Mali as failures or severe limitations. These instances are chosen since they shed light on the evolving logic of peacekeeping in the context of traditional transition operations, multidimensional post-conflict operations, protection crises, and modern settings characterized by fragmented consent. The following part is a literature review and the creation of an analytical framework to assess effectiveness.

2. Literature Review, Research Gap, and Analytical Framework

The scholarly discourse on peacekeeping has shifted away normative discussion to more advanced empirical research. Initial debates tended to revolve around the legality, sovereignty, and the institutional innovations that enabled the UN to use forces even though there was no explicit Charter chapter on

peacekeeping. Subsequent research questioned whether peacekeeping had any discernible impact following civil war. The influential work by Fortna proved that peacekeeping has a strong effect on the sustainability of peace following civil war settlements, refuting the argument that missions only deploy where peace is likely to be (Fortna, 2004). Later research narrowed that argument by demonstrating that peacekeeping is capable of reducing the number of deaths on the battlefield and one-sided violence against civilians when the troop strength is sufficient and the civilians are not abandoned to insurgents (Hultman et al., 2013, 2014). Local dynamics research also indicates that peacekeeping does not just monitor the elites but also reassures the communities, deters the spoilers, and makes their commitments more believable at the subnational level (Ruggeri, Dorussen, and Gizelis, 2017).

The second body of literature looks at the transformation of peacekeeping since the late 1990s. The collapse of the Cold War broadened the scope of work of missions, and the failure in Bosnia and Rwanda drove the UN to more forceful civilian-protection demands. Bellamy and Hunt (2015) explain this development by three general changes: the shift to the centrality of civilian protection, the shift to stabilization, and the increased readiness to use force. The same is demonstrated by Howard and Dayal (2018), who indicate that modern multidimensional missions are increasingly working under Chapter VII authority, which implies that peacekeepers should not merely monitor ceasefires. According to Howard (2019), peacekeeping cannot be evaluated by the principles of war-fighting or counterinsurgency; its unique value is persuasion, inducement, and calculated coercion within a framework of internationally legitimate standards.

A third strand examines political and institutional impacts other than violence reduction. Other studies have linked peacekeeping to better rule-of-law performance or better democratic performance, particularly when missions interact with domestic institutions in times of relative peace, as opposed to times of high war. The other work focuses on peacekeeping partnerships, demonstrating that UN missions may be more successful when they are backed by regional actors and neighboring states that have a political stake in the settlement. This is important since peacekeeping is inherently political prior to being military: even a well-equipped operation cannot replace the lack of elite dedication to peace.

In spite of these advances, there are two gaps. To begin with, the literature continues to be inclined to divide macro-level statistical results and the realities of mission design. Big-N studies inform us that peacekeeping is usually associated with improved results, yet they do not provide a complete picture of why certain missions with seemingly similar mandates can work differently on the ground. Second, policy discussion tends to be either filled with success stories or iconic failures, creating an inaccurate vocabulary of effective and ineffective missions. A more practical framework involves breaking down effectiveness into specific dimensions and then connecting the dimensions with the political and operational environments in which missions operate.

This article thus assesses peacekeeping in five dimensions: (1) containment of conflict, i.e. the capacity to reduce or prevent renewed large-scale violence; (2) protection of civilians, i.e. deterrence, physical protection and safer humanitarian access; (3) support to political transition, i.e. ceasefire implementation, elections, mediation and good offices; (4) institutional stabilization, i.e. dis These dimensions enable mixed outcomes to be identified instead of concealed.

The explanatory model here is based on four fundamental independent variables. The former is political consent, which is not merely a formal host-state approval but a more substantive congruence between national elites, conflict parties, and major regional actors. The second is the mandate realism, or

the extent to which the given tasks correspond to the political environment and the means at hand. The third is capability adequacy, such as troop quality, mobility, intelligence, civilian expertise, logistics, and leadership. The fourth is the conflict environment, particularly the presence of a negotiated transition or an active war with fragmented armed groups. These variables do not act independently, but interact. As an illustration, a powerful mandate without approval can lead to more confrontation and less effectiveness; abundant forces without political policy can only control symptoms.

Table 1 summarizes the framework used in the paper.

