The Future of the Protection of Civilians
in UN Peacekeeping Operations[1]

Namie Di Razza and Ralph Mamiya

We are now entering the third decade of the implementation of protection of civilians (POC) mandates in peacekeeping contexts. Looking ahead to the future of POC in peace operations over the next five to ten years, this note details possible trends, challenges, and needs. It explores the protection threats that are likely to arise, the contested but very possible continuation of POC mandates in peace operations, the political consensus on which POC mandates could be based, and the policy and operational challenges that may arise.

AREAS OF CONCERN FOR POC IN PEACEKEEPING OPERATIONS AND THEIR FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

This section analyzes three areas of concern for POC in peacekeeping operations: (1) POC mandates for UN peacekeeping operations; (2) the threats facing civilian populations; and (3) the practice of protection in the field.

MANDATING

Based on current trends, POC is likely to continue being included in peacekeeping mandates. Nonetheless, there is likely to be revitalized discussion on the concept of POC, its expansion, and its possible politicization and manipulation. POC mandates have traditionally focused on protecting civilians, broadly defined, from threats of physical violence. While the first POC mandate in 1999 was a relatively minor part of a robust mission mandate in Sierra Leone, over the past two decades POC mandates have become the Security Council's most common and broadest means for authorizing the use of force. However, while these mandates are often perceived to emphasize military means, the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO) has clarified that POC also encompasses the full range of a mission's political and programmatic capacities.

The POC Agenda under Stress

Peacekeeping stakeholders inside and outside the UN have long criticized POC mandates as overambitious and predicted a decrease in their use, only to witness an increase in the breadth and scope of POC.[2] At the same time, several trends throw the future of POC mandates into question:

- Budgetary pressures will almost certainly result in smaller missions with fewer troops, if not a preference for special political missions, making POC mandates appear unrealistic.
- Fatigue with POC failures will likely reduce the Security Council's appetite for POC mandates.
- Even if the Joe Biden administration reinvigorates US leadership in multilateral fora, POC may not be a central focus for the US.
- When considering deployments to parts of Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia affected by great-power proxy conflicts, Security Council members will be less adamant about including POC in mission mandates and will likely resort to more "niche" or "specialized" mandates.
- An increasingly influential China, which has historically tolerated POC mandates in peacekeeping, may become more assertive about the importance of host-state consent and more hostile to POC and other human rights–related concepts in the Security Council (see below).

Continued Use (and Politicization) of POC

Despite these challenges, other trends point to the continued use of POC mandates in the future. To understand these trends, it is important to recognize that POC mandates have rarely been solely about protecting civilians; they have also offered a convenient conceptual umbrella for member states to pursue a variety of other interests and goals.[3] Civilians will likely continue to suffer in great numbers, and information and communications technologies will allow this suffering to be witnessed by billions around the world, often in real time, increasing the already significant public attention paid to the moral imperative of POC. This could encourage countries that have traditionally been sensitive to public opinion and humanitarian concerns to support the inclusion of POC in mandates. Moreover, a core set of major troop- and police-contributing countries will almost certainly continue to support POC mandates, in some form, as a moral cause elevating the value of their participation in peacekeeping.

Most importantly, POC will continue to be a useful concept to garner support for UN peacekeeping operations in the next five to ten years and to maintain consensus around sensitive issues related to the use of force, stabilization operations, and host-state support. UN peacekeeping operations may face growing criticism, particularly from Western publics, for their support to states with questionable legitimacy and human rights records. In this context, Security Council members may wish to maintain "POC" in mandates to better justify deployments and "sell" these operations as community-based, people-centred endeavors. In addition, member states willing to deploy peace operations with more offensive capacities (such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force, the African Union Mission in Somalia, and the Force Intervention Brigade of the UN mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo) may be unable to generate broad support unless they resort to the language of POC to justify such robust operations.

---

[2] For example, as a presenter from the Department of Peacekeeping Operations' (DPKO) Office of Operations opined in 2012 at an internal retreat, "In the next five years [2012–2017], we foresee a decrease in POC mandates and an increase in rule-of-law mandates in peacekeeping missions." The following year witnessed DPKO's most ambitious rule-of-law-oriented mission, UNMISS, doubling down on its POC mandate, and the next two missions, MINUSCA and MINUSMA, receiving substantial and forward-looking POC mandates.

