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Independent Reviews of UN Peace Operations: A Study of Politics and Practice

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Cover Photo: Indian peacekeepers with armored vehicle watch over Bunagana and Ruyoni hill, a stronghold of M23 fighters in Bunagana, North Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo, May 23, 2012. UN Photo/Sylvain Liechti.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AMISOM	African Union Mission in Somalia
AU	African Union
AUPSC	African Union Peace and Security Council
CAR	Central African Republic
CPAS	Comprehensive Planning and Performance Assessment System
DFS	UN Department of Field Support (now DOS)
DOS	UN Department of Operational Support
DPA	UN Department of Political Affairs (now DPPA)
DPET	Division of Policy, Evaluation and Training
DPKO	UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (now DPO)
DPO	UN Department of Peace Operations
DPPA	UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
EOSG	Executive Office of the Secretary-General
FIB	Force Intervention Brigade
IAP	Integrated Assessment Planning
MINURSO	UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara
MINUSCA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic
MINUSMA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MONUSCO	UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo
SPM	Special political mission
SRSG	Special representative of the secretary-general
UNAMA	UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNAMI	UN Assistance Mission for Iraq
UNDOF	UN Disengagement Observer Force

UNFICYP	UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus
UNIOGBIS	UN Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Guinea-Bissau
UNISFA	UN Interim Security Force for Abyei
UNMIL	UN Mission in Liberia
UNMISS	UN Mission in South Sudan
UNOAU	UN Office to the African Union
UNOCA	UN Regional Office for Central Africa
UNOWAS	UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel
UNSMIL	UN Support Mission in Libya
UNSOM	UN Assistance Mission in Somalia
UNSOS	UN Support Office in Somalia
WEOG	Western Europe and Others Group

Executive Summary

Independent reviews are a relatively new but increasingly popular tool. Since the practice was established in 2017, there have been nineteen independent reviews of UN peace operations. These reviews have been intended to rigorously assess the strategic orientation of peace operations while providing more political credibility than UN-led review processes. But given the diverse processes and incentives that shape them, these exercises are both analytically complex and highly political. As independent reviews have gained prominence over the past five years, reflecting on the experiences of previous reviews is necessary for improving their quality, impact, and sustainability moving forward.

While the focus of each independent review is informed by its specific mandate and the mission context, independent reviews have followed a common progression. They are initiated by the secretary-general or Security Council. The Secretariat then creates terms of reference, nominates an external team leader, and identifies other UN officials to participate as team members. Once created, the review team develops lines of inquiry, drafts a workplan, and conducts a conflict analysis. It then carries out the research underpinning the review, including interviews, field visits, and data analysis. While drafting the report, the review team solicits feedback, including from "red teams," and consults with key stakeholders. Finally, the independent team leader submits their report to the secretary-general, who disseminates it in part or in full.

Analyzing each stage of this process reveals several dynamics that have shaped—and will continue to shape—the UN's experiences with independent reviews:

- Independence is a relative concept, and each review's independence and credibility are influenced by factors beyond the appointment of an external leader.
- Member states, UN Secretariat officials, and missions have diverse and often competing interests regarding independent reviews, and major divergences limit the degree to which stakeholders accept a review's findings and implement its recommendations.
- Independent reviews are most effective as exceptional responses to trust deficits, whether inside of the UN system, between the council and the UN system, or among council members.
- Key stakeholders do not share a common understanding of independent reviews' objectives or utility, owing to both the tool's flexibility and limited clarity on the features that distinguish it from other UN assessment and evaluation processes.
- Review teams continuously find themselves balancing methodological flexibility with the push for greater standardization so they do not find themselves "reinventing the wheel."
- Independent reviews need to overcome their orphan status within the UN in order to have a lasting impact and deliver value for the time and resources invested in them.

Ultimately, independent reviews have proven to be valuable but imperfect tools. To improve the conception and practice of future reviews, the UN, review teams, and member states could consider the following recommendations:

- The UN system should codify independent reviews within formal UN policy, consolidate best practices, clarify roles and expectations of UN staff seconded to review teams, prioritize diversity in the composition of review teams, improve reporting on independent reviews, and establish a dedicated funding stream for independent reviews.
- Independent review teams should emphasize their transparency and independence, build internal and external constituencies, systematize their use of diverse research methods and approaches, and embrace the support provided by red teams.
- Member states should treat independent reviews as exceptional instead of standard, debrief team leaders following the submission of an independent review, request a formal briefing on strategic reviews and assessments, strengthen reporting requirements on the implementation of review recommendations, and provide ample time for conducting independent reviews.

Introduction

UN peace operations are partnership enterprises. Nearly 90,000 civilian and uniformed personnel are part of twenty-six missions across the world.[1] These missions draw their mandates from the Security Council, finances from the General Assembly, and troops from more than 120 countries. They also operate within an elaborate organizational architecture spanning various UN entities spread over multiple continents. Understanding how different stakeholders within this ecosystem navigate their interests in pursuit of collective action is a defining challenge for the organization.

The continuously shifting landscape in which peace operations work only exacerbates this challenge. Member states are tasking missions around the world to implement more complex mandates with fewer resources. Geopolitical cooperation among major powers continues to fray, and the UN's pursuit of sustainable peace is increasingly compromised by securitized responses to national and regional political issues. Considering these dynamics, the UN and its member states find themselves continuously asking fundamental questions about the relevance and impact of their peace operations: Are they fit for their purpose? Are they achieving their strategic objectives and mandates? And are they able to respond effectively when there are significant changes on the ground?

> Independent reviews are both complex analytical processes and highly political undertakings.

Answering these questions has become an increasingly arduous task for the UN. Because member states and various UN entities involved in supporting peace operations have distinct interests that often clash, finding ways to incorporate informed, rigorous, and credible perspectives into these debates has become both valuable and necessary. These dynamics gave rise to the practice of independently reviewing UN peace operations.

Independent reviews occupy a unique place in the organization's policy sphere.[2] They are not formally codified or methodically detailed in departmental guidance.[3] Instead, they evolved organically from traditional UN practice through a combination of formal mandates and informal initiatives. Individual personalities and political dynamics shape each review's objectives, methodologies, and final outcomes, contributing to a range of practices that fall under a single broad category. And these reviews are subject to heightened political scrutiny within the organization and by member states, especially when their final reports remain confidential.

Nineteen independent reviews of UN peace operations have taken place since the practice was established in 2017 (see Table 1). These reviews have been requested by both the UN Security Council and the secretary-general and have covered multidimensional peacekeeping operations and field-based special political missions (SPMs), including regional offices. Independent reviews have unfolded across three unofficial phases: a first phase emerging as a byproduct of a breakdown in trust between the Security Council and the Secretariat; a second spurred by a formal initiative of the secretary-general to build political support for UN peacekeeping and preempt additional council requests; and a third driven by the Security Council's onus to assert its primacy over the practice.

Independent reviews are intended to rigorously assess the strategic orientation of peace operations while providing more political credibility than UN-led review processes. But given the diverse processes and incentives that shape them, these

1 Inclusive of UN peacekeeping operations and field-based SPMs (DPPA Cluster III). See: UN General Assembly, *Proposed Programme Budget for 2022*, UN Doc. A/76/6 (Sect. 3)/Add. 1, May 28, 2021, p. 36 (Table 9); UN Department of Global Communications, "Peacekeeping Operations Fact Sheet," August 31, 2021, available at https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/peacekeeping_missions_fact_sheet_august_2021_en.pdf ; and UN General Assembly, *Overview of the Financing of the United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Budget Performance for the Period 1 July 2019 to 30 June 2020 and Budget for the Period from 1 July 2021 to 30 June 2022—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. A/75/786, February 26, 2021, p. 65 (Table 13).

2 For the purposes of this paper, the term "independent reviews" is inclusive of independent strategic reviews and independent strategic assessments unless specifically disaggregated. The term independent strategic assessment is not used widely within the UN system; however, there is a need for this term considering that some independent exercises have explicitly described themselves as strategic assessments. The term "peace operations" is inclusive of peacekeeping operations and field-based SPMs (both country- and region-based); offices of special envoys and panels of experts are excluded.

3 The methodology for independent reviews was put forward in a note to the secretary-general from the under-secretaries-general for the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) and Department of Field Support (DFS) entitled "Review of Peacekeeping Operations" on October 2, 2017 (on file with author).

exercises are both complex analytical processes and highly political undertakings. As independent reviews have gained prominence over the past five years, reflecting on the experiences of previous reviews is necessary for improving their quality, impact, and sustainability moving forward.

This paper provides a comparative analysis of the nineteen independent reviews of UN peace operations conducted between 2017 and 2021 by considering emerging trends, best practices, and lessons observed.[4] It begins by juxtaposing the emergence of independent reviews with an increasingly fractured geopolitical landscape for UN peace operations and introducing these reviews' distinguishing features and objectives. It then analyzes how independent reviews have unfolded in practice across seven different dimensions. The paper concludes by presenting findings about the practice and future of independent reviews, developing criteria to distinguish between UN-led and independent reviews, and offering recommendations to the UN system, member states, and independent review teams to improve the practice.

Situating Independent Reviews in the UN Policy Sphere

Independent reviews are a relatively new but increasingly popular tool to support UN peace operations. They emerged as the by-product of political pressures on UN peace operations and have evolved through both formal and informal practices. Independent reviews comprise a set of common features, but the details of their practice are not regimented within the UN policy landscape, affording them a unique position. This section discusses the origins and evolution of independent reviews since their inception in 2017.

A Blurred Landscape of UN-Led Processes

While independent reviews emerged organically as one of UN Secretary-General António Guterres's flagship efforts to reexamine UN peace operations, the practice itself derives from the UN's strategic assessment and strategic review exercises. These tools have been cornerstones of the organization's efforts to evaluate its peace operations since the mid-2000s, and recent UN policies have defined them in greater detail.[5] But over time, these tools became increasingly blurred with each other, making them less impactful. Independent reviews emerged in part because of pushes to improve these evaluation tools. A full list of strategic reviews, strategic assessments, and independent reviews since 2013 is included as an annex to this paper.

Strategic assessments are interagency studies of integrated presences in conflict or post-conflict environments undertaken by the entire UN system.[6] They are intended to help develop "a shared understanding of a conflict or post-conflict situation, [the] role of stakeholders and core peace consolidation priorities, and to propose options for UN engagement on the basis of an assessment of risks and opportunities."[7] Practically speaking, they are intended to help align the strategies of multiple UN entities working in a country or region. Strategic assessments are required before the deployment of any integrated UN presence and can also be mandated for an existing presence at the request of senior UN leadership.[8] They are also the first of four required steps of the UN's Integrated Assessment and Planning (IAP) methodology.[9]

4 This research is based on a desk review of primary and secondary literature and forty-four interviews with current and former UN officials, member-state diplomats, outside experts, and individuals who have led independent reviews. It also builds on research conducted during an earlier phase of this project that drew on two closed-door research workshops: one with independent team leaders and one with UN officials.

5 UN, "Integrated Missions Planning Process (IMPP): Guidelines Endorsed by the Secretary-General," June 13, 2006; UN, "Policy on Integrated Assessment and Planning," October 2013; UN DPKO and DFS, "Policy: Planning and Review of Peacekeeping Operations," Ref. 2016.09, 2016; and UN, "Review of UN Integration—Final Report" (on file with author), 2021.

6 This includes multidimensional peacekeeping operations, field-based political missions, or UN country team presences.

7 Strategic assessments are the first of four minimum conditions for integrated assessment and planning and are precursors to the development of integrated strategic frameworks between Security Council–mandated presences and UN agencies, funds, and programs. They are also intended to "provide a basis for the development of recommendations on the nature and (re)configuration of UN engagement for the consideration of the Secretary-General and, when required, the Security Council." UN, "Policy on Integrated Assessment and Planning," para. 28.

8 UN DPKO, "Integrated Assessment and Planning Handbook," December 2013, pp. 17–30, 41–42.

9 The four requirements are: (1) the joint conduct of strategic assessments; (2) the articulation of a common UN vision, priorities, and respective responsibilities in support of peace consolidation; (3) the establishment of integrated mechanisms at both the field and headquarters levels; and (4) the conduct of integrated monitoring and evaluation. See: UN, "Policy on Integrated Assessment and Planning."

Strategic reviews have a narrower aperture: they are intended to reflect on the strategic direction of a peacekeeping operation or SPM, and not necessarily the overall UN response in a country or region. Their underlying objectives are "to analyze the situation, review the performance and impact of the mission or the UN on the ground, and recommend adjustments, if appropriate, to inform the mandate renewal or adjust the UN response on the ground."[10] While strategic reviews can be led by the Department of Peace Operations (DPO, formerly the Department of Peacekeeping Operations [DPKO]), the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA, formerly the Department of Political Affairs [DPA]), or the Department of Operational Support (DOS, formerly the Department of Field Support [DFS]), participants in the review can also include UN entities "whose operations may be significantly affected by the review."[11] Strategic reviews are expected to take place every two or three years, if not more frequently, depending on the circumstances.