Figure 1. Conditional model of UN peacekeeping effectiveness

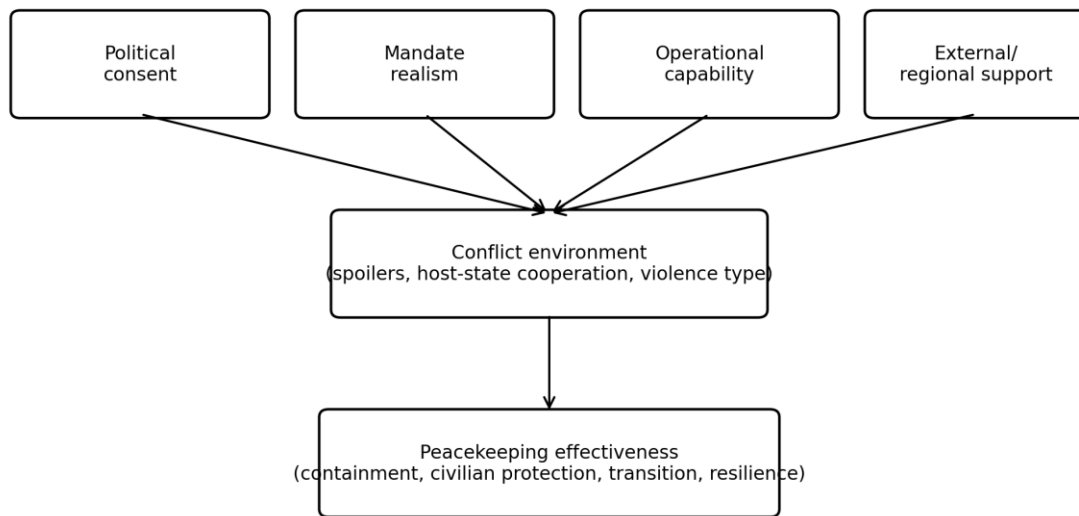


Figure 1. Conditional model of UN peacekeeping effectiveness

Source: Author's analytical synthesis based on the comparative framework and mission discussion in the text.

Table 1. Analytical dimensions of UN peacekeeping effectiveness

Dimension	Core indicators
Conflict containment	Ceasefire monitoring, reduction in battle deaths, deterrence of relapse
Protection of civilians	Physical protection, deterrence of attacks, humanitarian access
Political transition	Mediation support, election assistance, implementation of agreements
Institutional stabilization	DDR, police reform, justice support, administrative reconstruction
Durability after exit	Persistence of peace, resilience of institutions, quality of transition

Collectively, the literature indicates a moderate conclusion. Peacekeeping is not a panacea, but the overwhelming evidence suggests that it works better than most of its critics would suggest. The actual analytical problem is to define when it works, why and to what extent. This is discussed in the following section that looks at the doctrinal development of UN peacekeeping and the institutional tensions that define the effectiveness of missions.

3. The Changing Logic of United Nations Peacekeeping

The UN peacekeeping is based on a peculiar institutional basis. The Charter does not formally establish a distinct category of enforcement, peacekeeping, but the practice has become a practical instrument between the consensual settlement mechanisms of Chapter VI and the coercive mechanisms of Chapter VII. Gradually, peacekeeping became linked to three fundamental principles: the consent of the parties, impartiality, and the non-use of force unless in self-defence and defence of the mandate (United Nations Peacekeeping, n.d.-a). These principles have never been fixed, yet they are fundamental. Their understanding has shifted because the UN has ceased to be an interstate observation mission and has shifted to multidimensional operations in intrastate conflicts.

Consent is commonly regarded as the legal and political status of peacekeeping, yet it is not as solid as the word implies. In most modern conflicts there is no one sovereign interlocutor that can plausibly bind all armed actors. Even when a central government formally accepts a mission, local commanders, spoilers, criminal networks, and foreign sponsors can subvert the meaning of consent. This issue is now explicitly acknowledged in UN doctrine, which states that local or fragmented consent can be lacking even in cases where national authorities consent to deployment (United Nations Peacekeeping, n.d.-a). To be effective, then, consent must be perceived as a continuum, not as a yes-or-no legal fact.

Unbiasedness is also often misconstrued. It does not imply a lack of commitment to peace and violence, or lack of concern in the implementation of mandates. Instead, impartiality demands unbiased, rule-based behavior in favor of the mandate. Practically, though, the distinction between unbiased execution and perceived bias is hard to draw when missions are assigned the responsibility of assisting host-state institutions and at the same time safeguarding civilians against threats that might involve state actors or state-backed forces. This tension was intensified by the emergence of stabilization requirements that brought peacekeeping nearer to security assistance to governments with insurgencies. Such a step can enhance state capacity, but it may also undermine local perceptions of legitimacy when peacekeepers are seen to be partisan to one side.