[4] For the P3 and like-minded countries, POC mandates have historically represented a convergence of a set of norms and a set of tools: an interest in a "liberal order" based on human rights, on the one hand, and the projection of force through proxies (primarily non-Western peacekeepers), on the other. To date, China has displayed mild opposition to the former normative framework but an increasing yet cautious interest in the latter operational tool.

Finally, with the international human rights framework likely to be a locus of significant normative disagreement between China and Russia, on the one hand, and Western powers, on the other, the language of POC may continue to be a useful compromise that allows each side to save face while pursuing their respective interests.

For example, potential deployments to West Africa (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Niger), the Middle East (Syria, Yemen), Southeast Asia (Myanmar, the Philippines) or the Mediterranean will be motivated by national interests in securing strategic installations and resources, countering insurgencies and terrorism, stopping migration, and restoring "law and order" in areas of strategic importance. POC mandates may offer a convenient political narrative to cover these other interests.

In this context, the concept of POC is likely to be further expanded, questioned, and reframed to fit different contexts and different interests. Mandates may frame POC in a way that further blurs the boundaries between humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping, and stabilization. Distinguishing civilians from combatants, perpetrators from victims, and attackers from defenders will be more and more challenging, as the identity and intentions of all stakeholders grow intentionally vague. This will raise crucial questions about who the "civilians" to be protected are and what they should be protected from.

China's Growing Role and Implications for POC

China will likely have a growing influence on future POC mandates. China has historically opposed contentious concepts like the responsibility to protect and human rights "naming and shaming." Nonetheless, it has been a cautious supporter of the POC agenda in the Security Council as it has sought to take on a visible role in peacekeeping and to protect its reputation as a "responsible great power." While China has generally promoted state sovereignty and equality between states, it may remain open to robust POC mandates for peacekeeping operations when doing so aligns with other national interests, including the expansion of its political, economic, or military influence.[4] This trend is likely to continue.

On the other hand, the retrenchment of France, the UK, and the US (the "P3") for financial and ideological reasons could result in less pressure on non-Western states—including China and other nonaligned countries—to conform to current notions of what it means to be a "responsible great power," including the endorsement, in some form, of the POC and human rights agendas. While a more assertive China may agree to continue deploying peace operations in situations where civilians are under threat and to use POC as an umbrella concept to garner support from a wide range of member states, it is likely to become more assertive in opposing the rights-based framework that lies at the heart of POC mandates. At the same time, China may increasingly push for a focus on "tier 3" POC (protection through building a protective environment) and, in particular, for support to host states and development activities, which may further dilute the concept of POC and pave the way for more partial (pro-government) POC approaches.

The Reckoning over Human Rights

Human rights is the "third pillar" of the United Nations, and while the next five to ten years are unlikely to see a complete erosion of human rights norms, they may witness China and like-minded countries

---

[4] For the P3 and like-minded countries, POC mandates have historically represented a convergence of a set of norms and a set of tools: an interest in a "liberal order" based on human rights, on the one hand, and the projection of force through proxies (primarily non-Western peacekeepers), on the other. To date, China has displayed mild opposition to the former normative framework but an increasing yet cautious interest in the latter operational tool.

working to block human rights–specific mandates.[5] This may result in few to no new missions with human rights mandates, or even "monitoring" mandates (traditionally associated with human rights components). It could also restrict the space for naming (much less shaming) perpetrators of human rights violations. The likely increase in "gray-zone" actors, including private companies—from security and military contractors to technology companies that support cyber operations—will also make it harder to ensure accountability for violations in an internationally recognized manner.

Limitations or outright opposition to peace operations' involvement in human rights issues will impact their effectiveness in protecting civilians even where POC mandates are clearly established.[6] They might lead to "à la carte" or fragmented POC or human rights mandates, where the Security Council authorizes some POC or human rights goals but not the full range of activities required to make those goals achievable. For instance, the council may authorize a mission to protect civilians without monitoring human rights, limiting the mission's situational awareness and its ability to understand protection challenges. Even among member states that are traditionally supportive of the human rights agenda, policy preferences might shift toward human rights compliance frameworks that emphasize collaborative and capacity-building approaches with states rather than monitoring, investigation, and public reporting.

