



The Political Practice of Peacekeeping

HOW STRATEGIES FOR PEACE
OPERATIONS ARE DEVELOPED
AND IMPLEMENTED

By

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About the Project

This project aims to provide the UN and its partners with clear, evidence-based approaches for facilitating political resolutions to conflict and a rigorous methodology for assessing the impact of political interventions. United Nations University Centre for Policy Research and the Stimson Center, with the support of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, undertook this project to translate the core political commitments of Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) into a set of viable, effective policies and practices. This is the first joint project between United Nations University Centre for Policy Research and Stimson Center and draws on reviews of peace operations, interviews with key stakeholders and a comparison across different settings, to describe how mission leaders have translated broad political language into political engagement strategies, Mission Concepts, and approaches across the UN family in-country, with recommendations and resources for decision-making. Drawing on existing methodologies in the social sciences and the development fields, the project has also developed an Assessment Tool with key metrics for peace operations to evaluate their political engagement.


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The Political Practice of Peacekeeping

The 2018 Action for Peacekeeping Declaration (A4P) commits UN peace operations to pursue political objectives based on integrated strategies and solutions. This emphasis on political solutions echoes the widely-accepted mantra of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO), which proposed that peace operations undergo a fundamental shift towards the primacy of politics.¹ While there is broad agreement on the need to place political outcomes at the centre of peacekeeping, there is little consensus on what “politics” means in practice. This is in part because political engagement is by nature elusive and often opaque, done behind closed doors or within a constellation of other actors. Lacking a common understanding, the UN and its partners have tended to accept the notion of political primacy without interrogating what it means in practice. As a result, the ways in which the UN develops and implements politically-led strategies are poorly understood.

This policy paper was supported by the Government of the Netherlands, developed in consultation with the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO), and refined during an expert roundtable event in June 2020.² It examines the **political practice of peacekeeping**, the ways in which missions, the UN Secretariat and the Security Council work to articulate mandated political objectives at a strategic level. Drawing on the internal strategies of peace operations, interviews with senior UN officials involved in peacekeeping, and in-country research of the authors, the paper compares the practices of the five major peacekeeping missions today (the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo – MONUSCO; the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic – MINUSCA; the United Nations Mission in South Sudan – UNMISS; the

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United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali – MINUSMA; and the United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur – UNAMID).³ It describes how strategies have been developed amongst the Security Council, the UN Secretariat, and mission leaders. On this basis, it offers evidence-based recommendations for improved mandating by the Council, more effective strategy development by UN Headquarters and missions, and greater impact in the implementation of peacekeeping mandates in the field.⁴

The paper is divided into four sections. First, it proposes a working definition of “political solution,” a surprisingly slippery term in the context of peace operations, but necessary as a baseline to analyse mission strategies. Second, it describes the mission mandating process, outlining the current guidelines for translating Council mandates into strategies. Third, based on a cross-mission comparison, it identifies key conflict trends that have shaped how the Security Council, the Secretariat, and missions envision the work of peacekeeping today. Drawing on the five case studies in this report, the final section offers lessons for how Security Council members, policymakers, and mission leadership can improve the political practice of peacekeeping.



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Defining “Political Solution”

The UN has no formal definition of the terms “political” or “political solution.” In fact, the Preparatory Commission for the UN Charter effectively begged the question, giving the Secretary-General “a role to play as a mediator and as an informal advisor ... to take decisions which may be justly called political.”⁵ This so-called “Good Offices” function of the Secretary-General has never been formalized and, according to Teresa Whitfield, can mean “almost anything – from a well-timed telephone call by the Secretary-General, to exploratory conversations, or a full-fledged mediation effort conducted in his or her name.”⁶ Ian Johnstone has offered an equally broad definition of the Good Offices role of the Secretary-General, as “everything the UN can do of a diplomatic nature to help prevent, manage or resolve conflicts.”⁷

In the first decades of the UN, the Secretary-General employed the Good Offices role to address a wide range of political crises, including the 1950 invasion of South Korea by North Korea, the 1956 Suez crisis and repeated efforts to resolve the Greek/Turkish dispute over Cyprus.⁸ Importantly, the Good Offices

role has not been restricted to the Secretary-General, but is delegated to the various special representatives and envoys, including the heads of peace operations.⁹ Today, the 13 peacekeeping missions and 24 special political missions of the UN all possess, either explicitly or implicitly, the Secretary-General’s Good Offices function.¹⁰

What it means to exercise that political function, however, is a difficult question lacking a clear doctrine or practice within the UN.¹¹ In 2015, the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) offered a partial definition, largely by opposing politics to military and technical activities:

Lasting peace is not achieved nor sustained by military and technical engagements, but through political solutions. The primacy of politics should be the hallmark of the approach of the United Nations to the resolution of conflict, during mediation, the monitoring of ceasefires, assistance to the implementation of peace accords, the management of violent conflicts and longer-term efforts at sustaining peace.¹²

Here, the HIPPO report adds a range of activities that embody the primacy of politics, including dialogue with parties, exploration of alternatives to violence, promotion of human rights, crafting solutions for conflicts, and supporting peace processes.¹³ It concludes that “[t]he main effort of any peace operation must be to focus international attention, leverage and resources on supporting national actors ... to restore peace, address underlying conflict drivers and meet the legitimate interests of the wider population, not just a small elite.”¹⁴

Jean Arnault, one of the authors of the HIPPO report, clarified what was meant by the term “politics” in this context, stating simply “the search for negotiated solutions to conflicts.”¹⁵ In this, he contrasted political solutions to military operations, counter-insurgency campaigns, and efforts to extend State authority.¹⁶ The HIPPO’s first concern, Arnault wrote, “is to reconnect the use of force with the politics of peaceful settlements as a pre-condition for deployment.”¹⁷ Importantly, the “primacy of politics” mentioned in the HIPPO report does not mean that political affairs sections should be higher in the mission’s hierarchy (and here the use of “politics” rather than “political” is relevant), but rather that the overarching political solution should be the reference point for the work of a mission.