The most visible change has been in the third principle-limited use of force. The Security Council has been granting multidimensional missions under Chapter VII, particularly when protection of civilians is the primary focus, since the late 1990s (Howard and Dayal, 2018). This does not transform peacekeeping into war-fighting, but it does increase expectations. Modern missions are supposed to prevent attacks, safeguard civilian populations, establish humanitarian space, and occasionally facilitate disarmament in a setting where violence is still active. According to Bellamy and Hunt (2015), these expectations turned peacekeeping into a less armed buffer into a more complex and even coercive business. But force is not the answer to the main question: missions are requested to defend without being involved in the war, and to stabilize without substituting the political settlement they are expected to defend.

Multidimensional and integrated peacekeeping has been the institutional response to this dilemma. Missions are now integrated with military forces, constituted police, political affairs officers, electoral

experts, rule-of-law specialists, human rights personnel, and civilian administrators. Civilian protection has turned into a mission-wide task and not a strictly military task. UN policy underlines that protection is a combined activity that should be sought by prevention, deterrence, and response, and never beyond the capabilities and areas of deployment of the mission (United Nations Peacekeeping, n.d.-c). This is an important caveat. It recognizes a practical fact that is frequently overlooked in the popular discourse: mandates create expectations, but civilians can only be defended where missions have the mobility, intelligence, legitimacy, and force posture to operate.

Recent UN reform efforts affirm that peacekeeping is being reconsidered in terms of political coherence and capability that matches and not institutional expansion per se. Action for Peacekeeping and its successor agenda, A4P+, prioritize collective coherence in the back of a political approach, strategic and operational integration, capabilities and mindsets, accountability to and of peacekeepers, and the application of data and technology (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2025). The future of peacekeeping study by the independent 2024 study makes an even more acute point: peacekeeping is more likely to succeed when the parties to the conflict are interested in making peace, when the Security Council is united, when the neighbors are interested in the stability, and when the host government is cooperative (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2024). That is, peacekeeping can still be effective, but it is a politically oriented and contextualized instrument.

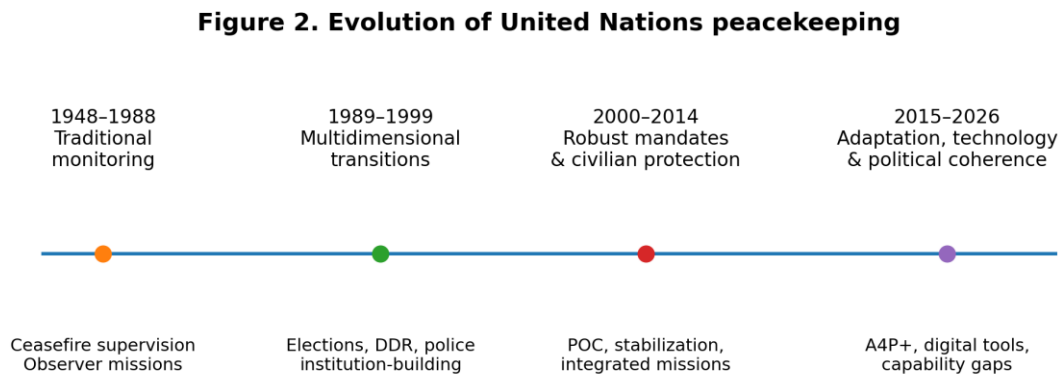


Figure 2. Evolution of United Nations peacekeeping

Source: Author's analytical synthesis based on the comparative framework and mission discussion in the text.