Differences between strategic assessments and strategic reviews are straightforward on paper but less clear in practice. Both strive to comprehensively analyze the trajectory of a UN presence and offer recommendations about its mandate or reconfiguration. While a strategic assessment is required in advance of deploying a new presence, both can be requested by the Security Council or senior UN leadership at any point in a mission's lifecycle. Security Council members and UN officials have also used the terminology inconsistently, reflecting ambiguity about their defining features and comparative advantages.[12]

Internally, parts of the UN Secretariat have begun using strategic reviews over strategic assessments in planning processes where the IAP methodology would require the latter (see Figure 1 below). Multiple UN officials observed that strategic reviews have become perceived as "work-arounds" to avoid triggering the IAP policy and its comparatively burdensome requirements, especially since reviews can be done with fewer people and UN entities.[13] Strategic reviews are one-off undertakings, whereas strategic assessments have a clearly defined methodology and follow-on processes. The 2020 Review of UN Integration concluded that "few of the individuals interviewed [for the review] were familiar with the integrated assessment and planning policy, let alone the related tools and techniques.… The two main criticisms leveled against the policy are that the associated processes are heavy and that it is not relevant to the day-to-day work of staff."[14]

Debates about strategic reviews and assessments are indicative of larger concerns about the quality and consistency with which the UN evaluates its field presences. Reporting by the secretary-general to the Security Council (both through regular mandated reports and special reports) is one of the primary vehicles for official written assessments of a peace operation (with another being the secretary-general's annual budget report to the General Assembly on specific missions). They constitute the organization's on-the-record statements about missions and the context in which they operate; consolidate policies, guidance, and assessments from different parts of the organization; and provide the secretary-general's own narrative and conclusions. Findings from strategic UN exercises are frequently incorporated into these reports.[15]

Member states and the broader research community frequently critique the quality, rigor, and objectivity of the Secretariat's periodic reporting on UN peace operations, which are often chronological summaries of activities and security incidents

10 UN DPKO and UN DFS, "Policy: Planning and Review of Peacekeeping Operations," para. 23.1.

11 Ibid.

12 A prime example of this is the AU-UN special report on UNAMID: the report is labeled a "strategic assessment," but its introductory paragraph notes Security Council Resolution 2429 requests that the UN Secretariat undertake a strategic review. UN Security Council, *Special Report of the Chairperson of the African Union Commission and the Secretary-General of the United Nations on the Strategic Assessment of the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur*, UN Doc. S/2019/445, May 30, 2019. In another instance, the Security Council referenced a May 2015 strategic review of UNOCA as a "strategic assessment review." UN Security Council, *Statement by the President of the Security Council*, UN Doc. S/PRST/2015/12, June 11, 2015.

13 Interview 5, current UN officials, January 2021; Interview 14, current UN officials, February 2021; Interview 35, current UN officials, May 2021.

14 UN, "2020 Review of UN Integration—Final Report," para. 26.

15 They are sometimes submitted as stand-alone documents, depending on the Security Council's mandated reporting cycle on the peace operation. See discussion later in this paper.

divorced from an overarching analysis.[16] Strategic inputs into these reports are often products of departmental interests and compromises. Perhaps most concerning is the perception that "considerations regarding the acceptability by the Council of the options proposed by the Secretariat weigh heavily on the [reporting] process."[17]

Evaluations of UN peace operations are largely internal.[18] The Office of Internal Oversight Services conducts internal but independent audits, investigations, and evaluations across the entire UN system; these are often retrospective and traditionally focus on implementation and performance.[19] Recent Secretariat initiatives such as the Comprehensive Planning and Performance Assessment System (CPAS) for peacekeeping operations mark tangible efforts to strengthen how missions assess their own performance and impact.[20] But these have not mitigated perceptions about the quality of Secretariat reporting on strategic issues concerning UN peace operations. As one of the team leaders of an independent review characterized the dilemma, "The UN wants to grade its own homework.… DPPA and DPO assess their own performance to the [UN Security Council], and the [council] doesn't have the knowledge or familiarities with these realities and peace operations to meaningfully evaluate them."[21]

Trust Deficits and the Genesis of Independent Reviews

The concept of independent reviews of UN peace operations was first mentioned in a formal UN document when the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) recommended that "independent evaluations should, as appropriate, be commissioned at key decision points to provide objective assessments of progress in mandate implementation and overall context."[22]

This suggestion gained momentum during a period of growing geopolitical pressure on UN peacekeeping and breakdowns in trust between the Security Council and the Secretariat. Secretary-General Guterres's first months in office in early 2017 coincided with those of US President Donald Trump. The Trump administration quickly signaled its intention to cut American financial contributions to UN peacekeeping as an expression of its "America First" foreign policy.[23] These pressures served as a backdrop to the first flagship event of the United States' April 2017 Security Council presidency, a thematic debate entitled "Peacekeeping Operations Review." US Permanent Representative Nikki Haley encouraged the Security Council to undertake a holistic evaluation of each UN peacekeeping operation, stressing the importance of "measurables and accountability" while rejecting the premise that these evaluations would be budget-cutting exercises.[24] Multiple council members endorsed the notion that missions should be reviewed regularly, with some even specifically discussing the need to improve the UN's strategic review process.[25]

> Independent reviews gained momentum during a period of growing geopolitical pressure on UN peacekeeping and breakdowns in trust between the Security Council and the Secretariat.

Although independent reviews were not explicitly mentioned during the thematic debate, these discussions served as a backdrop for the Secretariat

16 See, for example: Security Council Report, "The Security Council and UN Peace Operations: Reform and Deliver," May 2016, p. 12; Security Council Report, "Is Christmas Really Over? Improving the Mandating of Peace Operations," February 2019, p. 6; and Security Council Report, "Prioritisation and Sequencing of Council Mandates: Walking the Walk?" January 2020, pp. 14–15.

17 Security Council Report, "Prioritisation and Sequencing," p. 14.

18 UN Evaluation Group, "Norms and Standards for Evaluation," 2016; UNICEF, "Revised Evaluation Policy of UNICEF," June 2018; UN Development Programme, "Evaluation 2020: Annual Report," April 2021.

19 UN Office of Internal Oversight Services, "What We Do," available at https://oios.un.org/what-we-do .

20 UN Peacekeeping, "CPAS," available at https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/cpas .

21 Interview 6, independent team leader, January 2021.

22 UN General Assembly and UN Security Council, *Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on Uniting Our Strengths for Peace: Politics, Partnership and People*, UN Doc. A/70/95–S/2015/446, June 17, 2015, paras. 180(d) and 340(i).

23 Colum Lynch, "Trump Administration Eyes $1 Billion in Cuts to U.N. Peacekeeping," *Foreign Policy*, March 23, 2017.

24 UN Security Council, 7918th Meeting, UN Doc. S/PV.7918, April 6, 2017.

25 See: Ibid., national statements by Ethiopia and Sweden.

to test new approaches in the ensuing months. Secretary-General Guterres appointed Ján Kubiš, then special representative of the secretary-general (SRSG) for the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), to lead the Security Council–mandated review of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).[26] During the same time frame, the Secretariat commissioned former Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations Jean-Marie Guéhenno to independently lead a "strategic assessment review" of the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL).[27] Contentious debates over political strategy, both within these missions and between these missions and headquarters, informed the Secretariat's decision to appoint external leaders for these exercises. These were arguably the first independent reviews, though they were not conceptualized or referred to as such.

Independent reviews were catapulted into the spotlight in July 2017 following a public fracture between the Security Council and Secretariat. Resolution 2367 (2017) renewed the mandate of UNAMI and requested that the Secretariat prepare "an independent, external assessment" of the mission.[28] As penholder for the file, the United States expressed its desire to have an "unbiased third-party review… [that] should set a gold standard for improving efficiency and accountability."[29] It also described this review as "an effort to shake up the UN approach to management review and in support of the Secretary-General's reform agenda."[30] Through this resolution, the Security Council encroached on one of the Secretariat's core competencies and sent signals about its lack of confidence in the UN's ability to evaluate one of its missions and propose possible reconfigurations.

Secretary-General Guterres convened a meeting of his Executive Committee in July 2017 to initiate new reviews of UN peacekeeping operations, responding to the growing chorus of concerns from UN member states.[31] This initiative was based on a proposal by DPKO and DFS to review eight missions, constituting the unofficial start of the second phase of independent reviews. The Executive Committee's formal decision stated:

> Under the overall lead of DPKO and DFS, each review will be undertaken by an integrated review team led by a non-UN expert with reliable knowledge of the UN system, such as a former senior UN staff member. DPKO and DFS will coordinate the review team process, select [the review] team, and provide secretariat services. The conclusions and recommendations of the reviews will be conveyed to DPKO and DFS before transmission to the secretary-general.[32]

It also requested that DPKO and DFS develop a methodology for reviewing UN peace operations, as well as standing structures to support these reviews, including a review secretariat and standalone Joint Analytics Team.[33] The Executive Committee also considered that the reviews should balance boldness and innovation with political feasibility; that human rights and gender lenses should be integrated throughout the reviews; and that the UN should avoid being inward-looking and overly sensitive to bureaucratic dynamics.[34]

While this formal series of independent reviews concluded at the end of 2018, the practice caught on politically with the Security Council and within the Secretariat. As a result, many of the independent review components (discussed in

26 Mandating a current SRSG to lead a review of another mission was a unique model: Kubiš was chosen because he intimately understood the mission's context and operations (having led it a few years prior) but was deemed sufficiently distanced from it to not have immediate conflicts of interest. Interview 31, current UN officials, May 2021.

27 Security Council Resolution 2323 (2017) (para 4.) described the assessment as a "strategic assessment review," a phrasing that was used to title the section of the secretary-general's report that summarized its findings (S/2017/726) (paras. 81–83). The text of the secretary-general's report, however, describes the process as a strategic assessment. The council's conflation of these distinct processes speaks to broad confusion about their objectives and methodologies, a point addressed later in this paper. See point raised in footnote 12.

28 UN Security Council Resolution 2367 (July 14, 2017), UN Doc. S/RES/2367, para. 7.

29 UN Security Council, 8003rd meeting, UN Doc. S/PV.8003, July 14, 2017.

30 UN Security Council, 8112th meeting, UN Doc. S/PV.8112, November 22, 2017.

31 For more information about the Executive Committee and Deputies Committee, see: UN Office of Human Resources Management, "The Essential Guidebook for Senior Leaders of the United Nations Secretariat," October 2017, pp. 24–25.

32 Executive Committee Decision 2017/81 (shared verbally with author), July 27, 2017.

33 UN DPKO and UN DFS, "Review of Peacekeeping Operations."

34 Interview 5, current UN officials, January 2021.

Table 1. List of independent reviews and assessments (2017–2021)

Mission[35]	Requesting Entity	Independent Leader	Findings[36]	Unofficial Phase
UNAMA*	Resolution 2344 (2017)	Ján Kubiš	S/2017/696	**Phase 1**
UNSMIL	Secretary-general	Jean-Marie Guéhenno	S/2017/726	
UNAMI	Resolution 2367 (2017)	Anthony Banbury and Phillip Rawkins	S/2017/966	
UNFICYP*	Resolution 2369 (2017)	Wolfgang Weisbrod-Weber	S/2017/1008	**Phase 2**
UNMISS	Secretary-general	Kevin Kennedy	S/2018/143	
MINUSMA	Secretary-general	Ellen Løj	S/2018/541	
UNISFA	Secretary-general	Martin Luther Agwai	S/2018/778	
MINURSO	Secretary-general	Diane Corner	S/2018/889	
MINUSCA	Secretary-general	Juan Gabriel Valdés	S/2018/922	
UNIOGBIS*	Resolution 2404 (2018)	João Honwana	S/2018/1086	
UNDOF	Secretary-general	Paolo Serra	S/2018/1088	
UNSOS	Secretary-general	Stephen Cutts	S/2018/1149	
UNOCA*	Presidential Statement 2018/17	Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah	S/2019/625	**Phase 3**
MONUSCO	Resolution 2463 (2019)	Youssef Mahmoud	S/2019/842	
UNOWAS	Secretary-general	Abdoulaye Bathily	S/2019/890	
UNOAU*	Secretary-general	Said Djinnit	S/2020/1020[37]	
UNMISS	Resolution 2514 (2020)	El-Ghassim Wane	S/2020/1224	
Somalia/ AMISOM	Resolution 2520 (2020)	Carlos Alberto dos Santos Cruz	Submitted to Security Council in January 2021	
UNSMIL	Resolution 2542 (2020)	Abdoulaye Bathily	S/2021/716	

35 Asterisks denote reviews that were not requested to be independent reviews but for which the Secretariat took the decision to hire an external team leader.

36 Official UN documents where the report was shared in whole or in part or was summarized in whole or in part. The review of Somalia/AMISOM was submitted as a confidential document to the Security Council, but its findings were not summarized publicly.

37 The assessment of UNOAU and the UN-AU partnership was formally initiated in 2016 but only began in late 2019. The report was submitted in September 2020. See: UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on Strengthening the Partnership between the United Nations and the African Union on Issues of Peace and Security in Africa, Including the Work of the United Nations Office to the African Union*, UN Doc. S/2016/780, September 13, 2016, para. 57.

