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Sara Hellmüller & Fanny Badache

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# Children of their time: The impact of world politics on United Nations peace operations

Sara Hellmüller <sup>a</sup> and Fanny Badache <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Geneva Graduate Institute, Geneva, Switzerland; <sup>b</sup>University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland



## ABSTRACT

Peace operations are the main instrument of the United Nations (UN) to maintain international peace and security. This special issue analyzes how recent changes in world politics, in terms of increased geopolitical competition and contestation of the liberal international order, have influenced UN peace operations. It combines International Relations (IR) theory and peace research by calling for a macro-level analysis of UN peace operations. It thereby contributes to core debates in IR about the changing global order and its manifestations, as well as to peace research by analyzing how structural factors influence the UN's role in promoting peace. Overall, the special issue further promotes a macro turn in peace research, which we argue is urgently needed at a time when the UN's role in maintaining international peace and security is questioned by major and emerging powers and by host states.

**KEYWORDS** United Nations; peace operations; world politics; world order; peacemaking; peacekeeping

We are now at an inflection point. The post-cold war period is over. A transition is under way to a new global order. While its contours remain to be defined, leaders around the world have referred to multipolarity as one of its defining traits. In this moment of transition, power dynamics have become increasingly fragmented as new poles of influence emerge, new economic blocs form and axes of contestation are redefined. There is greater competition among major powers and a loss of trust between the global North and South. [...] The unity of purpose expressed by Member States in the early 1990s has waned. (UN Secretary-General António Guterres in his Policy Brief on a *New Agenda for Peace*, 20 July 2023)

Peace operations, defined as including good offices engagements, special political missions, and peacekeeping operations (United Nations, 2015), are the main instrument of the United Nations (UN) to maintain

**CONTACT** Sara Hellmüller  sara.hellmueller@graduateinstitute.ch  Chem. Eugène-Rigot 2, Geneva 1202, Switzerland

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international peace and security. Being mandated by the UN Security Council and deployed to various geographical contexts, they are heavily influenced by world politics. In the bipolar system that characterized the Cold War, UN peace operations mainly developed in response to interstate conflicts with the mandate to stabilize and contain armed conflicts by monitoring ceasefires (Paris, 2004; Richmond, 2004). At the end of the Cold War, world politics changed and so did UN peace operations. In a liberal world order dominated by the United States (US), the UN deployed peace operations mostly to intra-state wars with extensive mandates aimed at transforming states and societies according to liberal values (Campbell et al., 2011). This shows that UN peace operations are “children of their time”: movements in the tectonic plates of world politics influence their objectives and mandates. In other words, the prevailing material and ideational conditions of the international system have an impact on the UN’s initiatives to promote peace (Dunton et al., 2023; Hellmüller, 2022; Paris, 2014).

Looking at today’s world politics, scholars and practitioners agree that the world is changing rapidly, and a new order is emerging (de Coning, 2019; Paul, 2018; Sakwa, 2017; Stephen & Zürn, 2019). The unipolar system characterized by US preeminence is in decline as new actors have become more influential on the international stage (Kacowicz & Miller, 2018; Posen, 2012). While the US remains the most powerful actor in material terms, its normative influence has waned. The Taliban take-over after its withdrawal from Afghanistan has led to a questioning of its ability to promote democracy through militarized means and the difference in its reaction towards Russia’s and Israel’s violations of international law has led to accusations of double standards, which jeopardize its legitimacy as a world power (Gowan, 2024). Indeed, “power seems to be diffusing away from the US and the Western ‘core’ of the international system” (Paris, 2014, p. 502). Major powers, such as Russia and China, as well as regional powers, such as Brazil, India, South Africa, and Turkey, have become more assertive in world politics (Call & de Coning, 2017; Paul, 2018). Important non-Western groupings, such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), have also gained in prominence. Overall, voices on the international stage are more diverse with influential states having different—and sometimes diverging—conceptions of the UN’s role in peace promotion (Badache et al., 2022). This begs the question of how this emerging multipolar world order influences UN peace operations.<sup>1</sup>