These descriptions offer helpful clues as to the substance of the term “political solution” in a peacekeeping context. But they also tend to dodge the question, framing the political negatively as “not military or technical” rather than providing a positive definition. The Action for Peacekeeping Declaration suffers from the same shortcomings, committing only to “stronger engagement to advance political solutions to conflict and to pursue complementary political objectives and integrated strategies.”¹⁸

Drawing from the HIPPO report, and based on wide-ranging interviews with former and current UN leaders and experts, we propose the following working definition for the term “political solution”:

A political solution in a peace operations context is one where parties reach negotiated, inclusive agreements to halt the killing and attempt to address the major grievances that triggered the violent

conflict or are likely to trigger further violent conflict. As such, a political solution offers a comprehensive framework for a sustainable transition to peace, and a clear set of commonly agreed elements for achieving it.

Under this definition, ceasefires or cessations of hostilities typically would only be part of broader political solutions, unless they were considered sufficient to sustainably end a conflict; likewise, the protection of civilians, stabilization and State-building could be part of a political solution, but would not in and of themselves constitute one. In line with the HIPPO report, this definition demands that a political solution be negotiated, not merely the outcome of force, and that it be inclusive, representing more than just the interests of the belligerents.¹⁹ At the same time, it allows for military and technical engagements that could be used to incentivize parties to reach a political solution.

Having a working definition of a political solution does not solve the deeper substantive questions of what is needed to resolve conflicts (and some experts suggested that too formulaic a definition could inhibit the work of peacekeeping), but it helps to clarify other related definitions in this report. “Political primacy” means placing the political solution at the centre of the work of a peace operation and articulating how all other mission activities would contribute to that solution.

It is worth a final note on the term “political strategy.” This report focuses on the translation from a Security Council mandate to a mission strategy. We use the term “strategy” broadly, given the range of documents that might constitute a strategy within the UN system. For example, today’s peacekeeping missions are required to have a Mission Concept, a document that should provide strategic guidance on the basis of the Council mandate. Some missions have also developed documents entitled “political strategies” or “mission plans”, which are not required and may not conform to the precise requirements of UN guidance on Mission Concepts, but which may well move the mission closer to the kind of political primacy envisioned by HIPPO. A broad use of the term “strategy” allows us to consider all approaches used by missions.



II

From Mandate to Strategy

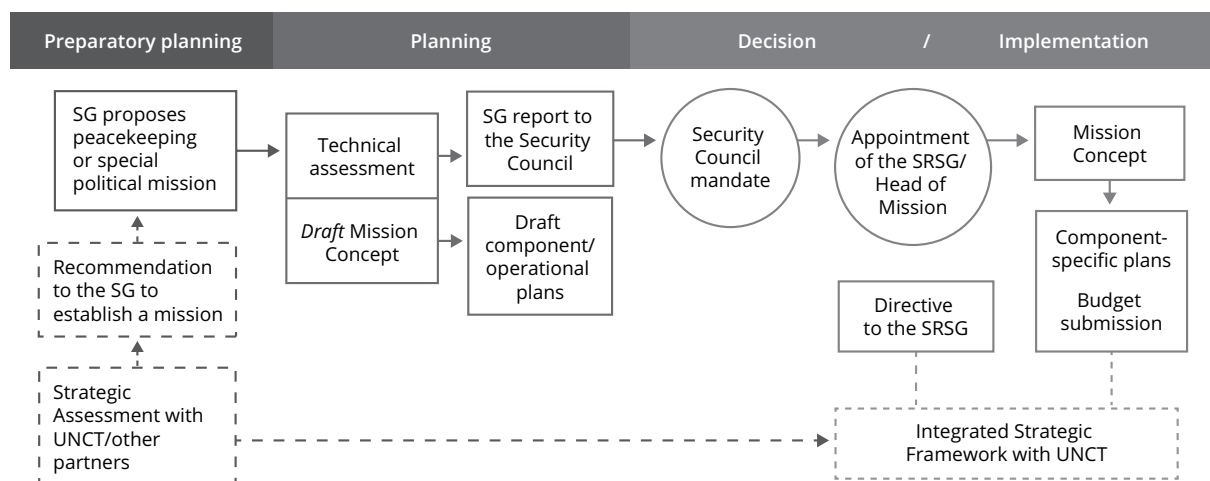
The principal focus of this project is how a political strategy can be developed amongst the Security Council, the UN Secretariat, and mission leadership. The 2014 UN guidance on the preparation of a Mission Concept details the linear path of this process, which begins with preparatory/planning phases by the Secretariat, then a Security Council mandate, and finally the development of a Mission Concept after appointment of a Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG).

The roles and responsibilities are meant to be fairly clear under this guidance: Unless otherwise indicated, the mission leadership is responsible for developing and executing the Mission Concept, on the basis of an SRSG directive issued either at the outset of a new mission or following a substantial change in mandate.²⁰ The Mission Concept is a strategic planning document, which should lay out the vision of the mission, how it will

implement the Council mandate, prioritization of tasks and guidance to mission entities on how to accomplish the strategy. The 2014 guidance replaced the 2010 Integrated Mission Planning Process guidelines and earlier requirements on missions to establish mission-wide plans, some of which were in place during the earlier moments of our case studies. As of the writing of this report, there was new draft guidance in development by DPO, which would shift the responsibility to develop the Mission Concept from missions to the UN Secretariat, also requiring that Mission Concepts develop a “broad political direction” to guide its mandate implementation.²¹

In practice, however, the pathways from a Security Council mandate to a mission strategy vary significantly from mission to mission, and indeed, vary at different moments in the same mission. In some cases, a peacekeeping operation had no mission-wide strategy for

Pathway of a Mission Concept (from 2014 Mission Concept Guidelines)



years or maintained outdated strategies long after they were rendered redundant. In others, the Secretariat used its regular reporting to the Council to provide strategic guidance to the mission without developing a Mission Concept. Mission Concepts themselves also vary widely: some clearly articulate the overarching political objectives of the mission, whereas others are an operational implementation plan, more akin to a results-based budget.