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Comparative findings

Figure 3. Comparative mission effectiveness across cases

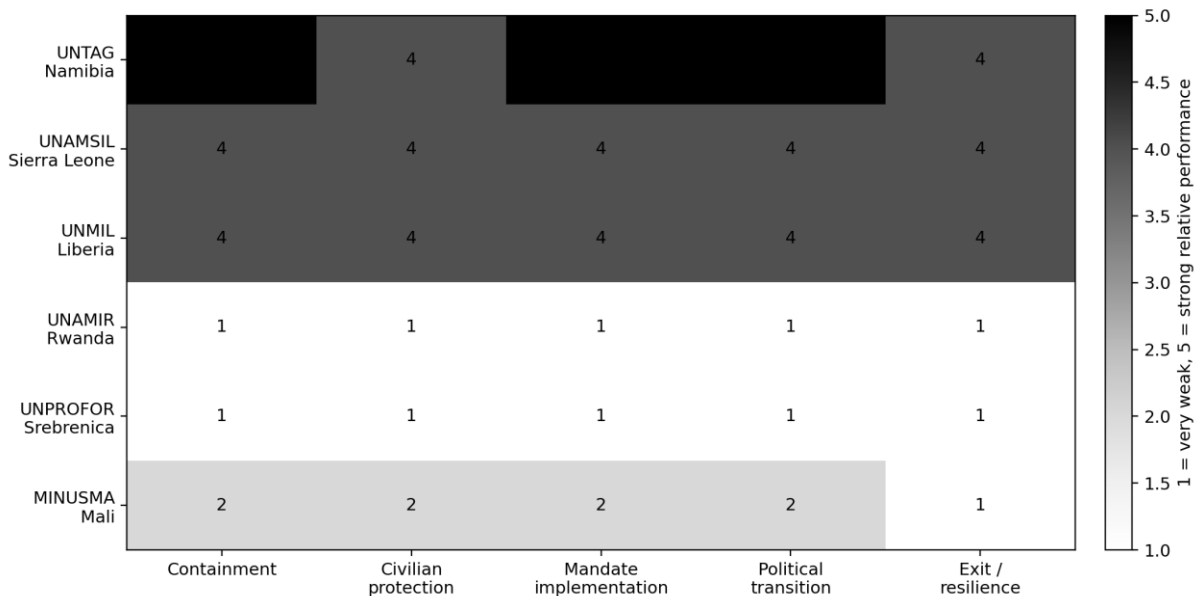


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Across these six cases, patterns become clear. Relative successes—Namibia, Sierra Leone, and Liberia—shared four features: a discernible political process; consent that was meaningful enough to permit implementation; mandates better aligned to context; and capabilities sufficient for the tasks assigned. By contrast, Rwanda and Srebrenica represented extreme cases in which the UN promised protection without the political or operational means to enforce it. Mali falls between these poles: the mission was neither irrelevant nor wholly ineffective, but it was deployed in a conflict environment whose fragmentation and counterterrorism logic exceeded the design assumptions of traditional peacekeeping.

Table 2. Comparative summary of mission performance

Mission	Political setting	Main contribution	Binding constraint	Overall assessment
UNTAG (Namibia)	Negotiated transition	Elections, ceasefire implementation, supervised independence	Limited compared with later missions	High relative success

Mission	Political setting	Main contribution	Binding constraint	Overall assessment
UNAMSIL (Sierra Leone)	Post-war settlement with serious risks	DDR, election support, police rebuilding, deterrence of relapse	Early security crisis and mandate stress	Strong success after adaptation
UNMIL (Liberia)	Post-war recovery with long horizon	Civilian protection, DDR, institutional rebuilding	Dependence on sustained external support	Strong long-term success
UNAMIR (Rwanda)	Genocide and collapsing peace process	Minimal due to mandate and resource constraints	Lack of will, weak mandate, tiny force	Catastrophic failure
UNPROFOR /Srebrenica	Safe-area promise amid active war	Symbolic protection claim	Inadequate force and political backing	Catastrophic failure
MINUSMA (Mali)	Fragmented conflict and contested consent	Local stabilization and protection in limited areas	Strategic mismatch in counterterror environment	Severe structural limitation

The comparison supports the paper's central argument: peacekeeping is conditionally effective. It works most plausibly when politics, mandate, and capability are aligned; it fails most dramatically when symbolic presence is mistaken for real protective capacity.

5. Future Challenges and Reform Priorities.

The future of UN peacekeeping will not be determined by the abstract arguments about the relevance but by the ability of the institution to adjust to the realities of conflicts in the modern world. There are four issues of particular significance.

