



Rethinking United Nations (UN) peacekeeping in an era of new wars: structural challenges and strategic reforms in Africa, 2020–2025

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ABSTRACT

The period 2020–2025 marked a decisive shift in global conflict dynamics. The rise of asymmetric, fragmented, and digitally driven "new wars" has fundamentally challenged the foundations of United Nations (UN) peacekeeping. This article examines how emerging conflict patterns characterized by violent extremism, transnational armed networks, geopolitical competition, and information warfare expose deep structural limitations within legacy peacekeeping models. Using a comparative qualitative case-study design, this research triangulates data across four flagship missions: MINUSMA (Mali), MONUSCO (DR Congo), MINUSCA (Central African Republic), and UNMISS (South Sudan). The theoretical framework integrates Strategic Peacekeeping Theory to evaluate mandate–capacity alignment, and Political Settlement Theory to analyze institutional performance in environments lacking inclusive elite bargains. The findings reveal five systemic structural challenges: mandate–capacity mismatches, the erosion of host-state consent, geopolitical rivalries that undermine neutrality, acute operational vulnerabilities in mobility and intelligence, and severe legitimacy crises driven by digital disinformation. These constraints collectively impede mission effectiveness and threaten the long-term strategic relevance of UN interventions. To address these vulnerabilities, the article outlines a comprehensive reform agenda centered on mandate differentiation, intelligence-led operations, cyber-defense capabilities, hybrid UN–regional mission structures, and the subordination of military deployment to clear political strategies. These strategic interventions offer a pragmatic roadmap for recalibrating UN peacekeeping into an adaptive, legitimate, and effective instrument for 21st-century international security.

1. Introduction

The global conflict landscape underwent an accelerated transformation between 2020 and 2025, dismantling the core operational assumptions that have historically underpinned United Nations (UN) peacekeeping. Contemporary security theatres are increasingly defined by "new wars" characterized by decentralized non-state actors, asymmetric violence, transnational terror networks, state fragility, and state of the art digital propaganda. Unlike classical interstate conflicts settled via negotiated ceasefires, modern combat environments are fluid and strategically unpredictable. This hybridization of violence renders traditional peacekeeping principles specifically host-state consent, strict impartiality, and the minimal use of force increasingly obsolete.

During this period, the UN deployed missions into highly hostile environments: MINUSMA in Mali, MONUSCO in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), MINUSCA in the Central African Republic (CAR), and UNMISS in South Sudan. These operations confronted a volatile mix of localized insurgencies, shifting regional alliances, and private military contractors (PMCs). Furthermore, the strategic environment was profoundly disrupted by information warfare. Between 2020 and 2025, political elites and insurgent groups systematically weaponized digital platforms—using deep fakes, coordinated bot networks, and encrypted

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communication channels—to spread disinformation, erode mission legitimacy, and incite public hostility.

Compounding these field-level challenges, deep-seated geopolitical rivalries among permanent UN Security Council members fractured diplomatic cohesion. This division diluted mandate clarity and allowed host states to exploit great-power competition by outsourcing their security to alternative providers. Consequently, UN peacekeeping faces a systemic crisis of capability, legitimacy, and strategic orientation.

This article argues that incremental operational adjustments are insufficient to resolve this institutional crisis. Instead, UN peacekeeping requires a structural overhaul to remain viable. By evaluating the structural deficiencies across MINUSMA, MONUSCO, MINUSCA, and UNMISS, this study extracts cross-cutting systemic lessons to establish a forward-looking blueprint for an adaptive, politically integrated, and technologically enabled global security architecture.

The contemporary conflict literature converges on the "new wars" paradigm, which notes that modern violence is driven by decentralized networks, identity politics, and blurred lines between political ideology and transnational organized crime (Kaldor, 2013). This environment produces fluid insurgent structures and complex rebel governance systems that defy state-centric conflict resolution models (Mampilly, 2012; Staniland, 2017). Consequently, traditional multidimensional peacekeeping operations face severe friction when entering theatres where there is no peace to keep. Scholarship highlights a chronic mandate capacity gap in modern deployments (Howard & Dayal, 2019). The UN frequently burdens missions with overly broad state-building and stabilization objectives, yet routinely fails to supply the necessary tactical intelligence, mobility assets, and diplomatic leverage required to execute them (Bellamy & Williams, 2020). Moreover, missions often adopt rigid bureaucratic frameworks that are insulated from local political realities, inadvertently reinforcing predatory state behaviors (Autesserre, 2014; Rubin, 2021).

Despite these rich theoretical debates, post-2020 peacekeeping scholarship exhibits critical gaps:

- Digital Warfare Integration: Insufficient focus on how targeted digital disinformation campaigns and cyber operations systematically destabilize field missions.
- Security Market Outsourcing: Limited analysis of the disruptive impact of commercial proxy actors and foreign PMCs (e.g., the Wagner Group/Africa Corps) on mission neutrality.
- Sovereignty Weaponization: A need for deeper investigation into how host states strategically manipulate the rhetoric of state sovereignty to restrict UN operations while building parallel security alliances.