As discussed below, process matters and can have a significant impact on the substance of the strategy and on how it is received by those implementing it. The diversity of approaches across missions offers an opportunity to gain insight into what kinds of processes might produce the most effective strategies for achieving the Security Council's intended objectives.



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III Trends in Peacekeeping

The mandates and strategic planning for peacekeeping missions have been strongly influenced by the changing character of armed conflict, especially over the past 10-12 years. This section briefly overviews some of the most important trends in violent conflict, and their impact on the scope and focus of peacekeeping. It finds that the growing complexity and intractability of today's conflicts have led to an increasing security/stability focus by UN peacekeeping, potentially (though not necessarily) allowing less space for political engagement. The trend to deploy peacekeepers into settings without viable peace processes—and often during large-scale conflict—has also complicated the UN's political role, though in some cases this has allowed for entrepreneurial approaches to peacemaking by missions.

Over the past decade, the rate of major civil wars has tripled, driven by the growing role of non-State actors, the greater impact of large-

scale violent extremism, and the influence of transnational criminal networks.²² Many of today's internal conflicts are deeply regionalized, as neighbours, regional and international players use proxy forces to gain influence. Modern conflict also suffers from far higher rates of relapse than earlier eras: roughly 60 per cent of conflicts from the early 2000s have relapsed.²³ These trends have contributed to historic levels of conflict-related displacement and far higher numbers of civilians caught up and targeted in violent conflict.²⁴ Today's violent conflicts are deadlier to civilians and more intractable than ever before.

These trends have had several impacts on UN peacekeeping. Firstly, today's conflicts present a greater risk profile to UN peacekeepers, especially in areas affected by violent extremism. In recent years, the UN has been more regularly and directly targeted, taking on greater casualties and needing to take more steps to protect their

own personnel.²⁵ Facing the highest toll of peacekeepers in recent history, UN missions have, in some settings, become more focused on their own security (and indeed in protecting other UN activities in country) and less able to interact freely with local populations.²⁶ The question of “bunkerization” and the effect of reduced contact with local communities is relevant for political engagement strategies.

Second, UN peacekeeping is more frequently confronted with settings of “no peace to keep,” where belligerents have not fully laid down arms, peace agreements are either incomplete or lapsed and/or the more traditional functions of peacekeeping are less relevant. This reflects a willingness of Security Council members to authorize peacekeeping in areas of sudden or protracted conflict with fewer assurances that the presence of a mission will lead to a comprehensive or sustainable peace. The absence of viable peace processes, combined with open violent conflict, has meant that UN missions have been directed to prioritize activities like the protection of civilians, stabilization and even neutralization of armed groups. In places like the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan, the protection of civilians has become the highest priority for UN missions, especially as peace processes have either languished or lapsed.²⁷

Third, the growth of civil wars as the major form of violent conflict has meant that host States are necessarily belligerents in conflicts involving their own citizens. Not only have long-standing civil wars contributed to a decline in the basic governance capacities of States, but they place the UN in a difficult position vis-à-vis their host governments. **At times needing to protect civilians from their own governments, while also required to operate with host State consent, UN peace operations have found themselves caught in extraordinarily difficult situations.** These settings have also strained the UN’s typical approaches of building State capacity and extending State authority: in active civil war, these activities can become polarizing, leading populations to question the UN’s impartiality or, inadvertently, having the UN bolster a State’s ability to continue the use of violence. When the

UN does not support the government directly, or calls them out for their actions, unhappy governments may stonewall UN leaders and threaten to withdraw consent for the mission.

Fourth, the regionalization of civil wars has contributed to a proliferation of actors involved in making peace, including some well outside the affected region. As shown in the case studies below, today’s peacekeeping contexts are a crowded playing field, where envoys, regional organizations, neighbouring capitals, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and financial institutions jostle for position. Often, the UN’s role in a peace process may appear relatively small, defined in terms of technical and logistical support or Good Offices. At the same time, UN peacekeeping missions may be massive players in country, spending billions on their deployment, providing development and humanitarian support to tens of thousands of people and maintaining presence across much wider areas of the country than other actors. Here, the logistics arm of peace operations can play important roles, enabling actors to travel around difficult to access regions, connecting parties that would otherwise be isolated and moving key resources into inaccessible areas.

Finally, in recent years great power competition has spilled over into the Security Council, repeatedly undermining the UN’s ability to respond effectively to major (and some minor) conflicts. The Council’s failure to halt brutal wars in Yemen and Syria, its paralysis in the face of the conflict in Ukraine, and its deep divisions over global security issues like Iran’s nuclear weapons have rendered it largely irrelevant to many of today’s most serious conflicts.²⁸ While the Council has maintained relative unity on existing peacekeeping operations, tensions have crept in to disrupt cohesive approaches to conflict. Moreover, increased arrears in peacekeeping assessments (over USD \$1 billion) and the steady downward pressure on budgets for the UN has meant that peacekeeping has faced a sceptical (internal and external) audience, resulting in more than USD \$1 billion reduction in the peacekeeping budget in the past few years alone.



IV

Lessons from the Case Studies

In this context, we examined the five largest peacekeeping operations deployed today—UNMISS, MONUSCO, MINUSCA, MINUSMA and UNAMID—asking how the missions developed new political strategies at key moments in their lifespans. Based on the five case studies, we have extracted the following lessons and recommendations that have broad applicability across peace operations.