38 The Security Council mandate requested that the independent assessment evaluate "international support to the whole security environment in Somalia post 2021." UN Security Council Resolution 2520 (May 29, 2020), UN Doc. S/RES/2520, para. 38.

more detail below) have since outlived the formal process and temporary structures established to support them. As of October 2021, an additional eight independent reviews have taken place since the conclusion of the DPKO-DFS initiative, forming a third, ongoing phase of independent reviews. Most of the reviews in this third phase have been initiated by the Security Council (see Figure 2).

This pronounced shift in practice is inextricable from the more principled question of whether the Security Council or the Secretariat is the primary client of independent reviews. Reviews have been shaped by different mandates, processes, and incentives depending on whether they were mandated by the secretary-general or the Security Council. While the first reviews emerged through an informal combination of council requests and Secretariat initiatives, the series of formal reviews placed the practice squarely in the Secretariat's domain. But the political fallout from the independent review of the UN mission in Mali (MINUSMA) further eroded trust between member states and the Secretariat (see Box 1).

Security Council members have begun mandating more independent reviews not only to make findings more transparent but also to more concretely influence these strategic decision points.

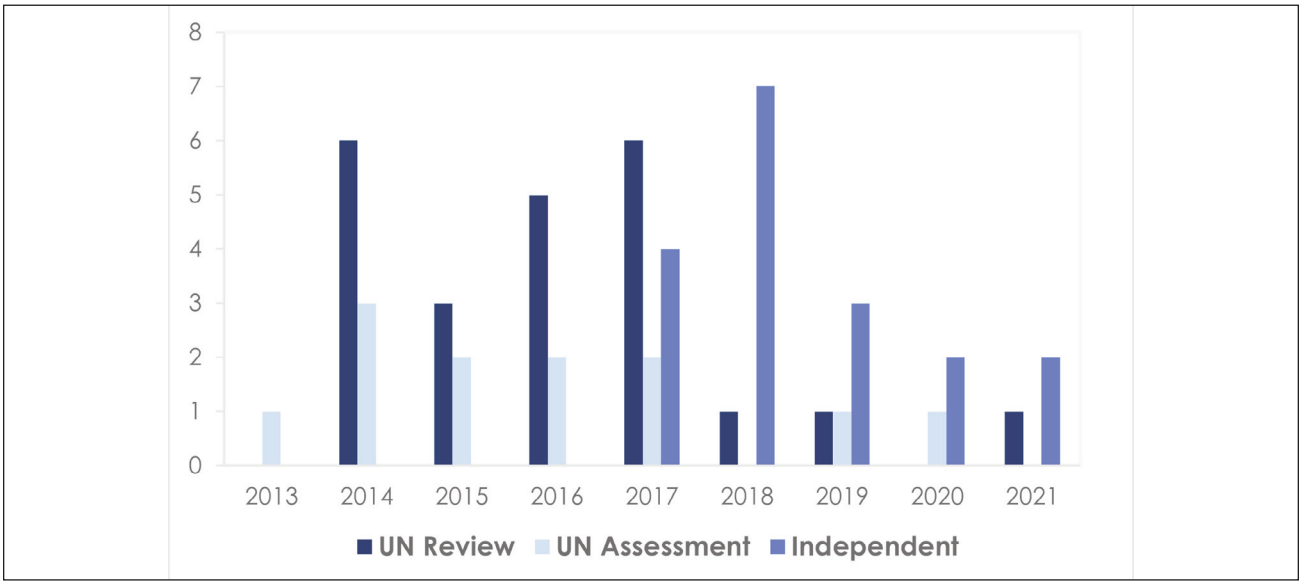
These dynamics fueled an ongoing contest among council members, and between the council and the Secretariat, to influence the narrative on and oversight of UN peace operations. Council members (particularly penholder countries) have begun mandating more independent reviews not only to make findings more transparent but also to more concretely influence these strategic decision points.

Recent reviews have had to straddle both the political context of the mission and broader Security Council–Secretariat dynamics. As argued later on, greater clarity on the objectives of and processes for UN-led and independent reviews, combined with a default posture of transparency for all independent review processes, would minimize the distinctions over which entity mandates a review in the first place.

Features of the Independent Review Process

While the focus of each independent review is informed by its specific mandate and the mission context, independent reviews have followed a

Figure 1. Comparison of reviews of UN missions by year of submission (2013–2021)[39]



39 According to year of submission. See Annex for a list of all reviews.

Figure 2. Independent reviews of peace operations by requesting entity (2017–2020)[40]

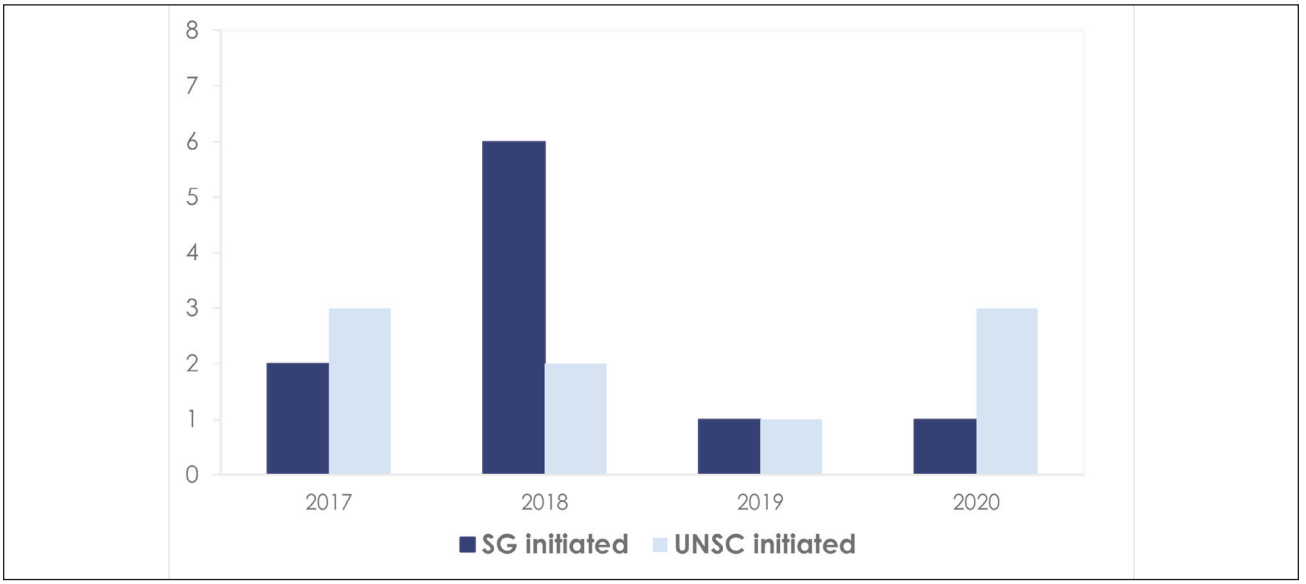
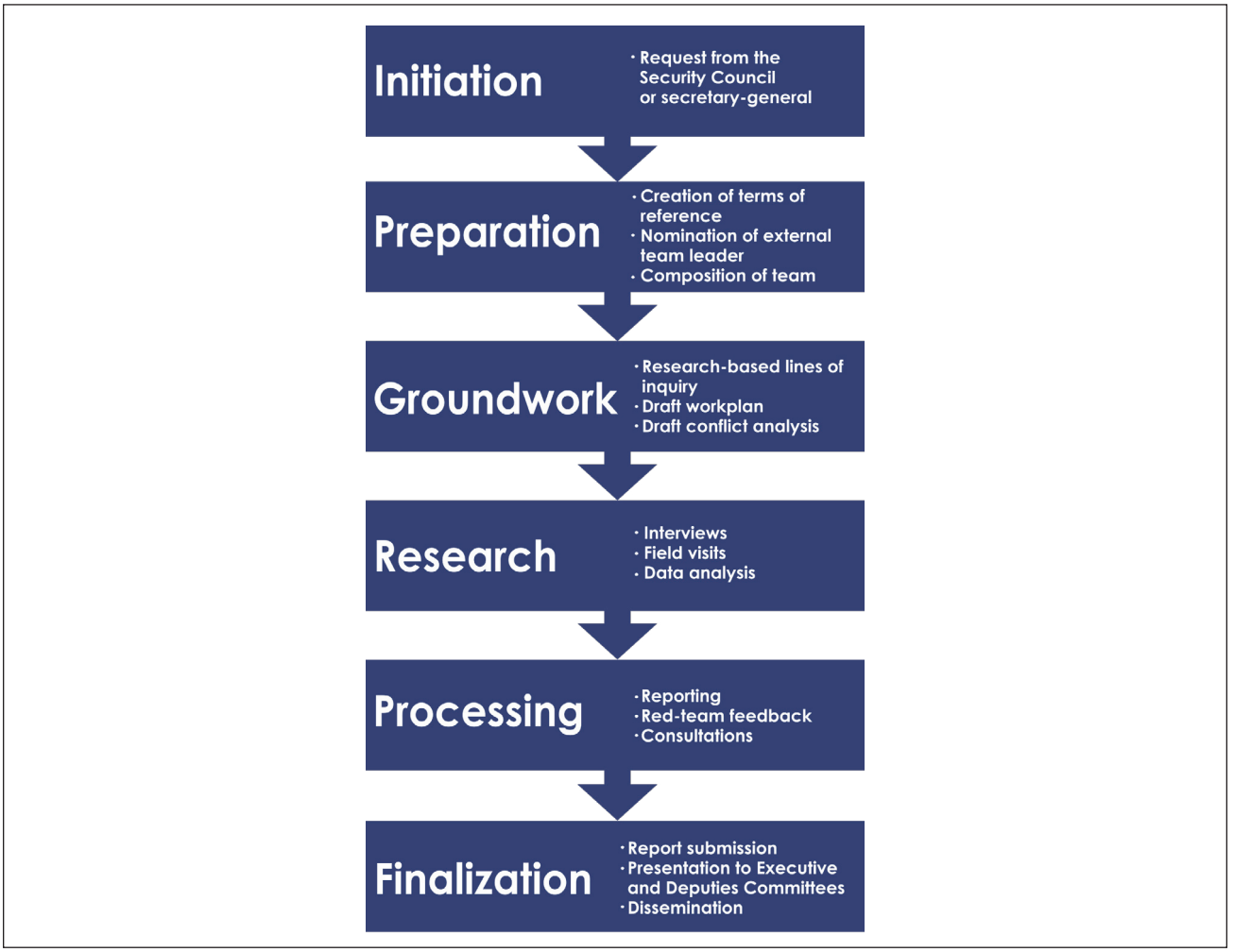


Figure 3. Features of the independent review process



40 According to year of request.

Box 1. The independent strategic review of MINUSMA and a fracture between the Security Council and Secretariat

The review of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was a highly contentious exercise due to political disagreements with the review's proposals. Ellen Løj's report proposed three options for MINUSMA's future, two of which directly countered the mission's expansive support for non-UN counterterrorism operations in Mali. Different parts of the Secretariat and the mission strongly disagreed with these options and were concerned about their possible implications for the UN. The report was also controversial among Security Council members and some (including France, which is the council penholder on Mali) actively lobbied the secretary-general and the Secretariat to maintain the mission's existing trajectory and prevent the report's circulation.[41]

Given these pressures, the Secretariat portrayed a selective and inaccurate summary of Løj's recommendations in the secretary-general's report to the council: it made no reference to the two options that conflicted with these political interests and instead framed the third option as the review's main recommendation.[42] Security Council members learned of the discrepancies between the independent review and the secretary-general's report, souring relations between them and the Secretariat while marring the review's integrity. This incident subsequently led the council to take a more proactive role in the independent review process so that it could encourage the submission of full reports.

common progression (see Figure 3). This progression has not always been completely structured or sequential: some of these stages have unfolded simultaneously, and not all independent reviews have utilized every feature.

Independent reviews are initiated by the secretary-general or by the Security Council (through a resolution or presidential statement asking the secretary-general to prepare a review for submission). Most mandates for an independent review include a submission deadline (often aligned with the upcoming renewal of the mission's mandate).[43]

The mission's lead department—DPO for peacekeeping operations and DPPA for SPMs—is then tasked with nominating an external team leader, developing terms of reference for the review, and identifying possible sources of funding. On some occasions, the secretary-general has taken the initiative to appoint an external team leader for a regular strategic review (e.g., for the reviews of UNOCA and UNOAU). Following informal consultations between the lead department and the Executive Office of the Secretary-General (EOSG), the department formally communicates the name of the proposed team leader and the draft terms of reference to the secretary-general.[44] Absent major points of contention, the EOSG replies affirmatively and formally establishes the review. At this point the mission's lead department, often in consultation with the team leader, begins contacting other UN departments to designate representatives who will participate in the review.

Once established, the review team is requested to develop lines of inquiry (i.e., research questions) along with products such as a conflict analysis, a desk review of the mission, and a draft workplan. The team receives briefings from the mission's lead desk in the DPO-DPPA shared regional structure (an integrated operational team or the regional desk). To support this process, external organizations such as the Social Science Research Council's Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum may convene closed-door roundtable discussions for the review

41 Aditi Gorur, "Case Study 5: The Political Strategy of the UN Peacekeeping Mission in Mali," in "The Political Practice of Peacekeeping: How Strategies for Peace Operations Are Developed and Implemented," Adam Day, Aditi Gorur, Victoria K. Holt, and Charles T. Hunt, eds., UN University Centre for Policy Research, 2020, p. 133; Interview 2, former UN official, January 2021; Interview 4, current UN officials, January 2021; Interview 5, current UN officials, January 2021; Interview 9, current UN official, January 2021; Interview 17, outside expert, February 2021; Interview 18, outside expert, February 2021; Interview 19, outside expert, March 2021; Interview 34, outside expert, May 2021.