This study directly addresses these conceptual gaps through a rigorous, comparative assessment of the 2020–2025 peacekeeping landscape.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes two complementary theoretical perspectives to evaluate the structural integrity of modern UN operations:

Strategic Peacekeeping Theory

This theory dictates that institutional success depends on the alignment of four core pillars:

Mandate design, operational capacity, resource allocation, and overarching political strategy (Bellamy & Williams, 2020). When these components are misaligned, structural mission failure becomes inevitable. This framework explains the operational paralysis observed in overextended missions like MONUSCO and MINUSMA, where expansive stabilization demands were paired with deficient tactical mobility and weak intelligence infrastructure.

Political Settlement Theory

This framework argues that durable peace depends entirely on a stable, elite-level distribution of power that is institutionalized and mutually recognized. Violence persists when ruling elites reject inclusive bargains, weaponize state institutions, or profit from ongoing instability. This theory explains why technical and military interventions fail in theatres like South Sudan and the DRC: without a genuine underlying political settlement, peacekeeping operations are reduced to managing a violent and permanent status quo.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, comparative multiple-case research design to analyze complex institutional dynamics within modern conflict zones.

Case Selection: Four active deployments were selected via purposive sampling: MINUSMA, MONUSCO, MINUSCA, and UNMISS. These cases represent high-intensity, multi-actor theatres characterized by asymmetric warfare, host-state friction, and competing external geopolitical interests.

Data Collection and Triangulation: Primary data sources consist of UN Security Council resolutions (2020–2025) and official host-government policy declarations. Secondary data points were extracted from peer-reviewed conflict journals and empirical tracking indices, including the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) and the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED).

The 2020–2025 Conflict Landscape: Core Drivers

The operational environment for international interventions has been radically altered by five intersecting systemic trends:

Armed Group Proliferation: Conflict theatres have experienced a hyper-fragmentation of combatants. In the eastern DRC alone, over 120 independent armed groups operate simultaneously, forming rapidly shifting tactical alliances driven by resource predation and illicit economies.

Asymmetric Violent Extremism: Ideologically absolute movements (e.g., JNIM and ISGS in the Sahel; ADF in Central Africa) reject traditional diplomatic compromise, rendering conventional mediation and peacekeeping paradigms ineffective.

Information Ecosystem Weaponization: Digital platforms have become active battlefields. Hostile actors deploy deep fakes, algorithmic disinformation campaigns, and state-sponsored digital operations to discredit UN personnel, fuel public outrage, and sabotage local civilian trust.

Geopolitical Splintering and Proxy Tenders: Fractured relations within the UN Security Council have directly compromised mission impartiality. Host governments increasingly leverage this great-power competition to substitute UN presence with foreign PMCs and parallel military actors.

Compound Humanitarian Erasure: Complex emergencies marked by mass internal displacement, pervasive gender-based violence, and deliberate attacks on humanitarian corridors have outpaced the defensive capabilities of traditional troop deployments.

Systemic Structural Challenges

The operational crises confronting the UN system are driven by five structural vulnerabilities:

Structural Challenges	Primary Causation
Mandate–Capacity Mismatch	Expansion of tasks without corresponding tactical enablers.
Consent Weaponization	Host-state elites treating UN presence as a challenge to sovereignty
Operational Blindness	Deficiencies in human intelligence (HUMINT) and signals intelligence. (SIGINIT)
Institutional Rigidity	Bureaucratic inertia within UN administrative, procurement and deployment networks.
Legitimacy Deficits	Public frustration driven by unrealistic expectations and coordinated disinformation.

Comparative Cross-Mission Analysis

MINUSMA (Mali): Asymmetric Warfare and Consent Collapse

Operating in an active counter-insurgency environment, MINUSMA became the deadliest UN deployment of its era. Following successive military coups, Mali's ruling junta weaponized sovereignty narratives and redirected its strategic alliance toward the Russian Wagner Group/Africa Corps. The mission faced severe flight bans, state-imposed mobility constraints, and targeted disinformation campaigns.

MINUSMA's experience demonstrates a structural contradiction: a peacekeeping mission cannot achieve stabilization objectives when its host state actively withdraws consent and partners with external mercenary networks. This friction culminated in the mission's forced, non-conditions-based liquidation in 2023.

MONUSCO (DR Congo): Mandate Inflation and Public Hostility

MONUSCO represents the limits of continuous mandate expansion unaccompanied by a viable political settlement. Despite maintaining a massive troop presence, the mission struggled to contain the multi-factional violence in eastern DRC due to mountainous terrain, limited operational agility, and tactical inertia among Troop-Contributing Countries (TCCs).