POC THREATS AND CHALLENGES

The conflicts of the mid-twenty-first century are likely to continue involving the targeting of civilians, whether due to the efforts of armed actors to spread fear and increase political or economic leverage, as in Darfur and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), or due to means and methods of warfare that disregard protected people and infrastructure, as in Yemen. Threats to civilians will also be aggravated by new trends that the UN will need to grapple with, including (but not limited to) "gray-zone" and hybrid conflict; complex humanitarian emergencies that peacekeepers are called on to respond to; social unrest and deteriorating state-society relations, potentially leading to a rise in urban conflict; and the increased influence of new technologies.

"Gray-Zone" and Hybrid Conflict

A significant challenge for peace operations in the coming decade may be an increase in the number and sophistication of hybrid and "gray-zone" conflicts that involve powerful states competing with each other while seeking to avoid full-scale (potentially nuclear) war.[7] Such conflicts offer many advantages to global

---

[5] The United States, under some scenarios, could be included among such like-minded countries and has blocked human rights language in many country-specific situations in the past. At the same time, the likely rise in competition between the US and China and the reality that the US has a historical commitment to a rights-based framework and better international reputation on human rights issues mean that the US is unlikely to join forces with China for a large-scale removal of human rights from the UN architecture. It is more likely that the US will selectively use human rights language and human rights mechanisms to try to frustrate Chinese ambitions and damage its international reputation, as it did with the Soviet Union.

[6] While DPO policy has traditionally drawn a distinction between POC mandates (protection from physical violence) and the protection of human rights, in practice these are deeply related tasks.

[7] "Gray zone" and "hybrid conflict" are both terms that lack agreed-upon definitions but are useful in the current context because they describe situations for which peacekeeping is not well prepared. "Gray zone" operations are those that may fall short of war but nonetheless have a significant disruptive effect, whether alone or in combination with other actions that may or may not be coordinated. The uncertainty ("may," "may not") and difficult characterization of such operations is central to what makes gray-zone situations so challenging. Similarly, hybrid conflicts are those that involve a greater spectrum of civilian and military tools and methods of war than peace operations may be familiar with—including cyber or information operations—as well as a mix of state and non-state actors. With some exceptions, peace operations have so far largely been involved in conflicts between states or between a government and non-state groups).

and regional powers, allowing them to inflict damage or disrupt daily life with a minimal physical presence and while denying responsibility.

These conflicts create significant concern for POC. They seek to diminish perceptions of state control or competence, undermine the confidence of local populations in their government (as in Ukraine), and disrupt civilian lives and livelihoods. Gray-zone warfare, which is by nature undeclared, also erodes the distinction between civilian and military targets, with civilian targets rarely off-limits, making it difficult to ensure compliance with international humanitarian law. Despite the threats gray-zone conflicts can pose to civilians, cease-fire monitoring missions in these areas might have no POC mandate or a mandate limited to protection through political dialogue (tier 1).[8]

Migration and Complex Humanitarian Crises

The coming ten years will likely see increasing humanitarian crises, including due to continued displacement and migration on a massive scale, caused by conflict, state repression, and government collapse and climate-induced catastrophe, particularly in low-lying areas of the Asia-Pacific region and extreme-heat zones. This will bring significant protection challenges, particularly given the increased fragility of the global refugee architecture, the increased role of predatory human-trafficking networks, the prevalence of border-closure policies in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the rise of anti-migrant sentiments. The Security Council may call upon peace operations to address the complex and politically sensitive humanitarian needs arising from these dynamics.[9]

Social Unrest and State-Society Relations

Due to the economic fallout of disruptions to global trade, a rise in nationalism, and distrust between governments and populations, many countries may see domestic unrest that could escalate into violence, especially in urban areas. Government efforts to strengthen state control—whether to manage pandemics, threats of violent extremism, or social unrest—will bring protection concerns. As xenophobia, scapegoating, and scare-mongering increase in contexts under stress, societal divisions will deepen or be deepened by competing political interests, potentially resulting in intercommunal violence. It is possible, or even likely, that at least one such socio-political conflict rises to the level of a mass atrocity against a civilian population within the next ten years. If, as suggested above, UN peace operations become focused more on state support, these dynamics will put the UN in a difficult position. Member states may increasingly ask for UN interventions to enhance their authority (border control, riot control, counterterrorism, etc.), while civil society actors may call upon the UN to protect civilians threatened by state actors.