42 UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2018/542, June 6, 2018, paras. 64–72.

43 The Security Council's request for the assessment of UNOAU and the UN-AU partnership did not include a deadline.

44 Interview 2, former UN official, January 2021; Interview 35, current UN officials, May 2021.

team with experts and academics who focus on the host country or region.[45]

Much of the review team's work is undertaken through qualitative research. Review teams examine mission documents, analyses, and reports and interview a wide range of UN officials, national stakeholders, and international partners. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, review teams could not travel and instead relied on video-teleconference meetings.[46]

While interview-based methodologies are standard for the UN, the secretary-general's series of independent reviews in 2017 and 2018 incorporated two innovative features that are now defining components of these processes.[47] The first is the systematic incorporation of quantitative analysis to "supplement the evidence base underlying decision options."[48] This practice was, in part, a response to a Security Council request to "ensure data streams… are centralized to improve analytics and evaluations of mission operations."[49] The second feature is the convening of "red teams," which have been used by the vast majority of independent reviews to stress test the review process by interrogating its assumptions, evidence, analysis, and recommendations.[50] Each red team comprises between three and six UN and non-UN individuals.

Reports are drafted and finalized by the review teams and then submitted to the Secretariat. The final report first arrives at the mission's home department, whose under-secretary-general submits it to the secretary-general along with a cover letter that offers the department's own views on the independent report's recommendations. Independent team leaders then brief the UN Executive Committee and Deputies Committee and participate in a short discussion on the report's findings and recommendations.

Dissemination is the last step of the independent review process. Most reviews are kept confidential within the UN Secretariat; the secretary-general provides only a summary of the review and its recommendations to the Security Council in a formal report or letter. If the report is transmitted in full to the Security Council, the secretary-general also submits a cover letter that reflects the UN's assessment of the report's findings and recommendations.

Assessing the UN's Experiences with Independent Reviews

While independent reviews of UN peace operations are similar on the surface, each is shaped by distinct political forces and operational variables. This section analyzes the UN's experiences with independent reviews across their various stages.

Motivations and Mandates: Why an Independent Review?

Independent reviews are increasingly prevalent because of their ability to marry rigorous analysis with credible, independent discussions on sensitive political issues. The degree to which each of these motivations drives the establishment of an independent review varies from case to case. Understanding the interplay between these motivations and each review's mandated objectives is necessary to accurately assess their potential impact.

Independent reviews are increasingly prevalent because of their ability to marry rigorous analysis with credible, independent discussions on sensitive political issues.

45 Social Science Research Council, "Overview," available at www.ssrc.org/programs/cppf/the-uns-think-bridge/ .

46 The review of UNMISS led by El-Ghassim Wane and the review of Somalia/AMISOM led by Carlos Alberto dos Santos Cruz were conducted entirely over video-teleconferencing (VTC) platforms. The review of UNSMIL led by Abdoulaye Bathily used a hybrid model, where some of the team members participated in a mission to Libya while others participated via VTC.

47 The review of UNFICYP was led by an external team leader but did not include a data-analytics component or a red team.

48 UN DFS, "Peacekeeping Review Analytics: Analytics Support Team—Overview" (on file with author), October 2017; Interview 5, current UN officials, January 2021.

49 UN Security Council Resolution 2378 (September 20, 2017), UN Doc. S/RES/2378, para. 13.

50 Executive Office of the Secretary-General, "Red-Teaming Exercise ToR" (on file with author), June 2019; Interview 17, outside expert, February 2021; Interview 18, outside expert, February 2021; Interview 19, outside expert, March 2021.

Box 2. Thematically focused independent reviews of UN peace operations

Although beyond the scope of this study, the UN has routinely commissioned independent (or external) reviews focused on thematic issues related to peace operations.[51] While previous reviews (such as the Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations [the Brahimi Report] or the HIPPO report) focused on comprehensive issues related to UN peace operations, recent studies have examined specific thematic issues in more detail. These studies have varied in scope and ambition but are nonetheless indicative of the UN's push to complement its internal analyses with external inputs.

The December 2017 report "Improving Security of UN Peacekeepers" (known as the Cruz Report), is the most famous of these reviews.[52] Led by Lieutenant General Carlos Alberto dos Santos Cruz, this report analyzed why troop and police fatalities in peacekeeping missions were increasing and proposed recommendations on what the organization should do to reverse this trend.[53] This review sparked considerable attention to the issue among politicians and policymakers.[54]

A second report, "Review of Peacekeeping Responses in Four Critical Missions," analyzed how the UN's four largest peacekeeping operations (MONUSCO, MINUSCA, UNMISS, and MINUSMA) have implemented their protection of civilians mandates. Led by former UN Assistant Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations El-Ghassim Wane, the report offered multidimensional assessments of the challenges, opportunities, and dilemmas these missions grappled with when undertaking activities to protect civilians in complex and dangerous environments.[55]

A third report, again led by Santos Cruz, assessed MONUSCO's response to the high number of attacks against civilians in the Democratic Republic of the Congo's (DRC) Ituri and North Kivu provinces. It specifically examined the performance of the mission's Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) over a narrow period.[56] The status of this assessment within the UN is unclear: while it was described as an "independent assessment," it most closely resembled a special investigation by a peacekeeping operation.[57]

While these reviews were initiated by the secretary-general, the most recent independent thematic study was requested by the Security Council. In its May 2021 presidential statement on the safety and security of UN peacekeepers, the council commissioned an independent strategic review of "peacekeeping operations' responses to improvised explosive devices [and] assessing capabilities and measures necessary to better mitigate this threat."[58] The study was still underway at the time of this report's publication.

Motivations for Independent Reviews

At their most aspirational, independent reviews encourage UN member states and the Secretariat to candidly evaluate a mission's strategic direction and performance. They generate conversations at strategic decision points in a mission's life cycle that are not necessarily anchored in the Security Council's reporting cycle. They directly channel advice to the secretary-general and provide "gut checks" on the basic assumptions underpinning

51 Prominent reports prior to 2017 include the Expert Panel on Peacekeeping and Technology (2014) and the report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (2015).

52 Carlos Alberto dos Santos Cruz, William R. Phillips, and Salvator Cusimano, "Improving Security of United Nations Peacekeepers: We Need to Change the Way We Are Doing Business," UN, December 19, 2017.

53 Carlos Alberto dos Santos Cruz, "Cruz on His Report: Q&A with Carlos Alberto dos Santos Cruz," interview by *IPI Global Observatory*, March 12, 2018.

54 UN Peacekeeping, "Action Plan to Implement the Report on Improving Security of Peacekeepers," April 2018.

55 El-Ghassim Wane et al., "Review of Peacekeeping Responses in Four Critical Missions" (on file with author), UN, March 2021.

56 Carlos Alberto dos Santos Cruz, "Independent Assessment of MONUSCO's Response to Recent Attacks Against Civilians in Béni Area, Democratic Republic of the Congo," UN, January 21, 2020.

57 Namie Di Razza, "The Accountability System for the Protection of Civilians in UN Peacekeeping: Special Investigations Factsheet," International Peace Institute, December 2020, p. 5.

58 UN Security Council, Statement Made by the President of the Security Council, UN Doc. S/PRST/2021/11, May 24, 2021.

UN engagement in a country or region.[59] Independent reviews also complement formal UN deliberations, sidestepping the bureaucratic negotiations that inform most UN reporting.

They are also one of the few formal channels within the UN to present independent written assessments.[60] Since their findings are circulated within the UN, or at least reflected in official UN documents, independent reviews have a degree of legitimacy that is unavailable to academic reports or other external studies. This legitimacy opens the door for all member states to consider formally engaging with the reviews, increasing the potential for wider ownership.[61]

But even though Security Council members and UN officials agree that independent reviews are valuable, they do not agree on their specific objectives or potential impact. Independent reviews have been mandated by different UN entities with different political objectives and at different points in a mission's life cycle. These motivations are not mutually exclusive since an independent review can serve multiple objectives simultaneously.

Five broad motivations cut across the nineteen independent reviews that have been conducted to date:

- **Evaluating the direction of a peace operation:** Some reviews have been motivated by the desire to holistically evaluate a UN peace operation. Independent reviews have been considered useful tools to assess a mission's strategic orientation, interrogate the assumptions underlying its priorities and deployment, and evaluate its performance and impact. The secretary-general's reviews of eight peacekeeping operations between 2017 and 2018 largely fall into this category. In another example, the 2019 review of the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) sought to investigate whether the regional office was adequately positioned to engage on issues in both West Africa and across the broader Sahel region. Similarly, the independent review of the UN Office to the African Union (UNOAU) and UN-AU cooperation considered the partnership's rapid expansion since 2010 and reflected the desire to ensure that the UN meets its "growing demands."[62]

- **Reorienting UN support following significant changes on the ground:** Other reviews were requested to better understand whether (or how) a mission should respond to new security conditions or evolutions in political processes in a host country or region. For example, the request for an independent review of the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) in 2020 was partially informed by the desire to recalibrate the mission's objectives following the conclusion of the Berlin Conference seven months earlier and requests for the UN to assume responsibility for cease-fire monitoring.[63] The 2018 review of the UN mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the 2020 review of international security support to Somalia were partially motivated by deteriorating security conditions in these countries.[64]

- **Informing a mission's reconfiguration:** Independent reviews have been requested to help inform debates surrounding a potential mission transition or drawdown. The Secretariat and council members have vested interests in maintaining, adjusting, or closing a mission and have considered external inputs to be worthwhile additions to these inherently biased discussions. UNAMI's independent review was mandated to assess the mission's structure, staffing, and resources to align the mission and the UN country team.[65] Reviews of the mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) and the

59 Interview 17, outside expert, February 2021.

60 Other channels include panel of experts' reports, letters submitted to and circulated by the presidents of the Security Council, and verbatim records of UN Security Council briefings where other persons participate in the proceedings.

61 Interview 32, member-state diplomat, May 2021.

62 UN Security Council Resolution 2320 (November 18, 2016), UN Doc. S/RES/2320, para. 11.

63 UN Security Council Resolution 2542 (September 15, 2020), UN Doc. S/RES/2542, paras. 5(i) and (ii); Interview 43, current UN official, June 2021.

64 Resolution 2520 (2020) requested that the secretary-general "conduct an independent assessment, by 10 January 2021, and present options to the Security Council on international support to the whole security environment in Somalia post 2021." This resolution also renewed the UN Security Council's mandate for the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). UN Doc. S/RES/2520, para. 38.

65 UN Doc. S/RES/2367, para. 7.

mission in Guinea-Bissau (UNIOGBIS) were informed by the council's desire to reprioritize these missions' mandated tasks and consider reconfiguring them.

- **Managing political divides in the Security Council:** In some instances, council members have mandated independent reviews as a compromise when they cannot reach consensus on changes to a mission's priorities or footprint. Council members have mandated some independent reviews to defuse specific concerns, buy time for further negotiations, or substantiate their own political agendas. For example, the request for the second independent review of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) in 2020 was a product of political debates within the council about the mission's strategic priorities and the potential closure of mission-run protection of civilians sites amid rapidly evolving conflict dynamics.[66]

- **Opening political space within the UN:** Reviews mandated by the secretary-general have also been used to help navigate sensitive internal debates. Independent reviews can articulate the political tradeoffs of sensitive policy issues without getting overwhelmed by bureaucratic interests within a mission or at headquarters. They can also provide a vehicle for different parts of the organization to credibly test a mission's status quo without immediately committing to significant changes. This trend partially reflects the SPMs' flexibility and the comparative political latitude within the council to reconfigure and reprioritize their mandates.

Mandates of Independent Reviews

Diverse (and often overlapping) motivations have led the Security Council and the secretary-general to give independent review teams a wide range of substantive and operational tasks. Peacekeeping operations and SPMs are themselves broad categories that encompass missions with different substantive mandates, structures, and political contexts. Applying the same broad tool of independent reviews to both peacekeeping operations and SPMs has led to significant differences in how the reviews have been put into practice. These differences have been made possible by the practice's flexibility and context-driven approach.

Diverse (and often overlapping) motivations have led the Security Council and the secretary-general to give independent review teams a wide range of substantive and operational tasks.

For example, some reviews have gravitated toward discussion of the mission's strategic approach to domestic political processes (e.g., the reviews of MINUSMA and MINUSCA). Others have sought to better prioritize mission mandates in the context of UN-wide efforts (e.g., the reviews of UNOCA and UNOAU). Certain reviews have focused less on strategic issues, instead concentrating on operational and performance-related matters (e.g., the reviews of the UN mission in Western Sahara and the UN Support Office in Somalia).