To begin with, peacekeeping is becoming more active in conflicts that are marked by fragmented armed forces, transnational criminal economies, and weak or fragmented state control. Consent in these environments is stratified and precarious. A host government can sanction a mission and local actors may block access, distort information, or assault civilians outside the mission. The independent study of the future of peacekeeping of 2024 highlights that the success is highly correlated with the willingness of the conflict parties to peace and the level of cooperation of host governments (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2024). This implies that the mission design of the future should start with more stringent political diagnosis. In the absence of a viable peace process, the UN must be wary of making promises that no peacekeeping operation can possibly fulfill.

Second, expectations of civilian-protection are morally imperative and operationally challenging. Since the vast majority of peacekeepers are currently deployed under protection mandates, the legitimacy of peacekeeping is becoming more and more reliant on whether populations perceive that the mission can

in fact assist in keeping them safe. However, the UN policy itself acknowledges that protection is constrained by capabilities and deployment areas (United Nations Peacekeeping, n.d.-c). The implication of the reform is not to water down protection norms, but to invest in what makes protection more credible: mobility, intelligence fusion, rapid reaction, improved community engagement, realistic prioritization, and honest communication about limits. There should also be no discrepancy between what is publicly declared and what is practically feasible, as this discrepancy will ruin local confidence.

Third, geopolitical polarization influences nearly all phases of peacekeeping, including mandate negotiation, renewal, resourcing, and exit. The future of peacekeeping study emphasizes the significance of unity of the Security Council and regional investment (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2024). Where the Council is split, mandates can be unclear compromises, and missions can be abandoned without a steady diplomatic support. Reform thus needs not just technical enhancement but greater political planning that would tie missions to regional bodies, to neighboring states and to long-term diplomacy. Peacekeeping is not a substitute of political involvement of major powers; it relies on political involvement.

Fourth, accountability is a determinant of the social legitimacy of peacekeeping. Action for Peacekeeping+ specifically mentions accountability to peacekeepers and accountability of peacekeepers as priorities, as well as data- and technology-enabled operations (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2025). This agenda is important since misconduct, particularly sexual exploitation and abuse, can severely hurt mission credibility. Performance review, command responsibility, and transparent transition planning are also part of accountability. A tactically active but strategically unaccountable mission will find it difficult to maintain legitimacy both among the local populations and troop contributors.

These issues suggest a reform agenda that is structured around fit and not size. The future peacekeeping must be more politically oriented, modular and selective. Mandates must be clear on what a mission must do, what it should do in case conditions allow, and what other actors like regional enforcement coalitions or development agencies should do. In areas where peacekeeping is still suitable, missions should be better informed with intelligence and situational awareness, enhanced civilian capabilities, more responsive force production, and more collaborative relationships with local entities. The discourse of reform in the UN itself is moving in this direction, with the focus on the fact that peacekeeping is still useful, but needs to change its models and capabilities (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2024, 2025).

Meanwhile, reform must not succumb to the temptation to redefine peacekeeping in such a broad way that it becomes depersonalized. The comparative evidence indicates that peacekeeping works best when it assists in the establishment of political space, reassure parties, safeguard civilians within plausible boundaries, and aids in the institution-building of domestic institutions. It is most ineffective when it is supposed to overcome insurgencies, to substitute state power, or to bring peace where there is no significant settlement. A stricter interpretation of the instrument is thus a state of success to come.

6. Conclusion

This paper has presented the argument that the success of United Nations peacekeeping operations can be best described as conditional and multidimensional. Peacekeeping is not a panacea, but neither is it a weary institution. The comparative record indicates that it is capable of significant contributions to international peace when used in support of a viable political process, when mandated to do so, when it has the capabilities necessary to the task it is assigned, and when it has coherent international and regional support. Namibia, Sierra Leone, and Liberia show that peacekeeping can assist in containing violence, facilitating transitions, protecting civilians, and leaving stronger institutions. Rwanda and Srebrenica demonstrate the converse: symbolic use without political intent or operational ability can result in

disastrous failure. Mali demonstrates that even serious missions will not work where consent fragments and the logic of conflict is changed to counterterrorism and state contestation.

The primary implication is practical. Discussions on whether peacekeeping works or not should be replaced by a more specific evaluation of when it works, why it works, and at what cost. The reform of the future must thus be less about rhetorical ambition and more about political coherence, capability equal, accountability, and honesty regarding limits. As long as the UN is the only universally legitimate institution capable of marshalling multinational operations to manage conflicts at scale, peacekeeping will be an essential part of it. Its future usefulness, however, will lie in disciplined adjustment to the realities of the twenty-first century conflict.

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