By drawing on International Relations (IR) theory and peace research, this special issue aims to answer this question. We conceptualize the current changes in world politics as consisting of increased geopolitical competition and a fading of the enthusiasm about liberalism that accompanied the end of the Cold War (Ikenberry, 2018). The special issue contributes to both IR and

peace research. First, it speaks to core debates of IR by exploring the influence of multipolarity on UN peace operations. In particular, it investigates how world politics changes, how these changes manifest themselves, and what impact they have on the UN's ability to maintain international peace and security. It thereby adds to debates on the effects of global power shifts on international organizations and on core concepts in IR (Kruck & Zangl, 2020; Zangl et al., 2016). Second, by focusing on the structural factors related to the dominant world order that influence UN peace operations, the special issue adds a macro-level perspective to peace research. It thereby complements the existing literature that has mostly focused on micro-level aspects of UN peace operations related to their inner workings, in terms of their mandates, structure, and impact at the domestic level (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013b; Paffenholz, 2015; Paris, 2014).

Overall, the special issue is timely and topical because there is broad acknowledgment that the UN faces challenges to prevent or address armed conflicts, such as in Syria, Ukraine, and the Middle East. Multidimensional peacekeeping operations, such as the ones deployed in South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, are criticized for their high costs and inefficacy, which ultimately hampers their legitimacy on the ground in host countries. Special political missions and good offices engagements, such as in Libya and Yemen, are accused of being unable to broker and oversee peace agreements (Asseburg et al., 2018; Hudáková, 2021; Mancini & Vericat, 2016). Against this background, the *Pact for the Future*, adopted at the Summit of the Future in September 2024, mandates the UN Secretary-General to undertake a review on the future of all forms of UN peace operations in order to “adapt peace operations to better respond to existing challenges and new realities” (United Nations, 2024). The future of UN peace operations is thus widely discussed (Cassin & Zyla, 2021; Coleman & Williams, 2021; de Coning, 2021; de Coning & Peter, 2019; Kenkel & Foley, 2021; Osland & Peter, 2021). Scholars and policymakers agree that they will remain relevant, although with some adaptations (Cassin & Zyla, 2021; Coleman & Williams, 2021). What peace operations may look like in the future is not yet clear, however. The special issue contributes to these debates by providing an analysis of the challenges and opportunities that the multipolar order creates for UN peace operations. It thereby sets the foundations for a better understanding of what revisions may be needed.

In this introduction, we first provide theoretical reflections on a macro turn in the study of UN peace operations that connects IR and peace research. Second, we outline such a macro-level analysis by defining the key concepts used in this special issue, namely world politics and peace operations, and by showing the main trends in both. We then introduce the articles in the special issue before concluding on the contributions made.

## Connecting IR and peace research: From “micro” to “macro” in the study of UN peace operations

The special issue seeks to understand the impact of changes in world politics on the maintenance of international peace and security and sheds a macro-level perspective on UN peace operations. To do so, it connects IR theories with peace research. IR seeks to “elucidate the causes of war and the prerequisites for the attainment of peace” (Richmond, 2007, p. 248). Its emergence at the beginning of the 20th century was linked to an interest in better understanding “governmental activities crossing national boundaries” to prevent wars (Barnett & Sikkink, 2008, p. 76; see also Hellmann, 2011, p. 22). The discipline has evolved over the years, expanding in scope as it became interested in actors other than states, and issues other than war and peace. Today, the main aim of IR is to better understand world politics.

Peace research, in turn, studies the causes of violence and ways to address them (Brühl, 2012; Brzoska, 2012; Cooper & Finley, 2014; Hagmann, 2014; Müller, 2012). In the 1950s, “calls arose for the systematic investigation of the conditions of peace as a special academic field” (Gleditsch et al., 2014, p. 146). The nuclear threat gave rise to peace movements and foundations began to sponsor programs in peace studies (Keohane, 2008, p. 708; Nye, 2008, pp. 652–653). Important research projects started, for instance Galtung’s conceptualizations of peace (Galtung, 1969) or Singer’s Correlates of War project (Singer & Small, 1972). Peace research has evolved since the early days, covering many different topics related to the causes of violence (Bara, 2018; Boyle, 2009; Nussio & Ugarriza, 2021) and conditions for peace (Coleman, 2022; Firchow & Mac Ginty, 2017; Mross et al., 2022).

