

Preserving the Peace

A Path Forward for the United States and United Nations Peacekeeping

Philip Caruso and Nahyun Brianne Yoo

In April 2023, People’s Republic of China Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin reported that Congolese children referred to female People’s Liberation Army (PLA) medical personnel assigned to MONUSCO, the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), as “their Chinese mothers,” and that the Chinese peacekeepers’ “love-filled program is still ongoing.”¹ China’s love for UN peacekeeping is clear. With almost 2,300 PLA personnel deployed in UN peacekeeping operations throughout Africa and the Middle East—relative to the United States’ 35—China is the largest troop contributor to UN peacekeeping among the five permanent UN Security Council (UNSC) members and has increased its military presence by over 1,700% in the past two decades.²

With only a meager contribution of its own, the United States risks empowering China’s agenda to shape—or worse, co-opt—the future of the rules-based international order at the UN. That risk is particularly acute on the ground in the developing countries that host peacekeepers—primarily in Africa—where the broader U.S. military’s absence undermines U.S. foreign policy objectives and creates a vacuum exploited by Russia and China. By increasing its presence in UN peacekeeping, the United States can ensure UN peacekeeping operations are kept independent of malign influence, leverage its expertise as the world’s greatest military power to improve UN peacekeeping effectiveness, build military-to-military partnerships with other troop-contributing countries, and offer valuable multilateral operations experience to U.S. military personnel. And it can do so efficiently with a modest increase in personnel. Put simply, the United States can benefit from a significant return on only a modest investment.

Trends in UN Peacekeeping

The UN has undertaken peacekeeping operations since its creation, undertaking its first ceasefire observer mission during the Arab-Israeli war in 1948.³ Under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the UNSC can authorize military force, to include military intervention by UN peacekeepers.⁴ Representing an international government organization, UN peacekeeping missions operate independently of any national government or military, and UN forces operate under UN control while assigned.

Peacekeeping is politically and militarily difficult; peacekeepers’ mandate to serve as impartial and honest brokers in conflict zones often limits UN political will to use military force on the ground, particularly when UN forces are targeted by actors that are hostile to their presence. A militarily rational response can be perceived as offensive in nature, escalating hostilities and undermining peacekeepers’ credibility. However, failing to respond militarily can fail to deter violence against peacekeepers and civilians, increasing risk to all parties.

The UN does not have organic military capability and depends on member states to contribute forces for UN missions. When member states contribute forces, they often do so with caveats, which are conditions under which such forces can be used and run the gamut in type and scope. This complicates UN military planning because peacekeeping commanders are often constrained when performing UN missions. Many caveats are aimed to reduce risk, reducing the ability of UN forces to combat hostile actors even where the UN political and military will exists to do so.

Member states are also reimbursed for the cost of contributed forces at UN-determined rates—driven as much by political considerations of fairness as actual cost—that tend to under-reimburse wealthy countries with expensive military capabilities, requiring them to unilaterally shoulder at least some of the cost of

contributing high-end assets to UN missions. This problem has compounded over time and is partially self-inflicted by those same wealthy countries, especially the United States, which pressure it to reduce costs as the largest donor. The net result is that developing countries, primarily in Africa and Asia, tend to contribute the preponderance of UN forces. Many now depend on UN reimbursements to fund their militaries, which can be as high as 20% of their total military budgets.

The UN's disproportionate reliance on developing countries for military power has other effects. Many do not benefit from the expensive and advanced training wealthy countries can afford, resulting in lower military effectiveness. Human rights, public health, and rule of law issues in those countries can cascade into their UN peacekeeping forces, undermining the UN's credibility.⁵ Militaries in developing countries often do not possess expensive, lifesaving technology and exquisite assets, and therefore may, by necessity, have a higher tolerance for casualties than those in the West with fewer, if any, caveats on how their forces may be used. Additionally, given the scale of their contributions, developing countries naturally demand a significant presence in UN peacekeeping leadership positions. This is further driven by political considerations at the UN, which must be seen as egalitarian among member states and representative of the world, even if that means that some UN peacekeeping leaders are less militarily experienced. This exacerbates the caveat challenge due to a higher perception of risk from troop-contributing countries, especially those in the West.

U.S. Participation in UN Peacekeeping

The United States is the largest financial contributor to UN peacekeeping, funding approximately 28% of the \$6 billion UN peacekeeping budget.⁶ Yet its military contributions are meager. Since UN forces typically operate under UN operational control while assigned, U.S. forces performing UN peacekeeping missions are subject to the challenges the broader UN peacekeeping enterprise faces. These obstacles have complicated the appetite in Washington for U.S. participation in UN peacekeeping and historically deterred the U.S. government from contributing forces at scale to UN peacekeeping operations unless under U.S. control.