1 Strategy should feed mandates

Security Council mandates are often seen as the source or starting point for political strategies but experience suggests that the flow should

be reversed. A strategic vision—based on in-country assessments and early and ongoing engagement—should feed the Council’s initial and subsequent mandates for a peace operation. In this context, the UN should consider formally implementing a proposal, outlined in the HIPPO report, to institute two-step mandating, deploying a small advance mission to scope out issues and help build toward a well-informed vision for the eventual peace operation mandate. This is consistent with the Stimson Center’s recommendation that the prioritization and sequencing of peacekeeping missions’ activities should be understood as a field-driven process facilitated by Security Council mandates, rather than a Council-driven process.²⁹ It also accords

with a key theme in the June 2020 expert roundtable organized for this project, that there is a distinction between grand strategy (based on a broad vision for the country, drawn from deep knowledge of that setting) and a more operational mission implementation strategy to drive day-to-day activities.

2 Peace agreements matter – but they have their limits

Across the cases, the presence of a peace agreement played a significant role in how a mission's mandate was developed and implemented. The UN mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), for example, benefited from a far clearer political role when it was articulated within the regionally agreed upon 2003 peace agreement and then incorporated into the Council's mandate. Following the 2006 elections, however, the formal political transitional period for the DRC ended and left the Council somewhat adrift in terms of the peacekeeping mission's overall goals. The result was an ever-increasing mandate that responded to continued killing in eastern Congo, stretching into areas like security sector reform and stabilization, without an overarching political vision for the mission. Similarly, the mission in Darfur was plagued from the outset by an unfinished peace process with little buy-in from the major parties. While the Darfur Peace Agreement provided an initial basis for deploying UNAMID, it offered a poor starting point for articulating a clear role for the mission. As a result, the mission spent much of its lifespan without a political strategy, providing technical and logistical support to a process that had little chance of success. In South Sudan too, the collapse of the initial political arrangement and lack of a viable peace agreement at key junctures of UNMISS' lifespan is highlighted in the case study as a major impediment to a political role for the mission.

However, the presence of a peace agreement is not a prerequisite for a meaningful political role. In both Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR), peacekeeping missions were deployed alongside negotiations but before peace agreements were reached. In Mali, the mission was able to carve out a role gradually,

by supporting elections and a set of consultations to understand why previous peace processes had failed. These steps paved the way to a 2015 peace agreement, which provided a clear role for MINUSMA. Similarly in CAR, MINUSCA's initial political efforts were heavily focused on electoral support and halting mass atrocities in the short-term, with very little vision of a broader political solution. This initial engagement, however, created space for the mission to play an instrumental role in an inclusive national dialogue and elections in 2015-6. These efforts, in turn, set off broader processes that ultimately led to the signing of a peace agreement in 2019, again providing a clear role for MINUSCA that could be captured in a Council mandate.

These varied experiences suggest that the absence of a peace agreement does not necessarily preclude a political strategy and role for peacekeeping. Many agreements falter, or fail to include key parties, and do not result in an end to widespread killing or civilian protection. In fact, a non-viable or insincere peace agreement (such as in Darfur) may make it harder for missions to facilitate political solutions than the absence of a peace agreement. At times, signing a weak agreement can reduce international pressure and give parties plausible excuses to stall, miring the UN in processes without progress. In some instances, having a substantive but small political role (such as support to elections) may create more opportunities for missions to have meaningful political influence than under a peace agreement.

3 A strong analytic basis for strategy

In light of peace agreements' limitations, they should not be the starting point for peacekeeping missions' political strategies. Instead, mission strategies should be based on cross-cutting analysis, including stakeholder mapping, scenario planning, and a strong sense of the political economy of conflict; today's missions often only partially engage with these analytic tools and approaches. Understanding how power is distributed is important, and often not the principal focus of analysis. There was consensus across experts on the need for strategies to address local, national, and regional



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levels. When crafting mission mandates, the Council is often less aware of local dynamics or places less emphasis on their importance, causing unanticipated problems later on. The Secretariat could do more to bring local issues to the Council's attention earlier and consistently throughout the process.

A stakeholder analysis should inform decision-making by the mission about whom to engage with and how. For example, missions can use stakeholder analyses to inform strategic communications decisions about which messages are critical to communicate to which stakeholders. Political strategies and strategic communications strategies are usually separate documents developed through independent processes, but the stakeholder analysis-driven approach could help link the two. Similarly, this analysis can inform decisions by the mission about who should be included in peace processes or engaged through other means. Mali's experience highlights how decisions about who gets a seat and at which table are highly political decisions that can have very important consequences for the cessation of or increase in

violence. Peacekeeping missions do not always have strong influence over which parties are invited to participate in a peace process, but they can use their stakeholder analyses (including which actors are likely to be allies or spoilers to peace, and analysis of likely perpetrators of violence) to push for certain actors to be brought into the process, or to push for new processes to be created to address those actors' grievances.

4 Bigger mandates do not necessarily mean bigger politics

There is often an unwritten assumption that larger missions with a range of activities across the political, security and humanitarian arenas will have greater leverage when it comes to influencing peace processes. One of the reasons for deploying a billion dollar mission with tens of thousands of troops is to be able to provide a security guarantee to a political process, and one of the reasons for expanding a mandate into areas like stabilization, security sector reform

(SSR) and protection is to underpin a political process with improved conditions and confidence on the ground. Yet, the experience of the peacekeeping operations in this study suggests that greater size may not lead to stronger political influence. In some cases, a large presence on the ground might even lead a mission to focus on its military and technical engagements and become distracted from its political objectives.

While the presence of large numbers of UN troops is correlated with a reduction in violence against civilians (indicating an influence of the conflict parties' immediate incentives and behaviours),³⁰ it does not on its own necessarily change the longer-term political calculations of parties to the conflict. The 2008 deployment of nearly 20,000 African Union (AU)/UN troops into Darfur had no apparent impact on the Government's or rebels' positions with respect to the peace negotiations (which are largely unresolved 12 years later). Nor did UNMISS' very large presence in South Sudan in 2013 appear to give it much influence over the protagonists of the civil war, as the 2016 relapse into open conflict demonstrated. Other factors, such as the threat of International Criminal Court (ICC) indictment, the imposition of sanctions, and international pressure appeared to play a much more direct political role. This is not always the case, and there are several instances where MONUSCO and MINUSCA, for example, used force to bring warring parties to a negotiating table (indeed MONUSCO's Force Intervention Brigade may have increased regional political engagement too). But it is worth interrogating the assumption that robust force inherently creates leverage in a peace process.