One frequent object of interest in peace research is UN peace operations (Duursma et al., 2023; Fortna, 2010; Walter et al., 2020). However, for a long time, studies on peace operations focused on micro-level factors and therefore remained disconnected from broader IR theories. Indeed, peace research has put most attention on the inner workings of peace operations (Hellmüller, 2022; Paris, 2014). The liberal world order of the early post-Cold War period enabled such a focus as peace operations flourished with increasingly extensive mandates (Newman et al., 2009, p. 3). In the mid-2000s, researchers coined the term “liberal peacebuilding” to describe peace operations, which included the promotion of “democracy, market-based economic reforms and a range of other institutions associated with ‘modern’ states as a driving force for building ‘peace’” (Newman et al., 2009, p. 3; Lidén, 2005; Paris, 2004; Richmond, 2008). They assessed various dimensions of liberal peacebuilding, including statebuilding, transitional justice, and reconstruction (Milliken & Krause, 2002; Sriram, 2009; Williams, 2010). At the same time, scholars started to criticize this liberal approach to peace

operations for its assumed universality (Call & Cousens, 2007; Mac Ginty, 2008; Sending, 2009), for upholding Western dominance (Chandler, 2010; Duffield, 2007; Pugh, 2004), and for its destabilizing impact in many contexts (Jabri, 2010; Richmond, 2008; Tadjbakhsh, 2010). The critiques led to a “local turn” in peace research (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013), with authors focusing on how peace operations interact with local actors, dynamics, and processes (Autesserre, 2010; Björkdahl et al., 2014; Hellmüller, 2013, 2018).

While this increased attention to the local dimensions of UN peace operations filled an important gap in the literature, it neglected the fact that liberal peacebuilding also reflected the structural context of the liberal world order. This further accentuated the disconnect between IR and peace research. Treating the structural context largely as a given, the focus on micro-level processes made researchers overlook the broader world-political factors that influence peace operations. In that sense, peace scholars have put their attention mostly on micro-theorizing rather than engaging with larger theoretical debates in IR and hence the study of peace operations has remained disconnected from the study of world politics (Hellmüller, 2022; Paris, 2000).<sup>2</sup>

This special issue re-connects IR and peace research. It provides a systematic exploration of the impact of factors at the macro level related to world politics on UN peace operations at the micro level. Other scholars have started to look at UN peace operations in a period of changing world politics. Cedric de Coning and Mateja Peter's edited volume entitled *United Nations Peace Operations in a Changing Global Order* (Palgrave, 2019) was the first to address this question. It studies the impact of four structural transformations on UN peace operations: the rebalancing of the relations between states in the Global North and in the Global South, the rise of regional organizations, the rise of violent extremism and fundamentalist non-state actors, and the increasing demands of non-state actors for an emphasis on human security. Other scholars have analyzed what shape peace operations could take at a time of contestation and transition (Dunton et al., 2023; Kenkel & Foley, 2021; Paris 2023). Overall, there is broad acknowledgement that peace operations will adapt to the changing material and ideational configurations rather than disappear (Coleman & Williams, 2021). One main adaptation that scholars point to is that they are becoming more “pragmatic” (Peter, 2019), defined as “the lowest common denominator’ policies and a more limited peacekeeping agenda that prioritizes conflict containment as opposed to resolution” (Dunton et al., 2023, p. 216).<sup>3</sup> As such, authors argue that large-scale ambitious operations are less likely to be deployed in the medium term with peace operations increasingly accepting a diffusion of control and becoming less directive and less liberal (Cassin & Zyla, 2021; Coleman & Job, 2021, p. 1467; Osland & Peter, 2021). By being more in support than in the lead of regional and domestic

attempts at conflict management, they will also likely sustain more locally-driven approaches to peace interventions (Cassin & Zyla, 2021; Karlsrud, 2023).