UN peacekeeping operations have grown in frequency, size, and scale over time, particularly since the 1980s. For decades, the United States has contributed small numbers of individual military members to serve under UN operational control as staff officers and observers. Yet casualties among U.S. military personnel assigned to UN peacekeeping in Lebanon in the 1980s, including by kidnapping, exposed risks with the UN's ability to protect U.S. personnel.⁷ Overall casualties in UN military operations surged in the 1990s as UN forces were increasingly used to facilitate humanitarian operations, averting genocide and starvation, but in the process confronting non-state actors who were hostile to their presence and uninterested in peace. Coinciding with the growth in UN peacekeeping, the American public became increasingly averse to military casualties. U.S. policymakers and legislators, perceiving unacceptable risk relative to the foreign policy reward of demonstrating commitment to the UN, became more and more reluctant to place U.S. troops under UN control.⁸ The number of U.S. military personnel serving under UN operational control decreased from 115 in 1993 to 35 in 2023.⁹

While the U.S. military still contributed large numbers of personnel to UN operations, it did so primarily via workaround—volunteering military support under U.S. command and operational control but with UN authority granted by the UNSC. A prominent example is the UN Mission in Somalia/Unified Task Force from 1992 to 1995, in which over 25,000 U.S. troops participated under UN authority and later became widely known to the American public through the film *Black Hawk Down*.¹⁰ Others include the UN Mission in Haiti from 1993 to 1996, in which over 25,000 U.S. troops also participated.¹¹

This workaround is less tenable today. From a UN perspective, the use of national forces under operational control of national authorities but supporting UN operations complicates UN control of those forces, especially international perceptions of whether such forces are acting unilaterally, potentially undermining UN credibility. In 1992, the UN created the Department of Peacekeeping Operations to build the UN's capacity to plan and manage UN military operations and institutionalize UN peacekeeping. Although it still does not

possess the operational command and control infrastructure to mirror the capabilities of sophisticated militaries or treaty organizations like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the UN has improved its ability to manage military operations. Where the UNSC establishes a peacekeeping mission mandate that cannot be addressed through the UN's Peacekeeping Capability Readiness System of generating forces under UN control, there may always be an application for UN authority conferred upon nationally controlled forces, but the political bar is higher today than in the past.

Given this trend, both the Obama-Biden and Biden-Harris administrations have pledged to contribute more U.S. forces to UN peacekeeping operations. In September 2015, President Barack Obama pledged to double the number of U.S. military personnel assigned to UN staff positions (this would have been to 68, from 34 at the time of Obama's pledge), as well as to make available U.S. military trainers to deploy with foreign military units to peacekeeping missions.¹² The accompanying policy memorandum to the U.S. government applied softer direction to "strongly consider" it, and these pledges did not come to fruition.¹³ In December 2021, the United States more conservatively pledged to "consider" embedding U.S. military trainers with foreign military units in peacekeeping missions.¹⁴ While it remains to be seen whether these pledges will reach implementation, the policy groundwork has been laid for the United States to do more in UN peacekeeping.

China and UN Peacekeeping

As the United States distanced its military from peacekeeping, the PLA has deepened its engagement. China is the only permanent member of the UNSC in the top ten military contributors to UN peacekeeping, and is the second largest financial contributor to UN peacekeeping at 15% of the budget.¹⁵ In 2000, the PLA contributed 98 personnel to UN peacekeeping; by 2015, just three years into the Xi Jinping era, its contribution had risen to 3,045.¹⁶ While that number has come down to approximately 2,300 in 2023, at least some of the decline can be attributed to the closure of the UN Mission in Liberia in 2018, to which China had contributed over 600 personnel in 2015.¹⁷

China benefits from participation in UN peacekeeping in multiple ways. Chinese leaders extol China's commitment to peace, with state-controlled media explaining "peace is in the genes of the Chinese nation," and "Chinese people care about the wellbeing of humanity."¹⁸ Chinese media highlights that "China honors its responsibilities as a major country" by actively participating in peacekeeping operations—a thinly veiled shot at the United States' reluctance to engage.¹⁹ Having not fought in combat since 1979, PLA personnel gain operational experience by deploying to peacekeeping missions.²⁰ They learn from the military members of other countries while establishing a military presence in countries of interest that could be used to collect intelligence information.²¹

PLA contributions to UN peacekeeping also correlate with Chinese financial investment and economic activity. The number of Chinese workers in South Sudan, for example, grew from 718 in 2014 to 5,828 in 2015.²² The number of PLA personnel deployed to the UN Mission in South Sudan likewise increased from 344 in 2014 to 1,054 in 2015.²³ While this is not by itself indicative of malign activity—China has a reasonable national interest in contributing to stability in countries with which it has a strong economic relationship—it is evidence that "the wellbeing of humanity," if a factor in China's UN calculus, is only but one factor, with use of UN peacekeeping participation as a tool to advance bilateral economic relationships another.