Less visible are the challenges of managing "Christmas tree" mandates for large multi-dimensional missions. Across our case studies, mission leaders pointed to the pragmatic challenges of running sprawling missions with competing priorities, enormous logistical constraints, and heightened expectations ranging from local citizens to Security Council members. In these settings, it is all too easy for the operational "tail" to wag the political "dog," for mission leaders to become consumed with managing a mission to the detriment of a more holistic vision for the UN in-country (especially when violence is continuing at a high rate). This phenomenon is not only a function of the

peacekeeping mission's managerial decisions, but also related to the levels of consent and cooperation of the host State government. Difficult host governments may welcome greater military and technical engagements from missions in specific areas, which contribute to the governments' own security, political or financial interests, while freezing them out of political processes. In MONUSCO, for example, the Council's gradual increase in the size and scope of the mission over time—including the addition of greater protection responsibilities, expanding roles in SSR, the gradual growth of stabilization, and the 2014 mandate to neutralize armed groups—coincided with a parallel decrease in the political influence of the mission in country. This decline was likely more strongly influenced by changes in the Congolese political landscape but the mission also strained to articulate a political role amidst all of its other priorities. Similarly, the size of UNAMID often operated as a sort of anchor on the mission, causing it to expend all of its political capital with Khartoum in achieving entry visas for staff and troops, extract expensive equipment from quarantine, and demand clearances for access to affected areas. "We used up all our political juice on operational things," said a former senior UN official.

Jean-Marie Guéhenno, the former chief of DPO, has argued that larger missions sometimes fail to use their presence as a fulcrum for gaining influence in country due to "a lack of understanding of the political nature of peacekeeping, as if the conduct of military operations and the military posture could be divorced from the politics of the situation."³¹ Our research suggests that some mission leaders *do* understand the political nature of peacekeeping and that the skillset and personality of SRSGs matters a great deal, but that they often find themselves consumed by the day to day operations of large missions.

5 Local peace processes can be critical

Peace processes are typically considered top-down elite bargains, initiated by the conflict parties and eventually trickling down into improved stability for the broader citizenry.³² While the elite bargain remains important

across most conflicts, the case of UNMISS' 2018 mission strategy also demonstrates the utility of connecting local-level peace processes to the national one. The UNMISS approach was based on a recognition that national politics are deeply connected to local dynamics, where even highly localized cattle rustling could be traced to powerbrokers in Juba. In response, UNMISS' 2018 strategy demanded that activities like intercommunal conflict resolution, local work to promote justice, and engagement with traditional authorities should all clearly demonstrate how such work would feed into the revitalized peace process at the national level. A similar lesson was found in MINUSCA's 2017 political strategy, which targeted actors whose motivations for violence were unlikely to be influenced by the national political process. Both of these missions took advantage of their sizeable presence on the ground across wide areas of the country, which gave them leverage in local political processes that they lacked in national processes.³³

In mandating missions, the Council should demand that missions report on how local-level activities are contributing to a broader political solution. In turn, mission leadership and the Secretariat could draw from the UNMISS example in better articulating those links in their mission strategies. The Council should do its best to maintain flexibility (in both its expectations and in mandate language) for missions to use opportunities for political influence where they see them. This might mean enabling the mission to pursue opportunities outside what might be seen as the "main" national-level political process, where a mission might have little political leverage, in order to bring in constituencies or address triggers of violence that are not included in the national-level process.

6 Using the players on the field

Peacekeeping is taking place on an increasingly crowded playing field, where the UN is frequently relegated to a fairly minor role in the overall political process. Council mandates and mission strategies have often struggled to clearly define how a mission will relate to these other players, focusing more on the isolated tasks of the UN. At most, the Council may ask the UN to "support" other actors—such as

UNMISS' support to the UN's own Special Envoy, the AU and Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in the revitalized peace process; UNAMID's support to the AU in the 2014 Darfur peace process; MINUSMA's support to Algeria as the "lead mediator" (as well as to the AU and Economic Community of West African States [ECOWAS]) in the Algiers process; and MINUSCA's support to the AU and Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) in the African Initiative. Mission strategies tend to follow suit, only expressing the roles and responsibilities of other actors in fairly vague terms, and seldom articulating the comparative advantages of each.

It is a well-established practice in strategy-making that organizations should have a clear vision of objectives and a well-articulated pathway to achieving them. In the case of peacekeeping, that pathway inevitably relies upon the work of other actors, not only the parties to the conflict, but also the wide range of Member States, regional organizations, envoys and civil society groups that can influence a peace process. While it may be difficult for the Council to define those roles—given its limited capacity to task other actors—mission strategies should analyse the relative strengths, roles and responsibilities of these players, specifying how the mission will interact with and gain leverage from them. This can inform Council mandates. In the cases of peacekeeping missions operating alongside UN regional envoys and/or UN groups of experts, this requires regional strategies that do more than articulate broad generic goals.

7 Building the Security Council into a strategy

A coherent unified Security Council is crucial to the success of a mission. Where the Council is divided, or where it is unable to articulate a clear common vision for a peacekeeping operation, there is far less chance of building towards and applying consistent diplomatic pressure to adhere to a viable political strategy. In some cases, a well-crafted and articulated UN mission strategy could straddle differences enough to unify Council members behind the mission; in others, there may be less apparent scope for the Secretariat or a peace operation to influence the coherence of the Council where the issues

that divide them are far deeper than applied to a single mission. Thus, mission strategies should take Council unity into account, identifying issues where divisions may cause complications, and also areas where the Council could come together. In CAR, Russia's decision to promote the Khartoum-led peace process against the efforts of other Council members to support the African Initiative offers an example of the detrimental effects of Council fractures. During the revitalized peace process in South Sudan, several Council members (and indeed the Government of South Sudan) were strongly opposed to the creation of a hybrid court as part of the transitional justice chapter of the agreement. Finding ways to defuse that tension—in this case by placing the African Union and IGAD in the lead on the hybrid court—was a strategic issue for maintaining Council unity.