Council-mandated reviews have been particularly wide-ranging in scope (see Table 2). Sometimes the council has asked independent review teams to prepare sweeping assessments of peace and security dynamics in the host country, as seen in the review mandates for MONUSCO, UNMISS, and international security support for Somalia.[67] Other times—and sometimes in conjunction with very broad requests—the council has requested detailed recommendations: the independent reviews of UNAMA and UNAMI had to provide assessments

66 Interview 36, former UN official, May 2021; Interview 41, current UN official, June 2021.

67 Security Council Resolution 2514 (2020) asked for assessments of the "challenges to peace and security in South Sudan and… detailed recommendations for the possible reconfiguration of the UNMISS mandate." UN Security Council Resolution 2514 (March 12, 2020), UN Doc. S/RES/2514, para. 39. Resolution 2463 (2019) asked for the review to assess "continued challenges to peace and security in the DRC and articulating a phased, progressive and comprehensive exit strategy for MONUSCO." UN Security Council Resolution 2463 (March 29, 2019), UN Doc. S/RES/2463, para. 45. Resolution 2520 (2020) asked for the review to "present options… on international support to the whole security environment in Somalia post 2021, including the role of the UN, AU and international partners." UN Doc. S/RES/2520, para. 38.

Table 2. UN Security Council resolution language mandating independent reviews (2017–2021)

Security Council Resolution	Focus	Resolution Text
Resolution 2344 (2017) (para. 7)	UNAMA (Afghanistan)	"Requests the Secretary-General, in accordance with best practices, to conduct a strategic review of UNAMA, examining mandated tasks, priorities, and related resources, assessing the mission's efficiency and effectiveness, in order to optimize the division of labour and configuration to ensure better cooperation and minimize duplication with other UN related organizations."
Resolution 2367 (2017) (para. 7)	UNAMI (Iraq)	"Calls upon the Secretary-General to conduct, by 15 October 2017, an independent, external assessment of the structure and staffing of the Mission, related resources, priorities, and areas in which it has comparative advantages and synergies with other United Nations entities, in order to ensure that the Mission and United Nations Country Team are configured to most appropriately and efficiently fulfil mandated tasks."
Resolution 2369 (2017) (para. 12)	UNFICYP (Cyprus)	"Requests the Secretary-General to conduct a strategic review of UNFICYP focused on findings and recommendations for how UNFICYP should be optimally configured to implement its existing mandate, based exclusively on rigorous evidence-based assessment of the impact of UNFICYP activities."
Resolution 2404 (2018) (para. 28)	UNIOGBIS (Guinea-Bissau)	"Requests…the Secretary General's assessment of the Mission including options for a possible reconfiguration of the United Nations presence in the country and re-prioritization of tasks."
Presidential Statement 2018/17	UNOCA (Central Africa)	"Requests the Secretary-General to conduct a strategic review regarding the scope of UNOCA's mandate and activities and present recommendations for areas of improvement, including the coherence of UN activities in countries under UNOCA's mandate, or new or refocused priorities."
Resolution 2463 (2019) (para.45)	MONUSCO (Democratic Republic of the Congo)	"[Requests] the Secretary-General, in accordance with best practices, to conduct and provide the Security Council, no later than 20 October 2019, with an independent strategic review of MONUSCO assessing the continued challenges to peace and security in the DRC and articulating a phased, progressive and comprehensive exit strategy, including: (i) An assessment, in consultation with the Government of DRC, UN agencies, member States, regional organisations and independent experts of the continued relevance of all mandated tasks, priorities and related resources; (ii) Recommendations, devised in consultation with the Government of DRC, UN agencies, member States, regional organisations and independent experts, for realistic, relevant and clearly measurable benchmarks and indicators, as well as indicative timelines for implementation, focused on increasing the capacity of the Government of the DRC and UNCT to enable

Security Council Resolution	Focus	Resolution Text
		them to absorb former MONUSCO tasks; [and] (iii) Options for adapting MONUSCO's future configuration of its civilian, police and military components, including by reducing MONUSCO's Force and civilian footprint in line with MONUSCO's priorities during the implementation of the exit strategy and benchmarks and indicators."
Resolution 2514 (2020) (para.39)	UNMISS (South Sudan)	"Requests the Secretary-General, in accordance with best practices, to conduct and provide the Security Council, no later than 15 December 2020, with an independent strategic review of UNMISS assessing the challenges to peace and security in South Sudan and providing detailed recommendations for the possible reconfiguration of the UNMISS mandate and its civilian, police, and military components to account for developments in the peace process, based on broad consultations, including, but not limited to, relevant transitional government bodies, humanitarian and development actors, and civil society organizations."
Resolution 2520 (2020) (para. 38)	Somalia/ AMISOM	"Requests the Secretary-General to conduct an independent assessment, by 10 January 2021, and present options to the Security Council on international support to the whole security environment in Somalia post 2021, including the role of the UN, AU and international partners, and after consultations with the FGS, AU and international partners on their respective views."
Resolution 2542 (2020) (para. 5)	UNSMIL (Libya)	"Requests that the Secretary-General, in accordance with best practices, conduct and provide the Security Council, no later than 31 July 2021, with an independent strategic review of UNSMIL, including: (i) an assessment and recommendations for improving the efficiency of UNSMIL's overall mission structure, prioritisation of tasks and the capacity and effectiveness of staffing, including on mediation and peace process management; [and] (ii) further assessment of the options for effective ceasefire monitoring under the auspices of the UN including additional recommendations as necessary."

of mission staffing, structure, and resource allocations, while the MONUSCO review team needed to draft benchmarks and indicators for a mission exit strategy.

Comparing motivations for and mandates of independent reviews reveals three additional trends. First, the UN is reticent to mandate an independent review when there is little space for strategic reflection. Missions that have not undergone an independent review either operate in frozen contexts or have comparatively inflexible mandates.[68] Geopolitical divides inside and outside of the Security Council often make it difficult, if not impossible, to discuss—let alone implement—a strategic recalibration.[69] Such constraints do not minimize the potential utility of independently examining these missions' strategy and performance, but the narrowed space for political engagement strips the independent review process of its greatest added value.

Narrowed space for political engagement strips the independent review process of its greatest added value.

Second, review mandates for peacekeeping operations and SPMs have evolved somewhat differently. Eleven independent reviews have focused on peacekeeping operations, and eight have focused on SPMs. To a certain extent, reviews of both kinds of peace operations have considered strategic and operational issues. But while the formal reviews of peacekeeping operations in 2017 and 2018 focused on a somewhat consistent objective, reviews of peacekeeping operations mandated from 2019 onwards have asked much broader strategic questions.[70] Review mandates for SPMs have been narrower in focus compared with those of peacekeeping operations. This trend partially reflects SPMs' comparative political latitude to reconfigure and reprioritize their mandates.

And third, independent review mandates do not consistently cover strategic and operational issues. Some individuals who have participated in independent reviews have been cautious about focusing on resource allocation in particular. They felt that this issue was best left for consideration by internal UN processes such as technical assessment missions, particularly as the General Assembly holds the prerogative for determining peacekeeping finances.[71] Security Council requests for independent reviews to focus on these issues can create tensions. Following independent review processes where the General Assembly played a limited role, Secretariat officials have found it difficult to account for significant changes to a mission's budgetary processes to the Fifth Committee.[72]

Others highlighted the value of using independent reviews to solicit separate assessments of mission performance and functionality, noting that these issues are inseparable from how a mission makes its strategic decisions. By providing an external perspective on mission performance, independent reviews can offer an additional layer of accountability that reduces the impact of member-state decisions through the Fifth Committee and other bilateral channels.[73]

Independence, Credibility, and Selecting the Right Team Leader

Credibility is an integral part of any independent review, and the team leader is a personification of this credibility. Their background, expertise, experience, personality, political capital, and interpretation of the mandate influence every

68 These include the UN missions in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP), the Golan Heights (UNDOF), Lebanon (UNSCOL), and Kosovo (UNMIK), as well as the UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) in the Middle East and the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA).

69 See: Security Council Report, "Jammu and Kashmir Consultations," August 15, 2019.

70 The formal reviews in 2017 and 2018 were mandated to "assess the scope of the mandate, the conditions for successful mandate implementation, and operational ization, with a view to recommending adjustments to the Security Council." UN DPKO and UN DFS under-secretaries-general, "Review of Peacekeeping Operations."

71 IPI research workshop with independent team leaders, February 2021; IPI research workshop with UN officials, February 2021. For background, see: Wasim Mir, "Financing UN Peacekeeping: Avoiding Another Crisis," International Peace Institute, April 2019.

72 This dynamic was particularly notable following the reviews of UNAMA and UNAMI in 2017, when different timelines for Security Council decisions, the independent reviews' finalization, and the General Assembly's cycle for its regular budget forced the Secretariat to prepare multiple budgets within a twelve-month period for each mission, significantly increasing the administrative burden on mission and headquarters staff. Feedback from external reviewer, October 2021.

73 Interview 33, member-state diplomats, May 2021.

aspect of the review. Choosing the right team leader is therefore one of the most important decision points of the entire process. Team leaders are usually required to wear multiple hats for the duration of their term: at times they need to be a diplomat, a politician, a subject-matter expert, or a project manager. They also need to be both sufficiently distanced from the UN system and skilled at operating in the UN context. The selection process is both an art and a science, especially since individuals who may be ideal candidates for one independent review may be ill-suited for another.

Considerations in Selecting a Team Leader

Independent team leaders are selected through informal negotiations among senior UN leaders based on three loosely defined criteria: they should not currently be employed by the UN system, they should have strong knowledge of UN peace operations, and they should have sufficient credibility to engage stakeholders across the political spectrum. Although the informal nature of the selection process contrasts sharply with the increasingly formalized recruitment mechanisms used for senior mission leaders, some argue that this opacity insulates team leaders from the intense member-state lobbying that traditionally accompanies the appointment of SRSGs.[74]

> Credibility is an integral part of any independent review, and the team leader is a personification of this credibility.

Experience overseeing UN peace operations (whether in the field or at headquarters) is a near-requirement for leading an independent review: eighteen of the nineteen individuals who have led independent reviews previously held a senior leadership post in the UN's peace and security pillar.[75] Knowledge of the UN system is considered imperative so that the findings and recommendations put forward are feasible within the multilateral context. Selecting an individual without a deep familiarity with UN peace operations could lead to recommendations that are divorced from the UN's strategic, operational, and bureaucratic realities.[76] Team leaders are thus considered "outside-insiders" rather than individuals who are truly external to the organization.[77]

Some preference is given to individuals whose expertise aligns with the specific mission context. For example, an individual with a military background or security sector expertise may be better placed to lead the review of a mission with an observer-oriented mandate; the appointments of General Martin Agwai to lead the review of the UN mission in Abyei (UNISFA) and then-Lieutenant General Paolo Serra to lead the review of the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) are indicative of this trend. Stephen Cutts's selection to lead the review of the UN Support Office in Somalia (UNSOS) followed a similar line of thinking given his experience in mission support and strategic planning.

Mission- or context-specific expertise is frequently debated when considering potential team leaders. Deep knowledge of a country's politics or preexisting relationships with stakeholders in the region can open doors for the review team that may otherwise be unavailable. For example, Said Djinnit's experience at the African Union (AU) and Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah's strong relationships across Central Africa helped unlock a larger network of interlocutors and, in some cases, encouraged more forthright interviews.[78] One UN official suggested, "[You] can't really understand what's needed strategically without nuanced understanding of the conditions on the ground, of

74 Office of the UN Secretary-General, "Senior Leadership Vacancies," available at www.un.org/sg/en/vacancies/index.shtml ; Colum Lynch and Robbie Gramer, "Big-Power Rivalries Hamstring Top U.N. Missions," *Foreign Policy*, July 22, 2020; Jeffrey Feltman, "Restoring (Some) Impartiality to UN Senior Appointments," Brookings Institution, October 29, 2020.

75 This entails experience at the level of assistant secretary-general or higher. The one exception was Phillip Rawkins, co-lead of the independent review of UNAMI, who held evaluation-focused postings in the UN's development pillar.

76 Interview 2, former UN official, January 2021; Interview 5, current UN officials, January 2021; Interview 6, independent team leader, January 2021; Interview 17, outside expert, March 2021; Interview 22, current UN official, March 2021; Interview 31, current UN officials, May 2021; Interview 38, current UN official, May 2021.