---

[8] While monitoring was in many respects the original purpose of peacekeeping missions, technological advances that allow distant countries to access detailed, real-time data may make peacekeepers' witness-bearing role less important; monitoring may also face resistance in the Security Council, where some countries may prefer that the "gray zone" remain as opaque as possible. Where monitoring and verification missions take place, there will thus be an increased onus on them to add value by at least matching the technological capacities of other conflict-watchers; this may require private sector partnerships for satellite data and arms tracing. It will also require political dexterity in developing messages that meet political realities while also adhering to UN principles.

[9] From the perspective of member states such as China that are cautious regarding international (mostly Western-based) humanitarian NGOs and are more comfortable with organizations that are state-centric, a UN peace operation mandated with humanitarian tasks could be an attractive alternative to conventional humanitarian arrangements. Peacekeepers mandated by the Security Council would be particularly attractive when humanitarian assistance needs to be delivered to a politically sensitive context such as Myanmar.

Threats to Civilians in a Digital Age

Emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, robotics, cyberwarfare methods, and autonomous weapons systems, are giving rise to new POC challenges and threats. These technologies can empower perpetrators, whether states or non-state armed groups, by helping the identify and geolocate civilian targets, quickly disseminate calls for violence, disrupt civilian infrastructure, and facilitate the organization of attacks on civilians. Technology-supported misinformation and disinformation campaigns, media manipulation, sabotage, and propaganda make it more difficult to deescalate tensions, adding to the risks facing civilians. Psychological and media warfare already appear in the defence strategies of powerful states and in the modi operandi of non-state armed groups, including extremist groups. They have the potential to undermine the capacities and reach of protection actors by further undermining confidence within and between communities, state actors, and UN peacekeepers.

Technologies may also divert and obfuscate responsibility and accountability for violations of international law, especially in the context of hybrid warfare or where autonomous weapons systems are being used and are involved in violations of international humanitarian law. The resulting normative gap, coupled with the potential involvement of tech companies and private actors in the design, management, and control of weapons and artificial intelligence systems, will make it harder to address new types of abuse.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR EVOLVING MISSIONS

To confront these new conflict dynamics, the UN may deploy new types of peace operations and increasingly use novel arrangements such as support missions (like the UN Support Office in Somalia) and conditional funding arrangements (like the compliance framework for the G5 Sahel). This will have practical implications for POC and will require modular approaches rather than a one-size-fits-all POC framework.

Civilian-Oriented Missions

Budgetary constraints are almost certain to limit the size of missions in the near term, potentially leading to peace operations that have a small military component, or none at all, being mandated to protect civilians. This will increase the importance of unarmed protection strategies. However, unarmed or lightly armed missions will be much less able to prevent and respond to widespread violence against civilians due to their limited resources and leverage, which could create reputational risks for the UN.

While protection through political dialogue (tier 1) and building a protective environment (tier 3) have always been part of DPO doctrine, the tools, strategies, and assessment of these activities will need to be refined. Missions with few or no troops and limited mobility assets will need to strengthen their networks to maintain situational awareness, identify entry points to change the behavior of potential perpetrators of violence against civilians, develop realistic expectations for such behavioral change, and manage expectations. In parallel, the UN system's full range of capacities, including in the political, human rights, and humanitarian fields, may offer alternative sources of protection and can be leveraged to establish protective environments. Professionalizing civilian staff conducting protection-related activities within different UN entities and ensuring that protection skills and mindsets percolate throughout the broader UN system will be essential. "Peacekeeping" too easily becomes about culture and personal networks rather than specific skills that can be developed and later redeployed in the UN's political, human rights, and humanitarian spheres beyond peacekeeping.

Stabilization and State-Support Missions

In missions with stabilization and state-support mandates, whose tasks may include anti-gang operations and crowd control, POC tends to become a function of governance and to be approached in terms of capacity building, requiring a strong role for UN police. These missions risk being co-opted by governments seeking to neutralize opponents and protesters and will have to navigate the crisis of confidence between the state and communities. UN police, in particular, will be expected to distinguish themselves from predatory police forces amid global debates on the legitimacy of policing functions.