Nominal Council unity is not always a sufficient indicator that the major powers will work together on a political process or that they will have leverage over the actors fuelling war. The Security Council's decision to impose an arms embargo on South Sudan (after years of delays and disagreements) was seen as a meaningful moment of unity but was quickly flouted by South Sudan's neighbours; similarly, the relative unity across the Council on the mandate for Mali has not prevented regional players from trafficking arms and resources into the country. A senior UN official captured an important lesson in this context: "Council members need to back their own resolutions in ways that show consistency and not undermine each other."

8 Dealing with difficult or weak governments

One increasingly common trend across peacekeeping is the challenge of difficult governments, many of which have been eroded through decades of corruption and neglect, implicated in violence against civilians and/or resistant to more inclusive peace processes. Constrained by the principle of host State consent, and often mandated to partner with the government on their core tasks, missions have struggled to find the right balance between partnership and impartial mandate implementation. Some Council

mandates recognize this challenge and call on governments to take specific actions to enable missions, including, for example, the call on the Government of Sudan to facilitate UNAMID's access to affected areas, and the Council's condemnation of the Government of South Sudan's role in the killing of civilians during the civil war.

Missions too have attempted to outline this challenge in their strategies, such as the 2016 MONUSCO Mission Concept, and the 2018 UNMISS strategy, both of which describe the difficulties of dealing with the host government. But there are more consistent ways that missions can incorporate navigating host State consent into their political strategies. For example, a 2018 Stimson Center report recommends selecting areas of political focus early on in a peacekeeping mission's deployment in part based on the strength of the government's consent. For example, choosing politically sensitive areas (such as supporting the creation of human rights mechanisms or security sector accountability bodies) when consent is strong, and prioritizing areas where the government's interests more obviously overlap with the mission's when consent is weak.³⁴ The report also recommends being aware of actions that are likely to trigger a deterioration of consent and conducting advance political outreach to mitigate sensitivities and reduce misunderstandings, as well as regularly reporting on consent to the Council so that missions can seek political support for firm action early on when consent begins to weaken.

Even in situations of strong consent, the weak capacity of the host State can seriously challenge the assumptions underlying a political strategy. The Security Council sometimes overestimates what a peacekeeping mission can achieve in the absence of a capable government partner. For example, prior to MINUSCA's deployment the Council identified that the absence of the rule of law was a major driver of violence in CAR, and for that reason gave the mission an unusual "urgent temporary measures" mandate that allowed the mission to conduct arrests and take other actions to fill that gap in the short term. However, the mission's ability to use its arrest powers to combat impunity still relied on the State's capacity to manage other areas of the criminal justice process, including issuing warrants, trying



cases and maintaining adequate corrections facilities. Thus, despite strong consent from the CAR Government, MINUSCA's ability to address the challenges related to the absence of rule of law – an important component of the Council's original political mandate for the mission – was limited by the State's weak capacity.

9 Protection as politics

Across the cases, there was a clear trend towards protection of civilians as increasingly central to missions' mandates. In some cases, such as MONUSCO and UNMISS, the Council shifted protection from one of several priorities to a position of *primus inter pares*, first in line for the use of resources and highest on the agenda when it came to reporting on the mission's activities.³⁵ In some settings, this was interpreted as pitting protection against other mission priorities, creating a hierarchy that did not allow for a coherent overall strategy. In cases such as UNMISS in 2014, the protection needs were rightly an all-consuming priority, as hundreds of thousands of civilians relied on the mission to prevent and interrupt mass atrocities. And MINUSCA offers an example where the protection of civilians was the highest priority from the outset of the mission's mandate.

In other cases, the prioritization has been the other way around – for example, the first mandate for MINUSMA after the signing of the 2015 Algiers peace agreement articulated a singular “strategic priority” for the mission – namely, to support the implementation of that agreement. In 2019, a second strategic priority was added focused on protection of civilians in the centre

of the country, and the Council made a point of identifying support to the peace agreement as the “primary” strategic objective. Here again, the mission appeared to struggle to understand what this prioritization meant in terms of the distribution of resources (especially given that the addition of the second strategic priority was not accompanied by any additional resources), and struggled also to connect the “political” work focused on the north of the country with the protection efforts focused on the centre.

The experiences of the five missions studied suggest that conceiving of the protection of civilians as a separate objective, without connecting the goals of protection of civilians to a broader political solution, can lead to missed opportunities and poor strategies.³⁶ Several UN experts complained that the dominance of protection of civilians led to “endless missions” that struggled to envision an exit from the country given the likelihood that civilians would be at risk for decades to come. Protection, of course, should be a priority when risks to civilians are high. But more effort could be made at the mandating and strategy-making phases to position the protection of civilians as a clearer enabler for a political solution, rather than a stand-alone activity.

10 The technical can bolster the political

Across many of the cases, missions suffered from a division between so-called “technical” activities and the broader political work of the mission. Where this division was most apparent, missions struggled to develop coherent strategies. Some



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missions were able to articulate how the technical work would feed into a political solution, leading to far better strategies.