The special issue contributes to this emerging research strand on the impact of changing world politics on UN peace operations. In comparison to earlier studies that have mostly focused on the *outcomes* of world-political changes in terms of what peace operations may look like in the future, it includes an analysis of the processes that connect changes in world politics to UN peace operations. Because even if scholars have acknowledged that changes in peace operations are linked to the global distribution of power, “the precise character of those linkages is rarely spelled out” (Cunliffe, 2020, p. 41). The special issue specifically draws on IR theories like realism, constructivism, and liberalism to analyze the main changes that we observe in world politics and to link them to the three concepts at the core of peace operations: peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding. Overall, such a macro turn in peace research is urgently needed at a time of questioning of the UN’s potential to maintain international peace and security (Gowan, 2024; Oksamytna & Karlsrud, 2020; Paris, 2000, pp. 29–30).

## **A macro-level analysis: Changes in world politics and UN peace operations**

In this section, we define and operationalize the key concepts used in the contributions to this special issue, namely changes in world politics on the one hand, and changes in UN peace operations on the other hand.

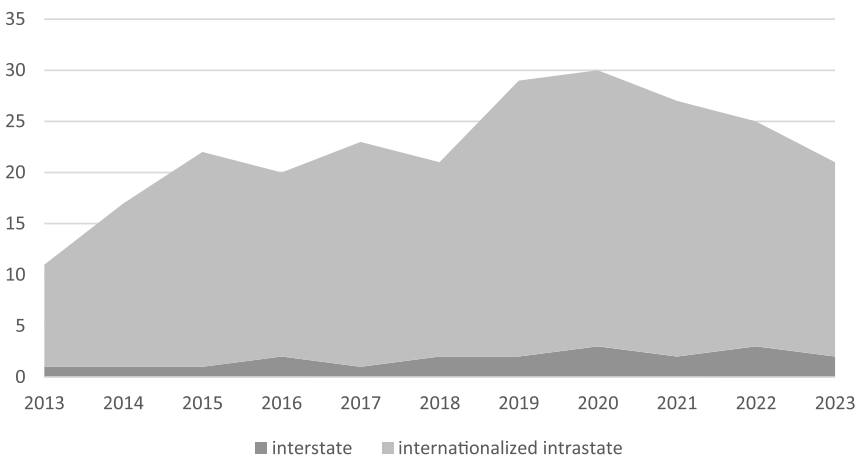
### ***Changes in world politics***

IR scholars, particularly from the realist school of thought, have historically defined the structure of world politics in terms of the distribution of material capabilities such as economic and military power. However, as constructivists, such as Finnemore (2009, pp. 58–59), put it: “the structure of world politics, however, is social as much as it is material. Material distributions of power alone tell us little about the kind of politics states will construct for themselves.” To fully understand how power is exercised in international politics, we therefore also need to include an analysis of the prevailing norms in international politics (Paris, 2003). Based on this understanding, we conceptualize the changes in world politics that have taken place in recent years both in material and ideational terms (Hellmüller, 2022; Howard & Stark, 2017/2018; Paris, 2014).

At the material level, we observe increased geopolitical competition defined as “the contention between great powers and aspiring great powers for control over territory, resources, and important geographical

positions” (Klare, 2003). Authors agree that with the increased influence of new global and regional actors, world politics entered a more competitive phase (Paris, 2014, p. 502). This increased geopolitical competition takes various shapes. First, we observe a (slight) increase in the number of direct conflicts between states in the last decade (see Figure 1): from 8 active interstate conflicts in the first decade of 2000s, this number rose to 14 between 2010 and 2020, and in the first three years after 2020, there were already eight active interstate conflicts per year (Davies et al., 2023). New or latent conflicts between states over both territory and government broke out or escalated such as between Iran and Israel since 2018, the China–India conflict over Aksai Chin in 2020, the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border conflict in 2021, the full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine in 2022, and the Israel-Lebanon conflict in 2024. Second, the number of internationalized civil wars has dramatically risen in the last decade: from 7 for the first decade of the 2000s, to 22 in the 2010s, and 13 such conflicts have been recorded for the first three years of the 2020s only (Davies et al., 2023). We can for instance think of Rwanda’s backing of armed groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo, or the different state actors having supported various parties in the civil wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen. This has led Davies et al. (2023) to conclude that we are witnessing a return of international rivalry and conflict between states in the form of both interstate conflicts and internationalized intrastate conflicts.