Counterinsurgency and Support to Parallel Forces

Similarly, missions supporting counterinsurgency or counterterrorism efforts or parallel forces may focus their POC efforts on logistical support to protection initiatives and civilian harm mitigation.[10] At the same time, their role in monitoring human rights might be explicitly undercut, even if human rights–friendly member states (potentially including the mandate penholders) seek to include some POC or human rights language in the mandate, in order to keep the UN's "hands clean," especially through the new model of "human rights compliance frameworks." For missions mandated to directly conduct counterinsurgency operations—even if they are not given an explicit POC mandate—civilian harm mitigation will also become an increasingly prominent focus. Non-state armed groups targeted by UN operations might seek to undermine popular trust in UN forces, including through retaliatory attacks against communities. In contexts where missions are mandated to both conduct offensive operations and protect civilians from violence, some armed groups might even perpetrate major attacks against civilians to distract peacekeepers from their offensive operations.[11]

Specialized Missions, Including Humanitarian Operations

Finally, specialized missions with limited mandates and niche roles may emerge. Peacekeeping operations might be asked to do more in the context of pandemics, climate-induced disasters, and massive population movements, which may lead the Security Council and Secretariat to consider expanding the "protection" role of peacekeeping missions beyond protection from physical violence. The Security Council may find consensus around "humanitarian" goals for peacekeeping operations: delivering assistance in the aftermath of natural or man-made disasters (e.g., in Lebanon); helping to feed and house people in the aftermath of state collapse (e.g., in North Korea); supporting the health response to pandemics (e.g., in the DRC); or serving as both providers of assistance to and barriers against migration (e.g., in Myanmar and the Mediterranean).[12]

These specialized missions may blur the distinction between humanitarian assistance, POC, and stabilization. The concept of POC could be expanded beyond the traditional definition of the "threat of

---

[10] The Security Council agrees on peacekeeping operations only where there is a strong national interest from one or more of the five permanent members and from the host state in addressing a specific security threat, such as insurgencies or violent extremism. While the extent to which the UN should take on such roles has been controversial, the political and operational potential for such missions exists.

[11] This tactic has already been observed in the DRC, in the context of MONUSCO's offensive operations against the Allied Democratic Forces.

[12] The term "humanitarian" is used in quotation marks here to acknowledge that the delivery of assistance consonant with traditional (UN-endorsed) humanitarian principles is ordinarily incompatible with a militarized presence, even a peacekeeping force. This term nonetheless serves as a useful shorthand and is very possibly the language that the Security Council would choose. Discussing the potential for these missions is not necessarily an endorsement of them.

physical violence" and be applied to the protection of migrants, support for complex health responses, the protection of cultural sites, or the protection of economically important facilities such as oil installations. Such missions are also likely to operate in a complex ecosystem of protection actors, and entail important partnership arrangements and coordination requirements towards other protection and security stakeholders.

Strategic Engagement and Partnerships with New Peace and Protection Actors

The range of actors involved in conflict resolution generally, and protection in particular, may grow and diversify, which could both create opportunities for UN peace operations and make some operations more complex. If the Security Council limits the UN's deployment of peace operations, multiple state and non-state actors may rise to tackle peacekeeping and protection. These include the EU, African Union (AU), NATO, and other regional organizations or regional coalitions, some of which may be comfortable with unconventional operating methods such as the use of private security contractors.[13] Some of these operations may take place outside peace operations settings, others may operate in parallel, and others may operate through partnership arrangements (such as the AU Mission in Somalia/UN Support Office in Somalia, the G5 Sahel, or the AU-UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur). In all cases, but particularly for parallel operations and partnership arrangements, ensuring that political strategies are coherent and that cooperation is guided by human rights and POC considerations will be paramount.[14]

The coming years may also see a growth in the prominence of local organizations (sometimes mediated or supported by international NGOs or donors) and the private or philanthropic sector in either directly providing protection or supporting protection efforts. As more constrained and smaller peacekeeping operations see their ability to reach protection hot spots and engage with civilians at the local level significantly reduced, local actors may present comparative advantages. Some of them can more easily work across national borders through local networks, while others can provide the technological means to offer "remote protection," including through social media. With many UN agencies promoting localization and with remote-working methods becoming more widely accepted in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the next five to ten years will create not only new opportunities and models to learn from but also more pressure to innovate and adapt in order to remain relevant.[15] Localization and remote management are both areas in which peacekeeping will have a great deal to learn. DPO will also be in a position to pass on POC good practices and ensure that international responses are coherent.