Perhaps most significantly, China's presence in UN peacekeeping has reduced the efficacy of the UN in the discharge of its mandate. PLA soldiers in South Sudan have failed to protect civilians in danger and have at least appeared to be preoccupied with national interests over the UN mission.²⁴ China has leveraged its influence to cut human rights positions in UN peacekeeping.²⁵ Chinese officials have challenged UN peacekeeping norms regarding human rights, while pushing to place PLA personnel in senior UN peacekeeping positions, both at UN Headquarters and in peacekeeping missions.²⁶ While the latter is relatively normal for many UN member states seeking to gain influence, the combination of PLA officers in key positions and a disregard for UN norms, such as human rights, represents a challenge that could erode the rules-based international order over time.

Russia and UN Peacekeeping

Like the United States, Russia contributes only a modest number of troops to UN peacekeeping. Yet at 46, Russia's current military contribution to UN peacekeeping still exceeds that of the U.S by 30%. Among those, the largest group in any mission—13 of those personnel—is in the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (CAR).²⁷ Perhaps not coincidentally, CAR hosts over 1,500 Russian military and Wagner personnel who have conducted malign activities for almost a decade.²⁸

Additionally, as the UN requires aircraft and helicopters—expensive, high-demand, and low-density assets that few countries possess in significant numbers—to support peacekeeping operations, few countries are willing to provide them. In many cases, the UN must contract out such support to private enterprises, and given the pressures on the UN to reduce costs—exerted in large part by major donors like the United States—those contracts are often awarded to the lowest bidder. That has positioned Russian companies, with access to Russian aircraft that can often be sustained at lower cost than Western aircraft, to win many contracts. Given the history of private Russian companies acting in concert with Russian government interests (see, e.g. Wagner), the presence of private Russian contractors providing key capabilities in UN peacekeeping offers a vector through which the Russian government can co-opt and/or malignly influence UN peacekeeping.

Broader Russian foreign policy, especially in Africa, seeks to exploit instability and corruption, especially in those countries which host UN peacekeeping by nature of such instability. Russian activities beyond UN missions have impeded those missions, including in CAR, Mali, Libya, South Sudan, and the DRC. The Wagner Group has been implicated in the decision by Mali's ruling military dictator, Colonel Assimi Goïta, to expel the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali.²⁹ Russia subsequently vetoed a renewal of UN sanctions in Mali to prevent violence against civilians.³⁰ The presence of Russian troops in UN peacekeeping missions in these countries is thus suspicious at best. While Russian foreign policy objectives in Africa may diverge from China's in multiple respects, Russia's presence in the absence of Western peacekeepers also risks eroding both the missions' effectiveness and the rules-based international order.

The Way Ahead

There are multiple advantages of even modest increases in UN peacekeeping contributions for the United States.

First, increasing the U.S. presence in UN peacekeeping would create a bulwark against attempts by China and Russia to co-opt UN peacekeeping in support of malign interests, as well as position the U.S. to better protect the UN from affronts to the rules-based international order it represents. Increased U.S. presence within peacekeeping missions would increase the political risk, both within the UN and internationally, for PLA and Russian military personnel to conduct malign activities or pursue national interests at the expense of UN peacekeeping effectiveness. Increased U.S. presence at UN Headquarters, including in the Department of Peace Operations, would influence the direction of UN peacekeeping policy to ensure that it is not co-opted to suit the interests of malign actors.

Second, an increased U.S. presence would offer valuable opportunities for the U.S. military to enhance military-to-military partnerships. Five of the seven largest troop contributors to UN peacekeeping are Indo-Pacific countries, including Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Indonesia. Both the United States and any of these countries would benefit from a stronger military relationship, including better interoperability and military performance. Moreover, growing bilateral and multilateral opportunities for the United States and partner militaries to train and deploy together would improve joint military effectiveness while developing a larger cadre of U.S. personnel who have experience and relationships with military personnel from those countries. Furthermore, the UN is one of the few venues through which U.S. military personnel interact with the PLA and Russian armed forces. At a time where even the U.S. Secretary of Defense struggles to communicate with his

counterpart, the value of military engagement through UN peacekeeping with PLA personnel at multiple levels is significant, offering additional relationships through which some military-to-military dialogue can be maintained.