Geopolitical competition also manifests itself in the dynamics at the UN Security Council where the permanent five member states have clashed on key decisions related to the conflicts in Syria, Ukraine, and Gaza, amongst others. Indeed, the use of the veto in the UN Security Council has



**Figure 1.** Number of active conflicts between states (2013–2023). Source: Elaborated by the authors based on the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset Version 24.1



increased in the last decades from 14 between 2001 and 2010, to 25 between 2011 and 2020, and was already at 17 in only the four years from 2021 to 2024.<sup>4</sup> It has also become more challenging for the UN Security Council to reach consensus. This is for instance shown in the renewal of peace mission mandates. While in 2011, less than 5 percent of such renewals were not unanimous, in 2022, the number of non-unanimous renewals was at 33.3 percent.<sup>5</sup>

At the ideational level, we observe increasing contestation of the liberal international order in general, and of international institutions in particular (Copelovitch et al., 2020; Walter, 2021; Zürn 2018). Even if contestation has always existed (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni & Hofmann, 2020), several scholars content that the current challenges are unprecedented (Lake et al., 2021). This contestation comes from *within* by founding actors of the post-Cold War liberal order, such as the US and the United Kingdom, as well as from *without* by states like China and Russia (Cunliffe, 2019; Gladstone, 2018). What is more, the contemporary order is contested by a diversity of non-state actors: from citizens (Hooghe et al., 2019) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Stephen & Zürn, 2019) to violent groups such as Daesh. One major source of this contestation lies in the shift from *liberal multilateralism* in the post-World War II to *post-national liberalism* in the post-Cold War era (Börzel & Zürn, 2021). Post-national liberalism denotes a system in which multilateral institutions have gained more authority and have increased their intrusiveness in states' internal affairs by promoting liberal values. This intrusiveness is increasingly being contested as post-colonial (Hill, 2005; Jabri, 2013).

Beyond the contestation of multilateral institutions like the UN, existing research also shows that today's major powers have different conceptions of key issues such as the UN's role in peacebuilding (Badache et al., 2022) and instruments like peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding (Call & de Coning, 2017; Jütersonke et al., 2021; Landau & Lehrs, 2022; Peter & Rice, 2022). Especially how states define the concepts of security (Paris, 2023) and sovereignty (Paris, 2020; Salaymeh et al., *Forthcoming*) is important for peace operations as it influences their mandates: The balance between the UN's role in maintaining international security and the conceptualization of sovereignty, for instance, determines the salience of the norm of the responsibility to protect (Chen & Yin, 2020; Nuruzzman, 2022).

Overall, and as highlighted by the UN Secretary-General (2023) in his Policy Brief on a *New Agenda for Peace*, world politics are changing—both materially and ideationally—but the exact contours in terms of the powerful actors and the norms they uphold are yet to be defined and so is the impact of these changes on UN peace operations.

## **Changes in UN peace operations**

We take a comprehensive approach to defining UN peace operations, including good offices engagements, special political missions, and peacekeeping operations (Hellmüller et al., 2023; United Nations, 2015). In most cases, the UN Security Council authorizes and defines the mandates of peace operations, although some are based on a decision by the UN General Assembly or on an exchange of letters between the Security Council and the Secretary-General (Johnstone, 2010, p. 22). While earlier research has mostly focused on UN peacekeeping operations, we argue that it is important to take a broader view, also including the political missions as they play an important role in the UN's repertoire of practices to maintain international peace and security (Hellmüller et al., 2022). This is in line with the UN's own approach as for instance the *Pact for the Future* speaks of all forms of peace operations, including political missions (United Nations, 2024). Moreover, many contexts have seen the deployment of different types of peace operations, such as Angola, Burundi, Cyprus, Haiti, and Somalia, and it would create an empirical blind spot not to include them all. We also conceptualize peace operations as engaging in tasks ranging from peacemaking to peacekeeping and peacebuilding. The good offices engagements in Syria and Yemen, for instance, were mandated to make peace and peacekeeping operations also frequently have mediation amongst their mandate tasks (Hellmüller & Keller, 2023). Moreover, many peace operations have mandates that go beyond making or keeping peace and engage in peacebuilding. The peace operations in Iraq (deployed in 2003), Libya (deployed in 2011), and Central African Republic (deployed in 2014) have for instance all engaged in civil society capacity-building, promotion of women's rights and participation, and strengthening of the rule of law.