Host-State Ownership of POC

As discussed above, the current trend of UN peace operations providing more technical, financial, and logistical support to governments' and other partners' stabilization and counterinsurgency operations may continue and intensify, posing reputational risks for peace operations. The protective function of

---

[13] For example, as the UN exits from the DRC and the Central African Republic, the AU may take on a more proactive role in conflict management, including POC. Following the development of EU and NATO POC doctrines, more countries may also establish their own policy frameworks for POC. In a context of general pushback against the human rights agenda at the UN, regional organizations like the EU may also choose to deploy separate operations that continue to pursue protection and human rights.

[14] See the Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network's forthcoming study of UNAMID.

[15] "Remote management" is not new for the UN. UN humanitarian actors have provided remote assistance in inaccessible areas such as Syria or the Nuba Mountains in Sudan through unauthorized cross-border assistance or support to local actors, and missions' human rights components have conducted remote monitoring in Darfur and Afghanistan. Nonetheless, it will take on increased importance for peace operations as their operating space becomes more limited.

peace operations may increasingly be defined in terms of state support to the exclusion of an inclusive, community-based set of activities. This may lead missions to support or be seen to support governments that are perceived as repressive and predatory. Continued strengthening, refinement, and dissemination of the Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP) may be increasingly important in this regard, particularly given that the HRDDP is an important blueprint for compliance frameworks for partner operations (such as the G5 Sahel). Given the likely retreat of the human rights agenda at the Security Council, the implementation of the HRDDP might be iteratively adjusted to give more space to collaborative measures with the host state in order to avoid confrontation.

In this context, the Security Council and Secretariat may place greater emphasis on national POC strategies such as that recently put forward by the government of Sudan to buttress its argument that a Chapter VII follow-on mission to AU-UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur was unnecessary. There is significant potential value in promoting such plans where governments are supportive and have adequate capacity, and they create opportunities to engage countries concretely on taking up their primary responsibility for protection. There is also significant risk, however, that such plans will be shallow commitments used primarily to sway an international audience and reduce a mission's ability to prevent and respond to protection crises as an impartial, independent actor.[16] DPO will need to weigh national POC strategies through a clear-eyed assessment of security actors' political and economic incentives to implement them, and against a thorough assessment of the risks to civilians in a country, as it advises the secretary-general and, in turn, the Security Council.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND OPTIONS FOR THE SECRETARIAT

Policy Issues

Prepare for divisions over human rights and POC: China and the P3 may be headed for increasingly deep divisions over human rights and, by extension, POC. It is likely, however, that a few enterprising member states will attempt to bridge the divide between China and the P3 by developing new concepts that incorporate elements of both POC and China's noninterventionist, protection-through-development approach.[17] New mandates are likely to include negotiated POC language that will be opaque for operators on the ground and require adapted policy guidance.

DPO and the Secretariat should prepare to facilitate these discussions and promote the revision and consolidation of a POC concept that affords a serious opportunity to confront violence against civilians. Any new concepts that bridge the divide between China and the P3 should seek to retain longstanding

---

[16] One can imagine a scenario, for example, of the exit of MONUSCO being followed by a civilian mission to support a government-led protection strategy in the DRC. Such a mission could be mandated to assist state actors in implementing their national POC plan, support the implementation of a human rights compliance framework for regional counterinsurgency operations, and offer political support and capacity building for governance reforms. One risk, however, would be that the government use the existence of a national POC strategy and invoke its "primary responsibility to protect" to sideline the mission from the management of POC and prevent it from offering its own analysis of threats to civilians and the responses needed.

[17] See: Rosemary Foot, *China, the UN and Human Protection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 269–272. "Responsibility while protecting," Brazil's proffered alternative to the "responsibility to protect," is an example of such a concept, albeit one that has yet to enter the mainstream. UNDP's "human security" framework is another example of an attempt to capture a set of protection and develop-oriented initiatives under a broad umbrella. See: Oliver Stuenkel, "Responsibility while Protecting," in Alex J. Bellamy and Tim Dunne, eds, *Oxford Handbook of the Responsibility to Protect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); United Nations Development Programme, *1994 World Development Report* (New York: United Nations, 1994); and UN General Assembly Resolution 66/290 (October 25, 2012), UN Doc. A/RES/66/290.

normative principles enshrined in international law, including international human rights and international humanitarian law.