Third, UN peacekeepers are by definition deployed to many of the world's hotspots. A U.S. military presence at UN missions in those countries would offer value to both the UN, which would possess more resources and gain effectiveness, and U.S. combatant commands. This is particularly valuable in Africa, which hosts the preponderance of UN peacekeeping missions and is an intense focus area of Russia and China for malign activities, yet the U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM) possesses few military resources relative to other combatant commands. Increased U.S. participation in UN peacekeeping would provide for better outcomes in Africa-based missions, offer opportunities to train and partner with African militaries, and provide U.S. military personnel with valuable Africa operational and cultural experience that USAFRICOM could later draw from for national missions.

Fourth, with the pre-eminent military in the world, the United States has a unique capability to improve the effectiveness of UN peacekeeping operations. A larger U.S. staff presence at both UN Headquarters and in peacekeeping missions would provide the UN with the most valuable military advice available to its policymakers and commanders, while a presence of U.S. trainers embedded in the field with less experienced partner forces would help them improve their performance on missions while gaining valuable training enhancing their overall military capabilities after rotating home. This is of particular value to the UN and would likely be welcomed relative to the PLA, which has not proven itself willing to assume risk or perform assigned missions to UN standards.

Finally, increasing U.S. participation in UN peacekeeping would make good on longstanding but unfulfilled commitments by multiple U.S. administrations, improving U.S. credibility at the UN. It would demonstrate that the United States is willing to shoulder at least a small portion of the risk that 70,000 peacekeepers from other countries assume every day, rather than merely underwriting peacekeeping missions for which the Global South incur the largest costs in lives. And in an era of wavering U.S. political will for multilateralism, it would reinforce the U.S. commitment to the UN and the rules-based international order.

Overcoming Challenges to U.S. Participation in UN Peacekeeping

Wherever possible, the United States must participate in UN peacekeeping according to UN rules. Where legal and practical impediments to do so exist, the UN has a demonstrated history of working with the United States to overcome them.

The largest impediment, particularly within the Department of Defense (DoD) and U.S. Congress, is placing U.S. troops under foreign operational control, which may heighten perceptions of risk while also reducing the pool of troops available to combatant commanders. There are two ways to mitigate this. First, the U.S. government can contribute a relatively small number of troops to UN operations, relying on legal precedent to place U.S. forces under foreign operational control, which is well-established.³¹ Though used sparingly, the president of the United States has placed U.S. forces under foreign control before. A small number of troops, perhaps in the hundreds, would be a substantial commitment above and beyond that of the last three decades and send clear signals about the U.S. commitment to UN peacekeeping. Alternatively, the United States could deploy forces to UN peacekeeping missions in "direct support" capacity, which would preserve U.S. operational control while providing additional capacity and capability to the UN. This would require the investment of political capital at the UN to create the policy pathway to make this possible, but would be well worth it if there is no other means available.

Where DoD is concerned about force protection and medical evacuation shortfalls, it can provide additional assets in a national capacity or contribute forces to UN missions in regions where the U.S. or its allies already have a presence. Alternatively, it can focus UN peacekeeping contributions to one mission with a larger

commitment that could include the necessary medical, airlift, and force protection assets needed to sustain and protect a U.S. contingent.

No challenge is insurmountable, and the United States can do more.

Philip Caruso is the Chairman of No One Left Behind, a former Deputy Military Advisor at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, and a former political-military affairs strategist at the U.S. Air Force.

Nahyun Brianne Yoo is a graduate of New York University, with eight years of experience in international affairs and U.S. public policy, who was a Boren Fellow and previously worked as a program analyst in resilience policy, and is currently serving as the Senior Policy Analyst at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS). This article was a personal endeavor and should not be attributed to DHS or the U.S. Government.

¹ "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on April 17, 2023," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, April 17, 2023,

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202304/t20230417_11060585.html.

² "Troop and Police Contributors," United Nations Peacekeeping, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>.

³ "Our History," United Nations Peacekeeping, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/our-history>.

⁴ "United Nations Charter," United Nations, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter>.

⁵ "Addressing Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: An Analytical Inventory of Peacekeeping Practice," United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, October 2012, <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/report/addressing-conflict-related-sexual-violence-an-analytical-inventory-of-peacekeeping-practice/04dananalyticalinventoryofpeacekeepingpracti.pdf>; "Interview: Richard Holbrooke," PBS, May 30, 2006, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/aids/interviews/holbrooke.html>.