On the one hand, processes like Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) and SSR are fundamentally political, in the sense that they require buy-in from the leadership of governments and almost always from a range of other actors such as armed groups, community leaders and donors. This is well recognized across missions, especially those that have struggled to advance such processes due to lack of political will. There were few instances, however, where a mission-wide strategy clearly articulated these processes as leading to a political solution. In some, such as MONUSCO's 2014 Islands of Stability strategy, large-scale national reforms were described as a final stage of a linear process that would first establish basic security and stabilize a conflict setting. This sequential view of how the DRC would change over time failed to reflect reality, and isolated military and so-called technical processes from a more holistic theory of change. In contrast, the 2018/19 UNMISS Mission Concept identifies both capacity building and protection as crucial elements of a broader political goal of "building durable peace" that is linked to the national peace process. MINUSCA's 2017 political strategy (one of the only missions to have a document of that name) articulated a locally-driven vision for halting violence that combined political outreach, military and police operations, technical engagement (such as DDR and CVR programmes), and State-building support as needed to respond to the specific motivations of different perpetrators of violence that were not being sufficiently addressed by the national political process.

In some cases, even a mission's electoral support was expressed in purely technical terms. Of course, there is broad recognition that the UN must be seen as impartial, especially in an electoral setting, and the public messaging should reinforce the technical and logistical side of UN support. In terms of developing a strategy, more could be done to articulate how support to electoral processes will contribute to a broader political solution. For example, in the case of the 2006 elections in DRC, there was a clear sense within the UN leadership that the technical and logistical support of the mission was contributing to implementation of the underlying peace agreement, building confidence in State institutions, and leading to a reduction in the risks of a resumption of war. In contrast, during the 2016-18 constitutional crisis in the DRC, the Council placed electoral support under the stabilization priority, focusing on the short-term objective of reducing instability through the electoral period. This led to the mission being focused more on the immediate security impacts of the elections, rather than a longer-term vision of how the electoral process might build towards a more inclusive political system, develop wider trust in the State, and address some of the long-standing grievances of marginalized groups in the Congo.

11 Keeping sight of peace dividends

Many conflicts at the local, national and regional levels are driven by economic factors. Some peace operations have taken creative steps, ranging from disrupting local rackets to engaging with banks and finance ministries, but many

UN stakeholders are reluctant to acknowledge this issue and the role missions can play. Peace operations should not only analyse the political economy but think creatively about how to engage with it.

In particular, there is a recurring problem in peacekeeping settings of missing peace dividends. Peacekeeping missions' political strategies are often predicated on the assumption that their political objectives (persuading perpetrators to halt their violence, supporting a restoration of State authority, promoting the rule of law, etc.) will yield peace dividends in the form of access to basic services, jobs, foreign investment, and so on. Yet, missions often do not articulate what they anticipate those peace dividends to be or how they expect them to be distributed, and in practice these dividends often do not materialize in the short term. This causes problems because peace dividends are often a priority concern for many communities in conflict-affected countries and the failure to see these dividends can cause populations to lose faith in political processes. Taking a political economy lens to the conflict and trying to anticipate whether and how peace will lead to improvements in financial security and access to services could help peacekeeping missions develop more realistic political strategies.

12 Translating strategies into marching orders

Having a strong political strategy may amount to very little if it is not translated into clear "marching orders" for mission components and field offices to follow. Some senior mission leaders, depending on personalities and prior experiences, may naturally tend toward this structured approach more than others. In the absence of clear instructions from mission leaders, heads of mission components, sections and field offices will develop their own plans based on their priorities and interests but this can lead to incoherence and missed opportunities.

The crucial lesson across the cases is that strategies should harness the mission's wide range of military, police and civilian capabilities and its field offices toward a common political vision. Strategies should offer a vision at the

outset that allows all mission components to articulate their work in support of that end state. This process is linked to the related concept of prioritization and sequencing. If a mission component cannot articulate how its activities contribute to the core mission priorities, then mission leadership should consider whether to continue those activities or redirect those resources toward other tasks that are more clearly advancing the mission's priorities. The strategy should also offer a vision for how these different activities can be sequenced to achieve the desired outcome. For example, the strategy could lay out how military operations, political dialogue, community outreach, State-building support and DDR initiatives could be used in sequence to influence armed group behaviour.

The UN's ongoing efforts on planning, strategy and assessments have yielded important improvements that have helped create greater coherence across mission components. For example, the introduction of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment System into peacekeeping missions has created processes for missions to review activities and assess their contributions toward mission priorities. But a clear vision from senior mission leadership, and an articulation of how each component's activities should contribute to that vision, also remain essential.

13 The many pathways to a strategy

While there has been UN guidance for many years, the practice of strategy development has varied significantly across missions and moments in time. In some missions, the Security Council resolution was never translated into a mission-wide concept or strategy, leaving individual components of the mission to develop their own plans.³⁷ In others, the Secretariat developed a set of strategic guidance that was then transmitted to the mission, placing the mission leadership in more of an implementing role.³⁸ And at other moments, the mission leadership developed its own strategy with very little interaction with Headquarters. At the time of writing, new guidance on Mission Concepts was under development by DPO, which would require the Secretariat to lead in drafting Mission Concepts.

Based on the case studies, there is no single “right” process to develop a strategy, and no clear finding that either the Secretariat or missions should be in the driver’s seat. However, the best processes appear to have the following elements: (1) active engagement by the mission leadership, leading to buy-in to the final product; (2) a strongly supportive and constructive role by the Secretariat, in particular the relevant Integrated Operational Team; (3) frequent interaction with the key Security Council members, often before the issuance and annual renewal of the mandate; (4) prior discussions with the host government and other conflict actors to understand their positions (though not necessarily asking for their input on the strategy); and (5) broadly consultative processes to build consensus across the mission and other key partners.

Terminology also matters. Several experts warned that the term “political strategy” in a mission setting can leave some components feeling excluded. Instead, the term “mission strategy” helps convey a sense that all components are contributing to a common goal, even if some do not view that goal in political terms. Similarly, the term “political solution” used frequently by HIPPO, Action for Peacekeeping and elsewhere could be improved – one suggestion was “political transformation.”