77 Interview 19, outside expert, March 2021.

78 Interview 4, current UN officials, March 2021; Interview 12, independent review leader, February 2021; Interview 14, current UN officials, February 2021; Interview 21, current UN official, March 2021.

the players, and what's worked in the past."[79] Others felt that team leaders should be somewhat distanced from the specific mission or country to minimize implicit bias and bring in fresh eyes.[80]

The team leader's working relationship with the Secretariat can impact both their selection and the way they conduct the review. Candidates without constructive relationships within the Secretariat may not make it onto the shortlist that emerges from long informal negotiations within DPPA or DPO, and between the home department and the EOSG. Mutual respect between the Secretariat and team leader is also perceived as valuable for "keeping [the department] on board" with the review's findings and recommendations.[81]

Informal relationships between team leaders and the UN also affect how they approach the review. Retired officials who have spent years away from the Secretariat and are not interested in future employment may feel more at liberty to speak freely. But these same officials may not be deeply familiar with contemporary dynamics and may struggle to offer an analysis as nuanced as an internal UN report.[82] Moreover, individuals who have spent most of their career within the UN system are likely to be implicitly biased in favor of the organization. And if they wish to maintain close working relationships with the UN in the future—whether through formal appointments or consultancies—they may choose to couch their analysis and findings in ways that "do not rock the boat," opening the possibility of implicit self-censorship.[83]

The team leader's worldview is another intangible factor. Team leaders can be expected to remain impartial but should not be perceived as neutral. Their expertise and interests will naturally factor into how they approach the review and should be considered from the outset. For example, Youssef Mahmoud has published extensively on the sustaining peace paradigm, an analytical framework that is at the core of his independent review of MONUSCO.[84] El-Ghassim Wane's extensive professional history at the AU similarly fed into his review of the UN mission in South Sudan, which strongly encouraged closer cooperation between the AU, UNMISS, and the wider UN system.[85]

Specifically, how team leaders interpret independence within the context of their review mandate is an underrated variable. Publishing a report and recommendations that are free from the influence of the Secretariat, the mission, or member states is the lowest common denominator of this independence. But on a practical level, independence means different things to different people. Some team leaders interpret it as a mandate to provide frank analysis and unvarnished recommendations, irrespective of the consequences. "Pushing the envelope" is one of the most valuable functions of an independent review, according to some former team leaders.[86] However, this also opens the door for critiques that a review may be out of line with what is politically feasible or desirable, minimizing the likelihood that member states or the UN will implement the report's recommendations.

Other team leaders interpret their role as to carefully balance independent, critical analysis with constructive engagement, particularly considering the highly politicized ecosystems in which these reviews unfold. They use their reviews and extensive consultations to weave together different strands of political or policy debate while framing their recommendations in ways that do not radically upend or contradict existing UN

79 Interview 26, current UN official, April 2021.

80 Interview 16, former UN official, February 2021; Interview 18, outside expert, February 2021.

81 Interview 2, former UN official, January 2021.

82 Interview 26, current UN official, April 2021.

83 Interview 10, member-state diplomat, January 2021.

84 Youssef Mahmoud is a senior adviser at the International Peace Institute and was affiliated with the organization for the duration of his time conducting the independent review of MONUSCO. Interview 38, outside expert, May 2021; Interview 18, outside expert, February 2021. See also: Youssef Mahmoud and Anupah Makoond, "Sustaining Peace: What Does It Mean in Practice?" International Peace Institute, April 2017; UN Security Council, *Transition from Stabilization to Peace: An Independent Strategic Review of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, UN Doc. S/2019/842, October 25, 2019; and Youssef Mahmoud, "Whatever the Future Holds for Peace Operations, Peacebuilding Must Be More Local and Plural," *IPI Global Observatory*, September 25, 2020.

85 UN Security Council, *Report on the Independent Strategic Review of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2514 (2020)*, UN Doc. S/2020/1224, December 15, 2020; Interview 13, independent team leader, February 2021; Interview 42, current UN official, June 2021.

86 Interview 16, outside expert, February 2021; IPI research workshop with independent team leaders, February 2021.

approaches and interests. As one independent team leader affirmed, "[The Secretariat] knew I would be partial to their interests, even implicitly."[87]

Finding Diversity in a Small Pool of Candidates

These formal and informal considerations narrow the list of potential candidates to a relatively small, homogenous pool of former UN officials.[88] As a result, some individuals (such as Bathily, Wane, and Santos Cruz) have led multiple independent reviews over the past few years. Considering that many of these individuals have well-established histories with the Secretariat, one former team leader surmised that the UN is "resorting to the usual suspects."[89]

> Women have led only two of the nineteen independent reviews.

Gender equality has not been a major consideration for selecting independent team leaders, as women have led only two of the nineteen independent reviews.[90] This rate is below even the UN's poor historical record of gender diversity in senior leadership appointments (women have been selected for approximately 20 percent of senior leadership appointments in DPPA/DPA and DPO/DPKO between 1995 and 2020), although the current secretary-general has achieved gender parity in new appointments.[91] To some extent, this imbalance is the product of the Secretariat's self-imposed informal criteria for choosing team leaders and of the historically disproportionate gender imbalance of senior UN leadership. The gender of an independent team leader should not correlate with whether the report features systematic, high-quality gender analysis. Nonetheless, the disproportionate appointment of male former officials to lead these reviews runs contrary to both the spirit and the letter of the secretary-general's gender-parity strategy for senior leadership appointments.[92]

Multiple interlocutors shared concerns that independent team leaders have also disproportionately come from either the countries in the UN's Western European and Others Group (WEOG) or from member states sitting on the Security Council.[93] Nine of the nineteen independent review team leaders have been nationals of WEOG countries, and six of the nineteen have been nationals of countries that had seats on the Security Council at the time of review—a geographic imbalance that is also seen in senior leadership appointments across the UN.[94] An individual's nationality can be used as a political argument to attack the review's credibility, such as when some perceived the appointment of the American Tony Banbury as a way for the US to exert influence over the review of UNAMI.[95]

Independent Leaders, Hybrid Teams

Independent reviews are hybrid exercises: while the team leader comes from outside the organization, the review team itself comprises officials seconded from various UN departments and agencies.[96] Review team members are mandated to support the independent team leader in all aspects of the process. Because independent team leaders are often former diplomats, politicians, or military officers who do not usually have strong research skills, team members play an outsize role in

87 Interview 15, independent review leader, February 2021.

88 Interview 4, current UN officials, January 2021.

89 Interview 16, independent review leader, February 2021.

90 Diane Corner (MINURSO) and Ellen Løj (MINUSMA).

91 Center on International Cooperation, "UN Senior Leadership Appointments Dashboard," available at www.cic.nyu.edu/UN-Senior-Appointments-Dashboard ; Thalif Deen, "UN Reaches 90:90 Gender Parity in Senior Leadership Transforming Organizational Culture," Inter Press Service, March 11, 2020.

92 Deen, "Gender Parity in Senior Leadership."

93 Interview 28, member-state diplomat, April 2021; Interview 31, current UN officials, May 2021; Interview 32, member-state diplomat, May 2021.

94 Between 1995 and 2021, approximately 46 percent of all senior leadership appointments within UN DPPA and UN DPO (then the Department of Political Affairs and DPKO, respectively) were from the Western European and Others Group (WEOG); the second highest percentage was 24 percent from the African Group. Center on International Cooperation, "UN Senior Leadership Appointments Dashboard."

95 Interview 33, member-state diplomats, May 2021.

96 The 2020 independent assessment of security assistance to Somalia was an exception as it used a unique team model: the team leader and the team's two substantive experts were all external to the UN. This three-person team was supported by a UN desk officer who provided logistical support and administrative backstopping. The UN undertook this approach because the assessment team had a mandate that was broader than focusing solely on a UN peace operation.

shaping the quality of the final product. The team leader's ability to foster a common purpose among diverse colleagues while managing a complex research project also influences the overall review process.

Selecting Review Team Members

Putting together an effective, diverse, and well-rounded review team is typically an overlooked aspect of the review process. No formal rules guide the establishment of review teams.[97] Each review's terms of reference propose relevant UN departments and agencies, funds, and programs that should be invited to participate, determined according to a mission's substantive priorities and the review's formal mandate. Individual team members are identified and nominated by their respective departments in coordination with the mission's home department.

Review teams have varied significantly in size and diversity of substantive expertise. The smallest review team included three people, while the largest included fifteen; the average has been between seven and eight UN officials in total. Many reviews include representatives from departments across the UN Secretariat and from relevant agencies, funds, and programs, frequently mirroring the multidimensional models used for strategic reviews and assessments. Some reviews with comparatively narrow mandates only include representatives from the UN's peace and security pillar. Review teams are predominantly headquarters-based, a significant challenge that exacerbates the perceived distance between the review team and the mission.

Team leaders and DPPA/DPO leadership balance a range of informal criteria when putting together a team. Multidisciplinary teams are valued because they bring together diverse perspectives, including from individuals who do not regularly follow the country or the mission's activities. Diversity in substantive expertise, language skills, gender, and professional seniority all matter when looking at the team. Team leaders previously accepted the participants put forward to them without question; however, team leaders of more recent reviews have negotiated with the relevant UN front offices to improve their team's gender balance or diversify the language skills represented.[98]

Building Cohesion and Setting Expectations

Setting a common purpose, shared expectations, and a clear division of labor internally are some of the independent team leader's most important responsibilities. Few team leaders have previous working relationships with the UN officials deployed to support their work, and often team members themselves have not worked together. The importance of learning to collaborate in the context of a complex and time-sensitive process cannot be taken for granted.

Continued emphasis on the review's independent mandate is imperative for team cohesion. Some team leaders hold multiple consultations with senior UN department heads to assert the team's independence and minimize the potential for, or impact of, external political pressures.[99] These efforts also need to be done internally with the team: stressing that the final report is owned by the team leader, not by the team or the UN more broadly, helps foster open debate and minimize the possibility of groupthink. This approach also builds space for team members to openly share disagreements and distance themselves from the interests of their home departments. Review team leaders consistently complimented the professionalism of most of their colleagues on the review team.[100]

Team leaders use different strategies to undertake their work, particularly when preparing the final report. Some prioritize inclusivity, with all the team members participating in daily briefings to help foster a common narrative, while others empower team members as substantive experts to prepare strands of analysis and draft text for the team leader's consideration. A few consolidate all information in the hands of a small number of people (most notably the integrated operational

97 The eight peacekeeping reviews in the second phase did have some limitations on participants in their respective review teams. Written feedback from UN DPO, October 2021.

98 Interview 3, independent review leader, January 2021; Interview 20, current UN official, March 2021.

99 Interview 3, independent team leader, January 2021; Interview 13, independent review leader, February 2021.

100 IPI research workshop with independent team leaders, February 2021.

team representative or the penholder). Each of these approaches has benefits and drawbacks, and their effectiveness often depends on individual personalities and lines of communication. Breakdowns most frequently occur when unclear or inconsistent expectations led team members to believe they would have more influence over the final report.[101]

While the team leader's independence is universally understood, each team member's own independence is more ambiguous. UN officials are not provided with a formal code of conduct, guidance document, or appointment letter when seconded to an independent review team. Most understand their mandate as to provide professional expertise in service of the team leader's vision and mandate, but expectations are not clearly defined.[102] Because team members are nominated and financially backed by their home department, there is an implicit expectation that they should consider the department's perspective, if not formally represent its position.[103] One UN official cynically recounted the implicit dynamic at play: "If I'm paying, you report to me."[104]

While the team leader's independence is universally understood, each team member's own independence is more ambiguous.

This tension is exacerbated by the growing prominence of senior UN officials on independent review teams.[105] Senior officials are not only considered subject-matter experts but are also more adept at navigating the ins and outs of UN bureaucracy. Moreover, they are in principle expected to be better equipped to resist undue political pressure.[106] However, relying on a handful of senior UN officials (who also have their own individual and professional interests) to undertake multiple reviews contributes to more homogenous outcomes. Two current UN officials observed that relying on senior-level colleagues wastes useful opportunities to help younger colleagues develop their skills and to encourage thinking that challenges the status quo.[107]

Officials seconded from the integrated operational teams of peacekeeping operations or the regional desks that backstop SPMs bear these pressures disproportionately. Officials who follow these missions daily can be valuable members of review teams for both their substantive expertise and for their extensive contacts within the mission. Some independent review teams task these representatives to serve as substantive experts, facilitate the logistics for in-country consultations, and hold the pen for drafting the final report.[108]

These multiple roles are not only extremely time-consuming, but they also place these officials in compromising situations. Backstopping officers traditionally draft the secretary-general's reports; asking them to also draft review reports forces them to single-handedly navigate the interests of the review team, departments at UN headquarters, and the mission.[109] Given the frequent communication between the review team and the regional desk responsible for the mission, some of these officials have felt compelled to share the review team's evolving thinking, impacting their degree of independence.[110] Appointing backstopping officials can also negatively impact the headquarters backstopping teams, which lose one of their colleagues for an indefinite period of time, a particular problem for teams backstopping SPMs, which have fewer resources than their counterparts supporting peacekeeping operations.

101 Interview 5, current UN officials, January 2021.

102 IPI research workshop with independent team leaders, February 2021.

103 IPI research workshop with UN officials, February 2021; Interview 13, independent review leader, February 2021; Interview 36, current UN official, May 2021.

104 Interview 22, current UN official, March 2021.

105 In this context, senior-level officials include those with a P5, D1, or D2 job classification and with more than ten years of experience working within the UN system. See: UN Careers, "Staff Categories," available at https://careers.un.org/lbw/home.aspx?viewtype=SC ; and UN General Assembly, *Composition of the Secretariat: Staff Demographics—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. A/75/591, November 9, 2020, p. 67.

106 Interview 9, current UN official, January 2021; Interview 14, current UN officials, February 2021; Interview 39, current UN official, May 2021.

107 Interview 21, current UN official, March 2021; Interview 27, current UN official, April 2021.

108 Interview 39, current UN official, May 2021.

109 IPI research workshop with UN officials, February 2021.

110 Interview 20, current UN official, March 2021; Interview 42, current UN official, June 2021.

Some team leaders also have sought out external expertise for their teams. For example, Anthony Banbury and the UNAMI review team received pro bono support from Boston Consulting Group in conducting a data-centric analysis of the mission's performance, resource allocation, and staffing structure. This support served as a precursor to the data-forward approach emphasized in subsequent independent reviews.[111] Recent review teams, including those for MONUSCO and UNMISS, have similarly recruited external consultants to act as report penholders. Having someone from outside the organization work closely with the team leader and prepare the final report adds an extra layer of independence to the process by allowing UN team members to be one step removed from its content.