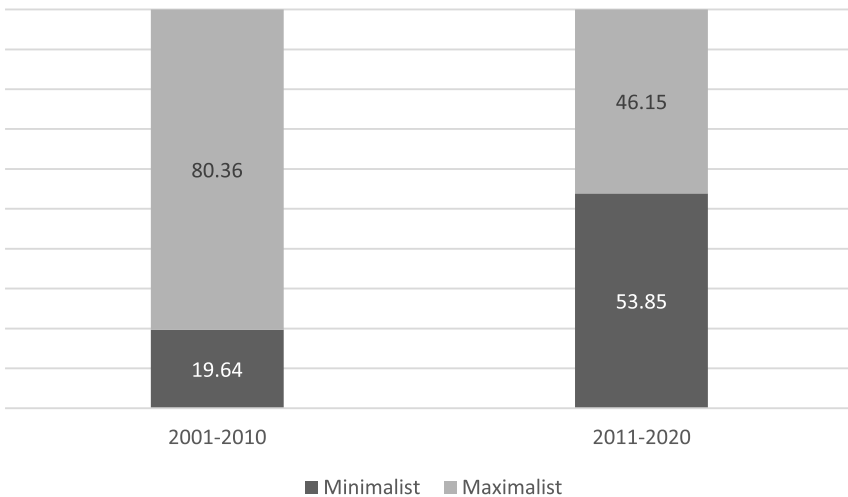
Peace operations are changing. These changes take place at two inter-connected levels: the UN Security Council that decides on the types of operations and their mandates on the one hand and their implementation when being deployed in conflict-affected contexts on the other hand.

First, at the level of the UN Security Council, we see a change in both the types of mission being deployed and their mandated tasks. Regarding the types of mission, there is a shift away from peacekeeping operations towards political missions—either in the form of special political missions or good offices engagements. While the number of newly deployed peacekeeping operations has decreased from 36 operations deployed from 1991 to 2010 to 10 from 2001 to 2010 and then 6 from 2011 to 2020, the number of political missions has remained at around 20 new missions per period and it has been higher than the number of peacekeeping operations in every year since 2000 (Hellmüller et al., 2023). Indeed, the last peacekeeping operation was deployed to Haiti from 2017 to 2019, while the UN

authorized several new political missions in recent years, for instance in Colombia (since 2017), Myanmar (since 2018), and Mozambique (2019–2023).

Moreover, mission mandates have become less extensive in the past 10 years, as depicted in [Figure 2](#). They indicate a stronger focus on ending violence or “minimalist” objectives, rather than extensive multidimensional operations aiming at promoting a positive peace with “maximalist” objectives (Hellmüller et al., 2023). Indeed, two of the flagship multidimensional operations have withdrawn or are in the process of withdrawing, namely the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSMA) which ended in December 2023 and the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), which is withdrawing. The mandates of recent operations also include fewer tasks overall, indicated by UN Secretary-General’s claim that “Christmas is over” referring to the fact that earlier operations had mandates comparable to Christmas trees due to the high number of tasks assigned to them (Security Council Report, 2019).