14 Towards iterative, flexible strategies

Across all of the case studies, a recurrent complaint from UN personnel was that missions had been turned into “planning factories,” required to produce Mission Concepts; mission-wide protection of civilians, human rights, gender and other plans; reports on Council benchmarks; and results-based budgeting plans. “By the time we finish one strategic plan and get it cleared by UN Headquarters, it’s already irrelevant and we need to start a new planning process,” a former SRSG stated.

In the highly fluid contexts of peacekeeping, producing a static strategy that requires layers of bureaucratic clearance may feel like an unnecessary impediment to the kind of nimble

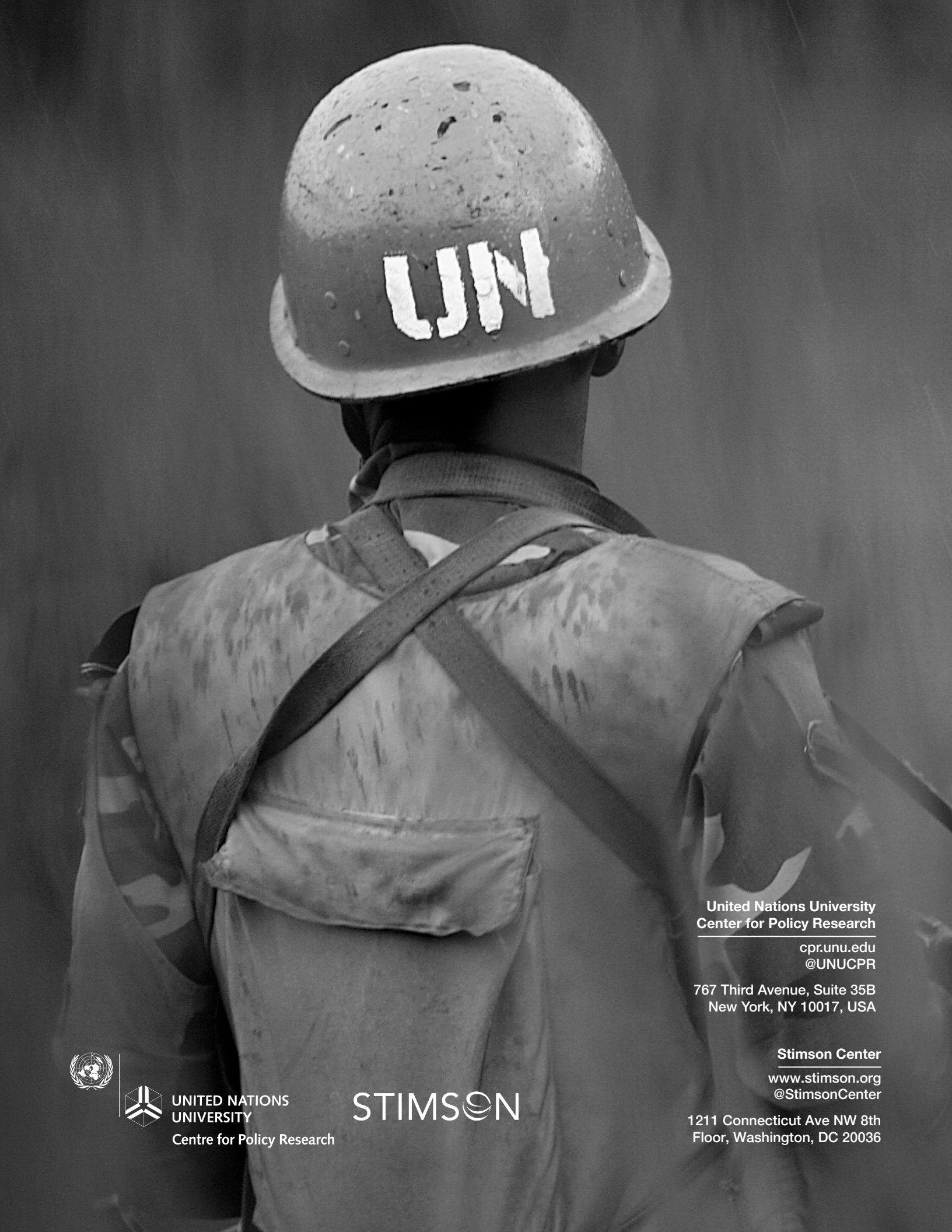
responsive action demanded of missions. Indeed, many senior UN officials suggested that the “real” strategic plan was often kept in the SRSG’s head, while the written plans were *pro forma* responses to Headquarters demands. “There is no way to write down a political strategy,” a former senior UN official argued. “You just have to appoint someone who can feel their way through.” The cases reviewed for this study show many examples of entrepreneurial, effective SRSGs navigating largely by their own starlight to accomplish very positive outcomes. But the cases also underscore the downside of an unwritten, unknown strategy: staff within the mission and potential partners outside the mission struggle to get in line behind a leader who does not communicate a vision for the mission. If heads of components do not understand whether and how their activities contribute to the mission’s political vision, it can exacerbate the tendency for missions to go their own way, disconnected from their political contexts. The unwritten approach can also cause problems when mission leaders falter or have little support in keeping political efforts on course, such as when a host nation constrains freedom of movement or undermines a peace agreement. At the same time, if leaders leave, they may take with them their strategic vision. And further, if there is no written strategy, it may further reduce the effective role of the Security Council’s diplomatic pressure and political influence with key actors, as well as a needed give-and-take about the success in implementing the mission with Council members aside from annual renewals.

There is not a one-size-fits-all approach to having the primacy of politics realized in a mission strategy, but the cases seem to point to a few common elements. These include (1) the need for more iterative, less rigid political strategies, living documents that are constantly reviewed and updated based on ground-truthing with the parties, and which do not overly constrain mission leaders; (2) a document that presents the SRSG’s overarching political vision with clear roles articulated for all mission components that directly contribute to that vision; and (3) a short process of consultation and approval, such that the strategy is not already seen as out of date by the time it is completed.

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