Box 3. How administrative details impact independent review methodologies

Internal timelines, funding sources, and consultancy regulations are not always at the forefront of discussions when the UN Secretariat receives a request for an independent review from the secretary-general or the Security Council. But these administrative details often influence the contours of a review team's methodology, and, by extension, the quality of its final report.

Operational delays and abbreviated deadlines, often because of slow Secretariat processes or overzealous council requests, are the most common administrative constraints. Beyond the time required to undertake the review itself, review teams also need time built in for comments from the home departments, presentations, official editing, and translation.

Sometimes internal processes and external forces delay a process from beginning. For example, five months elapsed between the council's adoption of Resolution 2514 (2020) and the formal start of El-Ghassim Wane's independent review of UNMISS. This was partially because of a multi-month process to finalize the review's terms of reference and Wane's nomination but also because of failed efforts to plan the review team's visit to South Sudan during the pandemic. The team therefore had just under three months to complete its review.[112] This problem is amplified when the council imposes a short time frame to complete a review: the review of UNAMI was given only three months, while the reviews of MONUSCO and international security support to Somalia were given just over six months each.

High costs and unpredictable funding streams for independent reviews also impact the teams' methodological freedom. DPO's assessment of the eight independent reviews of peacekeeping operations calculated that those exercises were on average "approximately $100,000 more expensive than internal reviews."[113] The mission's home department (DPO or DPPA) is expected to cover the consultancy costs for the team leader and their travel in the host country. They have often done so through extrabudgetary project funding (i.e., earmarked, voluntary, or pooled funding provided by member states) or from the mission's own budget if the review is requested by the Security Council. Team members' home departments are expected to cover the costs of their time and travel as part of the independent review. Available funds impact where a review team can visit (and for how long) and whether they can afford external consultants with specialized skills.

Relying on former officials to lead independent reviews also requires the UN to navigate consultancy regulations. Individuals who draw a pension from the organization can only be employed as consultants for a certain number of days each year; these administrative rules impacted the amount of time Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah could spend on the review of UNOCA, forcing the team to condense its work.[114]

111 Interview 5, current UN officials, January 2021; Interview 6, independent team leader, January 2021; Interview 27, current UN official, April 2021.

112 Interview 35, current UN officials, May 2021.

113 UN DPO, "Independent Strategic Reviews of Peacekeeping Operations: Synthesis Lessons Learned Report" (on file with author), November 2019.

114 Former UN officials who receive benefits from a UN pension fund face additional constraints in their ability to work as a consultant. UN Secretariat, *Administrative Instruction*, UN Doc. ST/AI/2013/4, December 19, 2013, pp. 3–4; Interview 14, current UN officials, February 2021.

Review Methodologies: Balancing Flexibility with Rigor

Independent reviews occupy a unique space within the UN policy sphere as a prominent but loosely defined tool. Certain features of the process are widely known, such as the selection of an external team leader and the incorporation of stress testing by red teams. But the structure and methodology of independent reviews are not spelled out in any formal policy, nor has the UN developed specific frameworks and requirements to guide them. The reviews do, however, follow a broadly similar process and have basic elements in common.

The resulting flexibility presents both advantages and limitations. On the one hand, affording team leaders free rein to shape the process to the specific mandate and context gives independent reviews a comparative advantage over more regimented exercises. On the other hand, this flexibility has produced wide discrepancies in the reviews' methodologies and analytical rigor. Striking a balance between standardization and adaptability is critical for sustaining the practice.

> While the flexibility of independent reviews affords team leaders free rein to shape the process, it has also produced wide discrepancies in the reviews' methodologies and analytical rigor.

Lack of Methodological Guidance or an Institutional Home

Independent reviews do not have an institutional home within the UN Secretariat, which limits policy oversight and harmonization. This lack of an institutional repository is partially by design—housing independent reviews within a formal structure could give the perception that the department or office housing that structure had disproportionate influence over the process.

But different UN entities do play a role along the way. The EOSG's Strategic Planning and Monitoring Unit has assumed a light coordination role for certain parts of the process, particularly in communicating with the team leader and convening the red-team exercises.[115] The temporary structures set up to support the 2017–2018 reviews were disbanded in 2018, motivated by the Secretariat's increased familiarity with the practice and the difficulty justifying full-time secondments following the conclusion of the reviews.[116] DPO's Division of Policy, Evaluation and Training (DPET) conducts after-action reviews for missions under its purview, a legacy of the department's support to the formal phase of reviews.[117] DPPA officials have participated in some independent reviews, but its Policy and Mediation Division has not developed any internal guidance, partially a reflection of the more ad hoc nature of independent reviews for SPMs.

Limited policy guidance and the lack of a dedicated repository of institutional memory exacerbate this absence of an institutional home.[118] The EOSG, DPKO, and DFS developed some preliminary material for the 2017–2018 reviews (most concretely the DPKO/DFS note submitted to the secretary-general), but this is not a formal policy document and has not been consistently used or regularly updated. DPET also prepared a closed-circulation lessons-learned summary in 2019 that compiled reflections from its after-action reviews.

But independent team leaders do not have formal access to the terms of reference, lines of inquiry, methodologies, or final reports of previous independent reviews. This lack of institutional guidance has left many independent review teams feeling like they were drawing on a blank canvas.[119] One UN official who participated in a recent review commented, "In terms of the process itself, we had quite a lot of freedom to the point where we felt like

115 The Strategic Planning and Monitoring Unit is mandated to support the EOSG through strategic analysis, priority setting, forward planning, risk management, innovation, and strategic alignment of plans and resources. UN, "ToR for the New/Revised EOSG Posts and Units" (on file with author), January 2017.

116 Interview 4, current UN officials, January 2021.

117 DPET officials also participated in some of the independent review exercises.

118 This limited guidance contrasts with the widely available policies and procedures defining UN-led strategic assessments and strategic reviews.

119 UN DPO, "Synthesis Lessons Learned Report."

we were reinventing the wheel."[120] As a result, there have been significant disparities in the quality and rigor of each review's analysis.[121]

Even without detailed policy guidance, independent reviews follow a somewhat standard progression. Each step of this progression reflects the ways that independent reviews straddle flexibility and rigor.

Terms of Reference and Lines of Inquiry

Terms of reference are the reviews' methodological departure point. They are drafted by the mission's home department and outline the review's context, mandate, and research steps (such as the desk review, interviews, field trips, data analysis, and the red-team exercise). They also name the independent team leader who has been nominated and identify possible UN departments to join the review team. Although frequently considered a pro forma document, terms of reference can help translate a broad and generic mandate into a set of discrete objectives. It can take the Secretariat months to finalize these terms because of drawn-out negotiations over the selection of the independent team leader.

Review methodologies are informal research roadmaps comprising lines of inquiry and conflict analyses. These tools help situate the review in the context of recent country developments, identify policy areas for critical examination, and prioritize field visits. Lines of inquiry documents are intended to help the review team translate a short, often broad Security Council or Executive Committee mandate into a tangible list of research questions. They also prepare the groundwork for a rigorous study by prioritizing objectives and setting an analytical framework to evaluate quantitative and qualitative evidence.[122] Lines of inquiry documents are drafted by the review team and shared with the EOSG for feedback.

Some review teams approach the lines of inquiry process diligently, devoting nearly 10 percent of the exercise to this process alone.[123] Others deprioritize the lines of inquiry process amid other time-sensitive priorities, completing them once they have already begun the desk review and interviews. Sometimes the team leader takes a hands-on approach to shape the review in a way that reflects their own understanding of their mandate; other times the team leader is comparatively hands-off, enabling their team to drive the design process.

Red Teams

Red-team exercises are among the most noteworthy innovations of the independent review process.[124] The red team's objectives are to stress test the review's assumptions, findings, and recommendations—not to fundamentally upend the report or impose its own views.[125] The EOSG has developed a detailed framework to help red-team members analyze the review at two key moments: once the lines of inquiry are drafted and once the review team has produced draft findings and recommendations.[126] Red teams are composed of UN and non-UN individuals with diverse skill sets, including country-specific knowledge, strategic-planning skills, experience with UN peace operations, military expertise, and substantive areas of specialization. Individuals are identified by the EOSG based on the specific issues identified in the review's terms of reference, and they are asked to participate on a voluntary basis.

Red-team sessions have offered useful external spaces for team leaders to receive constructive feedback, but their full potential is often untapped.[127] Some participants felt that more

120 Interview 42, current UN official, June 2021.

121 Interview 4, current UN officials, January 2021.

122 Interview 6, independent team leader, January 2021; Interview 35, current UN officials, May 2021.

123 Some stakeholders also highlighted the trade-offs of preparing extensive lists of focuses and research questions, pointing to the impracticality of covering all issues. Interview 5, current UN officials, January 2021; Interview 13, independent team leader, February 2021; Interview 18, current UN official, March 2021.

124 Karin Landgren, "Nailing Down the Primacy of Politics in UN Peacekeeping: An Insider Perspective," *IPI Global Observatory*, August 16, 2018; Marc Jacquand, "UN Reform and Mission Planning: Too Great Expectations?" International Peace Institute, November 2020, p. 15; Calin Trenkov-Wermuth, "The UN Needs a 'Red Team,'" *Foreign Affairs*, July 3, 2017.

125 Jacquand, "Too Great Expectations?" p. 15.

126 These include subjecting findings and recommendations to stress tests based on strategic clarity, quality of evidence, scenario dependency, resource requirements, stakeholder analysis, and alignment with UN principles. See: Executive Office of the Secretary-General, "Red-Teaming Exercises ToR."

127 IPI research workshop with independent team leaders, February 2021.

systematic support from red-team members would be useful, whether through more frequent sessions or through informal dialogue with team members. Given the compressed time frames, some review teams had to simultaneously solicit written feedback on the lines of analysis while also conducting their in-country visit.[128] Because they are not compensated for their time, red-team members also invest different levels of time and energy into their preparations. Determining the right combination of skill sets on a red team has proved an inexact science: some independent review teams felt that they needed more country-specific experts (particularly host-country nationals), while others wanted more feedback on how their ideas would make their way through the bureaucratic labyrinth that supports UN peace operations.[129]

Among the most noteworthy innovations of the independent review process are red-team exercises and the emphasis on data analytics.

Data Analytics

Another noteworthy innovation is the emphasis on data-analytics capabilities as an integral part of the independent review process. Reviews are encouraged to use rigorous, high-quality, quantifiable evidence to ground their analysis and policy options. Strengthened data analytics not only reflects the UN peace and security pillar's shift toward improving the quality of its work but is also a precursor to the secretary-general's system-wide push to make data a "strategic asset" for improving mandate delivery.[130]

Data specialists during the 2017–2018 phase of reviews helped the teams systematically integrate quantitative analysis into their reviews. This included assessments of the mission's performance on mandated priorities (e.g., results indicators and programmatic spending); operations (e.g., the mission's footprint, the performance of uniformed contingents, contingent-owned equipment); and finances and resources (e.g., budgets and spending allocations, staffing tables, logistical conditions).[131] These analyses also integrate proprietary UN information with open-source data about the country and the region to better contextualize the mission's operations. Since 2019, review teams have had access to data and analytical products from the mission and other parts of the UN system, but they do not have the dedicated data-analytics capabilities that were available to the formal reviews in 2017 and 2018.

Some review teams have effectively used data to link their assessment of a mission's mandated responsibilities with deployment patterns and resource allocation:

- The independent review of the UN mission in Western Sahara (MINURSO) incorporated data on minefield locations, deployment routes, and fuel costs to substantiate proposed adjustments to the mission's deployment patterns.[132]
- The independent review of MINUSMA overlayed the capabilities of different troop contingents on top of reported security incidents. This analysis, which was part of the evidence for the three options it proposed for the mission's reconfigured footprint, highlighted that troop contingents with fewer protective or medical capabilities tended to be deployed in the most dangerous roles and locations.
- The 2017 independent review of UNMISS and the 2018 review of MINUSMA used military patrol data, including average distance and frequency, to assess and inform these missions' reinvigorated protection of civilians strategies.[133]
- Geospatial analysis conducted during the

128 Interview 18, outside expert, February 2021; Interview 19, outside expert, March 2021; Interview 20, UN official, March 2021; Interview 23, outside expert, March 2021; Interview 35, current UN officials, May 2021.

129 IPI research workshop with independent team leaders, February 2021; Interview 11, independent team leader, January 2021; Interview 18, outside expert, February 2021; Interview 23, outside expert, March 2021; Interview 37, former UN official, May 2021; Interview 42, current UN official, June 2021.

130 UN, "Data Strategy of the Secretary-General for Action by Everyone, Everywhere," May 2020, pp. 2–3, 73.

131 UN DFS, "PK Review Analytics: Analytics Support Team Overview" (on file with author), October 2017; Interview 27, current UN official, April 2021; Interview 41, current UN official, June 2021.

132 IPI research workshop with independent team leaders, February 2021; UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary General on the Situation Concerning Western Sahara*, UN Doc. S/2018/889, October 3, 2018, para. 74.