Second, regarding mission implementation, the core concepts of peace operations in terms of consent, impartiality, and—for peacekeeping operations—the use of force only in self-defense, have also seen major changes in recent years (Duursma et al., 2023). Consent is being challenged by host governments withdrawing their willingness to cooperate, such as in Mali where the peace operation was terminated for this reason (Hellmüller, 2021; Piccolino & Karlsrud, 2011). Conflict parties increasingly question the impartiality of missions and have used accusations of bias for political



**Figure 2.** Number of minimalist and maximalist operations deployed in two periods. Source: UNPMM, [www.peacemissions.info](http://www.peacemissions.info).

motives, like in Sudan where the government declared the Special Envoy *persona non grata* (Paddon Rhoads, 2016). Finally, the principles of the responsibility to protect and the protection of civilians that have been used to authorize missions to use force to protect civilians from major harm, are also increasingly contested (Chen & Yin, 2020; Hunt, 2019; Laskaris & Kreutz, 2015). These changes are the result of evolving practices by both UN peace operations staff and troop-contributing countries.

The above shows that crucial shifts have been ongoing in world politics and in UN peace operations for more than a decade. Against this background, the special issue analyzes discourses, mandates, norms, and implementation of UN peace operations under conditions of geopolitical competition and increased contestation of the liberal international order.

### Articles in the special issue

All the contributions to this special issue address the relationship between changes in world politics and UN peace operations at different levels of analysis. The first two articles focus on the epistemic challenges that changing world politics pose to core concepts related to UN peace operations. The next two articles study the impact of world politics on the norms and discourses around UN peace operations at both the policy and deployment levels. Finally, three articles explore the effect of the increasing diversity of actors that characterize current world politics on the implementation of peace operations and processes. The authors approach these topics from different theoretical perspectives by using methods such as interviews, observation, quantitative and qualitative content analysis, and discourse analysis. Empirically, the articles cover different conflict settings in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.

In terms of epistemological reflections, Richmond (2025) starts by showing how legitimacy and viability problems with the international order have led to stalemated peace processes. He argues that our existing research methodologies, concepts, and practical doctrines are insufficient to understand these dynamics as they converge around a limited set of goals in terms of how to address conflicts. His article is embedded in critical peace and security studies and calls for more emancipatory theoretical frameworks to study contemporary peace processes.

Kobayashi, Krause and Yuan (2025)'s article also revolves around epistemic challenges. The authors begin by highlighting the evolving nature of conflict and the power relations in which conflict-affected states are embedded within the global structure. They then examine the epistemic dilemma between a narrowly defined conception of peacebuilding, which focuses primarily on its liberal dimensions, and the risk of conceptual overstretch when peacebuilding is understood as encompassing any policy

intervention in conflict-affected contexts. To navigate this tension, they advocate for an approach that conceptualizes peacebuilding as a process aimed at shaping political order in conflict-affected states.

Regarding norms and discourses, Prokhorova (2025) examines how normative changes at the global level—especially regarding the norm of the responsibility to protect have impacted the peacekeeping doctrine and practice in terms of the protection of civilians. Through an analysis of foundational texts concerning the norm of protection and doctrinal documents of peacekeeping, she traces the shift from militarized protectors of individual bodies to police protectors of (state) order and stability. She thereby uncovers what the changing norms mean for the three peacekeeping principles of consent, impartiality, and the non-use of force.

Also engaging with norms and discourses of UN peace operations, Buiteelaar (2025) examines whether they adapt to global normative change and shifting power distributions. To do so, he compares the human rights discourse of two peacekeeping operations—MONUC and MINUSCA—deployed during different paradigms (liberal peacekeeping and stabilization respectively). He shows that the discourse of these two peacekeeping operations did adapt to the normative shift from liberal peacebuilding to stabilization. However, his analysis also shows continuity in human rights discourse despite changes in world politics. He concludes that this imperfect adaptation of the discourse of peace operations at the micro level to changes at the macro level can be explained by the need to uphold core organizational norms.

The other three articles in the special issue focus on the increasing diversity of actors in world politics and their effect on the implementation of peace missions. Hellmüller and Salaymeh (2025) argue that geopolitical competition has led to a conflation of warmaking and peacemaking: The same actors that support conflict parties militarily also engage in efforts to resolve the conflict. This turns peace processes into political marketplaces with the main *modus operandi* becoming transactional peacemaking, which has three features: It prioritizes bilateral over multilateral approaches; is interest-based and exclusive rather than value-based and inclusive; and focuses on short-term deals instead of long-term outcomes. Through in-depth case studies of Libya, Yemen, and Syria, they analyze the impact of these changes for UN peace missions and for the global peacemaking landscape.