Local political elites frequently displaced blame for systemic state governance failures onto the UN. This dynamic catalyzed violent, disinformation-fueled anti-UN protests between 2022 and 2024, forcing an accelerated, politically pressured mission drawdown before local security architectures were stable.

MINUSCA (Central African Republic): Navigating Contested Security Marketplaces

In CAR, MINUSCA operated within a multi-polar proxy arena. While the mission maintained urban security, its political authority was marginalized by the government's heavy reliance on parallel Russian military assets.

This dual-track security landscape blurred operational boundaries, compromised UN neutrality in the eyes of opposition networks, and exposed peacekeepers to state-backed media attacks. MINUSCA highlights the structural difficulty of executing a mandate when a host government splits its security architecture between the UN and unaccountable private military actors.

UNMISS (South Sudan): Humanitarian Containment vs. Political Stagnation

UNMISS achieved historic success in humanitarian containment through its Protection of Civilians (POC) sites, which provided sanctuary to over 200,000 internally displaced persons.

However, the mission remained politically paralyzed. South Sudan's fragmented political elites systematically manipulated peace processes, safe in the knowledge that the UN would absorb the humanitarian fallout of their governance failures. UNMISS illustrates the paradox of a highly successful humanitarian intervention that remains unable to incentivize or enforce a durable, long-term political settlement.

Findings

A cross-mission evaluation demonstrates that the current crisis in UN peacekeeping is systemic rather than mission-specific. The inflation of mandates without matching capabilities represents an institutional design flaw. Host-state consent has shifted from a stable operational baseline into a volatile, transaction-oriented bargaining chip.

Furthermore, the weaponization of the digital information space has permanently altered the security environment. These insights apply broadly to all modern peace operations deployed in highly polarized, asymmetric, and resource-contested environments.

These findings show that classical peacekeeping dogmas predicated on clear geographic boundaries and cooperative state actors are increasingly unsuited for modern conflict dynamics. When host states manipulate sovereignty narratives and transition to alternative security providers, they challenge the multilateral norms that underpin the international security architecture.

If the UN fails to reform its operational doctrines and bridge its capabilities gap, it risks structural obsolescence, clearing the way for unregulated, transactional security approaches.

Conclusion

The 2020–2025 peacekeeping cycle exposed an existential disconnect between institutional mandates and operational realities. Legacy doctrines designed for post-war monitoring cannot manage fragmented insurgencies, digital information warfare, or states that actively subvert UN operations.

To maintain strategic relevance, the UN must shift away from large, static, troop-heavy deployments. Future operations must prioritize agile, technologically advanced, and politically integrated interventions supported by unified regional partnerships.

Recommendations

1. Mandate Differentiation and Typology Specialization

The UN Security Council must replace its uniform deployment models with clear, specialized mission categories:

- a. **Stabilization Frameworks:** Reserved for high-intensity zones, equipped with robust rules of engagement, predictive intelligence enablers, and intensive counter-IED capabilities.
- b. **Political Mediation Operations:** Stripped of heavy infantry, these missions should prioritize elite mediation, grassroots dispute resolution, and institutional rule-of-law reconstruction.
- c. **Hybrid Operations:** Institutionalized partnerships (e.g., joint UN–African Union deployments) that pair regional enforcement mandates with UN oversight, funding, and logistical continuity.

2. Digital Modernization and Information Defense

- a. **Predictive AI Architecture:** Deploy automated machine-learning platforms to synthesize real-time satellite imagery, geospatial mapping, and sensor arrays for early threat detection.
- b. **Strategic Counter-Disinformation Cells:** Establish dedicated cyber-defense units within mission commands to actively track, analyze, and counter digital manipulation campaigns and hostile propaganda.

3. Political Strategy Subordination

The UN must refuse to deploy military forces as a substitute for political dialogue. Troop movements should be systematically tied to clear, benchmarked compliance with peace negotiations. Peacekeeping operations must include parallel anti-corruption initiatives and local mediation assets to prevent predatory state behaviors.

4. Intelligence-Led Tactical Doctrine

Missions must transition from static, reactive patrolling to proactive, intelligence-driven operations. This change requires combining human intelligence (HUMINT) networks with advanced signals intelligence (SIGINT), standardizing tactical coordination among diverse troop contingencies, and expanding the use of local Community Liaison Assistants (CLAs) to restore grassroots institutional trust.

5. Conditions-Based Exit Strategies

The UN must eliminate rigid, calendar-driven mission withdrawal timelines. Draw downs must be tied to objective, verifiable security benchmarks, including the measurable capacity of local state security institutions, formal handovers to regional organizations, and continuous post-exit monitoring to prevent dangerous security vacuums.

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