⁶ Richard Gowan, "China's Pragmatic Approach to UN Peacekeeping," The Brookings Institution, September 14, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/chinas-pragmatic-approach-to-un-peacekeeping/>.

⁷ Richard M. Weintraub, "Lebanon Mine Kills -2 Americans Working as U.N. Observers," *The Washington Post*, September 26, 1982, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1982/09/26/lebanon-mine-kills-2-americans-working-as-un-observers/3fdb3441-6108-44f0-bd87-7d195f0879a0/>; Nora Boustany, "U.S. Marine Officer Abducted in Lebanon," *The Washington Post*, February 18, 1988, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1988/02/18/us-marine-officer-abducted-in-lebanon/3a3e2497-6bb0-46b4-b795-14d00dd4bf9f/>.

⁸ "Defense Legislation Considered Land Mines, Nuclear Testing, and UN Control of U.S. Troops," *CQ Almanac* 1996, 52nd ed., 1997, <https://library.cqpress.com/cqalmanac/document.php?id=cqal96-1092667>.

⁹ "Troop and Police Contributors," United Nations Peacekeeping, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>.

¹⁰ "Somalia – UNSOM II Background," United Nations Peacekeeping, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/mission/past/unosom2backgr2.html>.

¹¹ "Haiti Background," United Nations Peacekeeping, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/past/unmihbackgr2.html>.

¹² "Fact Sheet: U.S. Support to Peace Operations 2015 Leaders' Summit on UN Peacekeeping," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, September 28, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/28/fact-sheet-us-support-peace-operations-2015-leaders-summit-un>; "Contributors to United Nations Peacekeeping Operations," United Nations Peacekeeping, September 30, 2015, https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/sep15_1.pdf.

¹³ Barack Obama, "Memorandum on United States Support to United Nations Peace Operations," September 28, 2015, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/DCPD-201500663/html/DCPD-201500663.htm>.

¹⁴ "Fact Sheet: U.S. Commitments at the 2021 Seoul Peacekeeping Ministerial," United States Mission to the United Nations, December 8, 2021, <https://usun.usmission.gov/fact-sheet-u-s-commitments-at-the-2021-seoul-peacekeeping-ministerial/>.

¹⁵ "How We Are Funded," United Nations Peacekeeping, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/how-we-are-funded>.

¹⁶ "Troop and Police Contributors," UN Peacekeeping.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ "China's Armed Forces: 30 Years of UN Peacekeeping Operations," The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, Xinhua, September 18, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/18/c_139376725.htm.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Gowan, "China's Pragmatic Approach to UN Peacekeeping."

²¹ Ibid.

²² "Data: Chinese Workers in Africa," China Africa Research Initiative, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, <https://lucid-cari.squarespace.com/data-chinese-workers-in-africa>

²³ "Troop and Police Contributors," UN Peacekeeping.

²⁴ Jason Burke, "UN Peacekeepers Refused to Help as Aid Workers Were Raped in South Sudan – Report," *The Guardian*, October 6, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/06/un-peacekeepers-refused-to-help-south-sudan-rebels-raped-aid-workers-report>.

²⁵ Louis Charbonneau, "China Pushes to Cut UN Human Rights Posts," Human Rights Watch, June 7, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/06/07/china-pushes-cut-un-human-rights-posts>.

²⁶ Gowan, "China's Pragmatic Approach to UN Peacekeeping."

²⁷ "Troop and Police Contributors," UN Peacekeeping.

²⁸ Judicael Yongo, "Wagner Troops Arrive in Central African Republic Ahead of Referendum," Reuters, July 17, 2023,

<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/wagner-troops-arrive-central-african-republic-ahead-referendum-2023-07-17/>.

²⁹ Michelle Nichols, "UN Ends Peacekeeping Mission in Mali, U.S. Blames Russia's Wagner," Reuters, June 30, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/un-security-council-ends-peacekeeping-mission-mali-2023-06-30/>.

³⁰ Michelle Nichols, "UN Sanctions in Mali to End After Russia Blocks Renewal," Reuters, August 30, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-seeks-end-uns-mali-sanctions-monitoring-2023-08-30/>.

³¹ Walter Dellinger, "Placing of United States Armed Forces Under United Nations Operational or Tactical Control," U.S. Department of Justice, May 8, 1996, <https://www.justice.gov/file/20051/download>.