Pogodda (2025) also sheds light on the effects of increasing geopolitical competition on conflicts and their domestic dynamics. In particular, she examines the role of UN mediators in the context of revolutionary wars in Syria and Libya. She first discusses the challenges posed by revolutionary wars to UN mediation. She delves into the question of how multipolarity affects domestic dynamics and shows that these conflicts are heavily

penetrated by external actors which limit the possibility to achieve a negotiated solution and therefore UN mediation.

Finally, Fawcett (2025) focuses on the diversity of actors in terms of regions playing an increasingly important role. She shows that regional organizations have always played a role in peace operations but that their influence is expanding in the current world order. According to her, focusing our attention on the regional-global nexus allows to close the gap between important changes on the ground and how we understand the roles and effectiveness of peace operations. From an epistemological point of view, the attention to regional organizations in peace operations contributes to de-centering and de-Westernizing the discipline of IR. Overall, she reflects on how regional organizations may shape the “new multilateralism” and reconstruction of the global order and thereby provides insights into the broader context in which the UN decides on and deploys peace operations.

## Conclusion

UN peace operations are undergoing rapid transformations. This special issue focuses on the tectonic shifts in world politics as an important factor to explain these changes. To do so, it combines IR theory and peace research. It speaks to debates at the core of IR by conceptualizing the changing global order in material and ideational terms and by analyzing one particular manifestation of it in terms of its impact on the UN’s role in maintaining international peace and security. At the same time, the macro-level perspective it adopts makes a distinct contribution to peace research as it complements the existing literature that has mostly focused on micro-level aspects of UN peace operations related to their inner workings.

The special issue seeks to inspire future research that may delve deeper into other manifestations of changing world politics, such as the so-called “crisis of multilateralism,” financial aspects related to UN member states’ contributions, or the influence of regional powers. Other changes in UN peace operations should also be studied in relation to changing world politics, such as the shift from peacekeeping to political missions, the increased contestation of peace operations by host states and populations, or the spread of disinformation. More research could also be conducted on other mechanisms that link world politics and peace operations, such as how member states exert power in defining their mandates, how they define concepts at the core of peace operations—like security or sovereignty—, or what role they perceive and assign to the UN in terms of making, keeping, and building peace.

At a time when the UN is about to conduct a review of all forms of UN peace operations, the conversation on their future has only just started. Many things remain unknown: How will US President Donald Trump’s

contestation of the multilateral system impact on peace operations? How will political missions, such as in Libya and Yemen, regain their leverage in contexts of weak belligerent consent? What is the future of the remaining multi-dimensional peacekeeping operations in Central African Republic and South Sudan? These questions demonstrate that the special issue inscribes itself in a timely policy discussion on how the UN fulfills its most important role, namely, to maintain international peace and security.

## Notes

1. As we explain in the theoretical section, we define polarity not just as measured by material capabilities, but also the ability of a state to influence the prevailing norms and ideas in world politics. Whether multipolarity is a good description of the emerging world order is debated. Some authors speak of multiplexity (Acharya, 2017) or describe world politics as constituted of three worlds—the Global North, the Global West, and the Global South—that do not constitute poles of power but compete for shaping the world order (Ikenberry, 2024).
2. An edited volume by Kseniya Oksamytna and John Karlsrud is a noteworthy exception. See Oksamytna and Karlsrud (2020).
3. On pragmatic peacebuilding more broadly see Moe and Stepputat (2018), Chandler (2017).
4. As of 8 January 2025. Numbers generated from “Security Council—Veto List”, available at: <https://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick> (last accessed 8 January 2025).
5. Security Council Report, *Security Council Working Methods in Hard Times*, Mai 2023.

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## ORCID

Sara Hellmüller  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5411-8459>  
Fanny Badache  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7395-2163>

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