Undertake POC-focused policy planning around the following issues:

- **POC principles and standards that support mutual understanding and coordination with potential partners:** This includes political principles and operational approaches shared by the different protection actors. In addition to supporting policy coherence with multilateral actors (the AU, EU, NATO, etc.), this may also involve engaging important bilateral actors (China, France, US, etc.) on protection issues.
- **State-focused approaches, including national POC strategies:** While this is a broad area of work that includes security sector reform and host-state compacts, the benefits and risks to championing national leadership on POC should be considered. Developing a deeper body of knowledge about national POC strategies could be important in this respect.
- **Unarmed protection and protection through political dialogue:** While this is not a new area of work for peace operations, further policies could highlight it and lay out case studies of past successes and contingency plans for future missions. Leveraging UN system-wide civilian capacities for POC will almost certainly be essential.
- **Compliance frameworks and other cooperation mechanisms for support to partner forces**: It will be particularly important to consider the legal implications for the UN of providing such support.

Explore public-private partnerships: Expertise from a range of private sector partners will become more important, including partnerships with social media companies to tackle disinformation, hate speech, and abuse facilitated by technologies; the use of technology to monitor, analyze, and respond to threats to civilians; and the potential role of private security companies in providing operational protection in peace operations. As with any significant changes in peacekeeping, these developments may appear distant or even impossible, but that is all the more reason to begin exploring serious policy proposals and new coordination frameworks for new types of protection actors, including how they are vetted.

Identify operational gaps in new environments: "Gray-zone" conflict and social unrest may lead to increased threats to civilians in urban contexts, where terrorism, gang activity, riots, and tensions between communities could coincide and put civilians and civilian infrastructure and objects at risk. Current UN operations are inexperienced in such operations and likely to face challenges. In addition, continued robust operations and support to parallel forces may call for peace operations to refine and expand their civilian harm-mitigation practices and continue to adapt their implementation of the HRDDP.

Skills and Capabilities Needed on the Ground

Plan for new types of expertise, skills, and capabilities in peacekeeping operations: Many of the necessary civilian skills and capabilities related to POC speak to the need to rethink civilian staffing in the Secretariat, though these discussions are beyond the scope of this paper.[18] The significant and sustained

---

[18] Given the anticipated budgetary constraints and member states' rejection of past attempts to modernize civilian capacities during better budgetary times, the most sensible and straightforward solutions may not be available. Alternative solutions, such as bringing civilian on board through UN agency contracts, a strengthened corps of UN volunteers, or private sector contractors should be considered.

improvement of POC in peace operations will begin with civilian staff. Expertise, skills, and capability are needed in the following areas:

- **Technological expertise and capabilities:** Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence will dramatically change the operations of advanced militaries and widen the already mammoth gap between the UN's best- and worst-equipped peacekeepers. Considering how peace operations can incorporate advanced technologies will be a challenging task with important implications for POC. As with some technical aspects of mission support, DPO will need to consider which skills need to be upgraded and professionalized (or outsourced) within the civilian component, which should be brought in from the military, and which can be an amalgam of both.[19] "Cyber peacekeepers" savvy in social media, open-source intelligence, and network analysis of digital information ecosystems (who may or may not be field-based) could be envisioned. Technologies can also facilitate and quicken POC responses, including nontraditional, unarmed responses. Social media, for example, can be used to organize, mobilize, and coordinate large groups that could provide unarmed protective accompaniment or to expose perpetrators.

- **Community-based sociocultural expertise:** Context-specific expertise will be needed to ensure that analysis of POC threats is inclusive and that responses are built on a reliable analysis of structural systems of political and social oppression. This will be critical to complement technical approaches to state support, security sector reform, and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration, as well as to help missions avoid supporting predatory, illegitimate government actors.

- **Remote management of mandate implementation:** This includes the remote-working methods that have become more widespread during COVID-19 pandemic and remote work by "cyber peacekeepers." It also includes the use of local networks to conduct mandated activities, including monitoring protection threats and building situational awareness. Localization efforts in peace operations often end at the hiring of national staff, but this should only be the beginning; the most successful missions will be those in which local, not the mission itself, fulfill the mandate. This requires both a change of mindset and the strengthening of skills to develop and use local networks.

---

[19] Such skills could include computer imaging and expertise in hunting, monitoring, and investigating cyber threats to attribute responsibility for cyber-violence.