133 Jacquand, "Too Great Expectations?" p. 13.

> independent review of UNDOF provided a quantifiable and comparable assessment of the mission's various positions, including the visibility of the area of separation and cease-fire line. This analysis fed into recommendations about which positions the mission should prioritize during its reconfiguration.[134]

While more systematic quantitative insights and evidence-based assessments are valuable, the systematic incorporation of data analytics into independent reviews has not been a seamless exercise. Team leaders' requests for specific data can help generate new insights, but they are not always comfortable engaging with the analysis.[135] Independent team leaders have varying levels of interest in and knowledge of data analytics. But even if they are not fluent in data processes, team leaders can set internal expectations about the extent to which their research methodologies will prioritize data analytics.[136]

Expertise within the team itself also impacts the prominence of data analytics in each independent review. The formal reviews in 2017 and 2018 benefitted from the support of the stand-alone Joint Analytics Team; the review of UNSOS even included a dedicated data analyst who coordinated the team's approach and effectively liaised with different parts of the UN system.[137] But following the disbanding of the Joint Analytics Team, recent reviews have been forced to draw upon a diffuse, informal system of data focal points in the EOSG, the DPPA-DPO Information Management Unit, and relevant sections in the missions themselves. This decentralized approach has often left review team members without practical guidance on how to use data analytics or the necessary skills to take advantage of the data available to them.[138]

Another challenge has been quantifiably measuring UN peace operations' political and substantive performance. Historically, both peacekeeping operations and SPMs have not invested significantly in generating consistent quantitative information on their substantive activities. The quality of data on core mission activities is also not completely standardized within or between peacekeeping operations, which are increasingly tasked with generating and overseeing their own data. Most review teams' limited capacity to manage these challenges, including through effective coordination between the mission and headquarters, impacts how effectively they can incorporate data into their analyses.[139] Moreover, a recent study of mission planning processes alluded to cultural resistance within the organization to systematically integrating data.[140]

Despite these challenges, DPO's establishment of CPAS, the establishment of an Integrated Peacekeeping Performance and Accountability Framework (IPPAF), and the work of DPPA's innovation cell demonstrate a growing focus on quantifying mission performance and offer avenues for progress in the coming years.[141] Independent reviews will also benefit as data analytics become more integrated across the UN's peace and security pillar, especially as the UN accelerates implementation of the secretary-general's Data Strategy and the Strategy for the Digital Transformation of UN Peacekeeping.[142] These efforts will especially help the organization more systematically quantify and assess its progress on political aspects of these missions' work.

134 UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on United Nations Disengagement Observer Force*, UN Doc. S/2018/1088, December 6, 2018, para. 25; Interview 41, current UN official, June 2021.

135 Interview 36, current UN official, May 2021.

136 IPI research workshop with UN officials, February 2021; Interview 2, former UN official, January 2021; Interview 20, current UN official, March 2021.

137 Interview 21, current UN official, March 2021; Interview 27, current UN official, April 2021.

138 The Joint Analytics Team prepared a framework document in 2017 that identifies different uses for UN data analytics; however, this document has not been updated nor was it shared with recent review teams. Interview 13, independent team leader, January 2021; Interview 20, current UN official, March 2021; Interview 42, current UN official, June 2021.

139 Interview 36, current UN official, May 2021; Interview 41, current UN official, June 2021.

140 Jacquand, "Too Great Expectations?" p. 13.

141 DPPA-led SPMs have not yet incorporated CPAS into their work, even though the department and DPO's CPAS team engage regularly. See: UN Peacekeeping, "CPAS"; and UN DPPA, "Futuring Peace," available at www.futuringpeace.org .

142 UN Peacekeeping, "Strategy for the Digital Transformation of UN Peacekeeping," available at https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/strategy-digital-transformation-of-un-peacekeeping ; UN, "Data Strategy of the Secretary-General for Action by Everyone, Everywhere."

Gender Analysis

Independent reviews present a unique opportunity not only to examine the women, peace, and security agenda as a thematic issue for missions but also to integrate gender analysis. Some of the initial reviews incorporated gender-disaggregated data into their analyses; others did not effectively mainstream gender analysis. In either case, the secretary-general's summaries to the Security Council often lack the nuance of any gender analysis that may have been conducted.[143] The final reports from the reviews of MONUSCO and UNMISS (2020), which are publicly available, are positive models, as they detail comprehensive gender analyses.[144]

One recent trend is the appointment of specific gender experts to the review teams from DPO, UN Women, or an external partner.[145] A few interlocutors described this approach as a double-edged sword: establishing a dedicated gender focal point and giving them a broad mandate not only strengthens the research methodology but also raises gender more systematically within the final report; at the same time, it can silo the gender dimensions within one individual's remit, which can unintentionally shape how gender issues are considered in the report. Nonetheless, prioritizing gender-sensitive analysis throughout the report is a laudable goal.

Navigating Competing Interests during Consultations

Independent review teams contend with a wide range of interests and perspectives when meeting with different stakeholders. How they prioritize these stakeholders and consider their inputs requires balancing the imperative to consult widely with the need to protect the process's independence. Effective, wide-reaching consultations can help elicit diverse perspectives, identify political red lines, build political support, and manage expectations. But these review exercises have at times struggled to build a common understanding among different constituencies about the process and its possible outcomes.

Consultations with Security Council Members

Most independent review teams seek out bilateral meetings with prominent member states—including Security Council members, troop-contributing countries, development partners, and diplomats from the region—during their review's preliminary stages. Consultations with council members have become even more relevant given the council's increasing tendency to directly mandate independent reviews. These consultations provide an opportunity for review teams to delve deeper into the political debates underlying the decision to request an independent review in the first place, which are often masked in the final resolution. For example, the team reviewing UNIOGBIS met with the Security Council's permanent members and African members to better understand their assessments of country and regional dynamics and to gauge their opinions on a potential mission drawdown.

The team reviewing MONUSCO initiated a noteworthy practice when it convened a single, closed-door session with experts from all Security Council members.[146] This session was conceived with the objective of developing a shared understanding of the review mandate among council members. It also provided a platform for the independent team leader to share his understanding of the review and sensitize council delegations to his approach. The independent team leader shared a meeting note with council members, the EOSG, and DPO shortly after the session to put their perspectives on the record and set a trajectory that would be politically costly for

143 For example, the summary of the 2018 review of UNMISS only discussed gender in the context of gender-based violence. UN Security Council, *Special Report of the Secretary-General on the Renewal of the Mandate of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan*, UN Doc. S/2018/143, February 20, 2018. The summary of the review of MINUSMA only discussed gender in the context of greater inclusivity in the political process. UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. S/2018/541, June 6, 2018; UN DPO, "Synthesis Lessons Learned Report."

144 The UNMISS final report described this component of its methodology: "All consultations included specific gender-focused questions. Where relevant and possible, the review team conducted gender-specific consultations in one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions to ensure that adequate gendered analyses, views and information were considered." UN Doc. S/2020/1224, para. 5.

145 See, for example: UN Docs. S/2019/842 and S/2020/1224, paras. 5.

146 IPI helped convene this research workshop.

council members to contest once the report was finalized, a particularly important move since the council requested this review. The team leader also rejected all meetings with member states between the start of report drafting and the formal submission of the report to the Security Council. This approach strengthened the review's credibility and allowed the team leader to insulate the review team's work from council pressures and protect its independence.

While consultations with member states are useful, this protection of the review from undue political influence is one of the independent team leader's central responsibilities. In principle, council members support independent inputs into their deliberations and value the independent reviews as complements to the regular reports of the secretary-general. But in practice, some council members (often permanent members) have attempted to exert political influence on the reviews to advance their own interests.[147] While confidential reports may be valuable for the secretary-general, they have also enabled council members to exert diplomatic pressure on the independent team leader or on the Secretariat.

> Review exercises have at times struggled to build a common understanding among different constituencies about the process and its possible outcomes.

Relationships with the Mission under Review

Relationships between independent review teams and the missions under review are delicate in the best of instances and can become a major hurdle in the worst. As missions do not have any formal role in the process or influence over its analysis and recommendations, independent reviews are often perceived to be headquarters-led initiatives. Although review teams comprise a cross section of headquarters-based entities, UN officials based in the country rarely participate as team members. Missions often assume a large logistical burden for the review team's in-country visits, facilitating most of their consultations and preparing supplementary briefings and documentation. These dynamics perpetuate disconnects that can reduce buy-in from the mission and ultimately limit the review's impact.

Some missions are skeptical of the review's utility compared with the litany of mandatory reports they already prepare, while others perceive them as budget-cutting exercises or as implicit signals of no confidence in their leadership. Others feel that the review teams arrive with predetermined findings and that the mission's own perspectives are tangential.[148] In a few instances, independent review teams have found themselves caught up in preexisting tensions between the mission and the Secretariat.[149] One mission's SRSG left the country the same day the review team arrived in the country, which was interpreted by many as a direct rebuke of the process.[150]

Review teams and missions depend on one another to produce an impactful study. Independent reviews have the credibility and freedom to convey political messages that the mission is unable to (or can only do in private settings). They also provide an opportunity to put a fresh set of eyes on the mission's day-to-day activities and validate its approaches through extensive research and critical analysis.[151] At the same time, these teams cannot undertake their reviews without the input of the individuals who are closest to the situation. Successful reviews need to establish a collaborative environment so that staff are forthcoming about their nuanced experiences inside of the mission and with host-country officials.[152] But fostering the mission's buy-in to the review is not the same as building a consensus report, as disagreements are inevitable given the varying perspectives and interests at play.

147 Interview 19, outside expert, March 2021; Interview 34, outside expert, May 2021.

148 Interview 1, member-state diplomat, January 2021.

149 Interview 4, current UN officials, January 2021; Interview 24, former UN official, March 2021.

150 Interview 4, current UN officials, January 2021; Interview 21, current UN official, March 2021; Interview 25, current UN official, March 2021.

151 Interview 13, independent team leader, January 2021.

152 Interview 3, independent team leader, January 2021.

The most effective reviews foster widespread consultation with senior leaders and various mission entities through formal and informal channels. Nearly all mission sections prepare formal presentations and submissions at mission headquarters, regional offices, and temporary bases. Some review teams heavily rely on these during their visits to maintain a clear firewall between themselves and the mission, protecting the review team's independence from the UN as well as the mission's independence from the review's findings. Other review teams update the SRSG on their deliberations through near-daily sessions, discussing potential proposals to understand convergences or divergences in interest.[153] Review teams also convene follow-up meetings with different sections of the mission to elaborate on specific points. The review of UNSMIL in 2021 shared an anonymous survey with UN staff in Libya and at headquarters to solicit more detailed feedback on the key priorities and challenges facing the mission.[154]

Some independent team leaders create informal channels for mission staff to reach out. This provides space both for individual mission staff to contact the review team outside of the formal, mission-led sessions and for individuals or small groups to have bilateral meetings with only the team leader. This approach reduces the possibility that individuals who share their perspectives freely could face professional retaliation after the review concludes.[155]

Informal collaboration between the independent review team and the mission also extends into the final stages of the review. Some review teams do not share drafts of their report with mission leaders for comment, leading to allegations that the reviews contain factual errors or suggest recommendations that were already being implemented by the mission or had been determined to be nonstarters.[156] Other review teams share confidential drafts with mission leaders in a consultative spirit, allowing them to maintain ownership of the document and use any feedback as suggestions, even if there are healthy disagreements over specific recommendations.

Consultations with National and Regional Stakeholders

Consultations with national and regional stakeholders are part and parcel of UN reviews and assessments; independent reviews are no different. Review teams frequently meet with diverse cross sections of senior government officials, political party leaders, members of civil society groups and community-based organizations, diplomats, and representatives of regional organizations in capitals or other regions of the country. But these consultations are not easy: review teams often find themselves combating the perception that they are exclusively focused on the UN's work or that they are headquarters-dominated exercises. Review teams also have limited time to participate in meetings.[157] To partially mitigate this constraint, some teams convene community town halls and thematic roundtables to solicit input from diverse groups in fewer sessions and to share the review's objectives.[158]

Despite their institutional independence, domestic political contexts have impacted the extent to which independent review teams fully engage national stakeholders. The independent review team for MINURSO held brief consultations with the Polisario Front but felt limited in the extent to which it could engage on the mission's work. The team reviewing MONUSCO could not secure formal inputs from the Congolese government despite multiple visits to the country (including one for this express purpose).[159] As a result, multiple interlocutors indicated that the transition-

153 IPI research workshop with independent team leaders, February 2021; Interview 9, current UN official, January 2021.

154 UN Security Council, *Letter Dated 6 August 2021 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council*, UN Doc. S/2021/716, August 9, 2021, Annex para. 6(e).

155 Interview 3, independent team leader, January 2021; Interview 13, independent team leader, February 2021; Interview 15, independent team leader, February 2021; Interview 21, current UN official, March 2021.

156 Interview 34, outside expert, May 2021; Interview 37, former UN official, May 2021; UN DPO, "Synthesis Lessons Learned Report."

157 See, for example: UN Doc. S/2019/842, para. 11.

158 UN DPO, "Synthesis Lessons Learned Report."

159 The independent review of MONUSCO was mandated in March 2019 and was requested to submit its report to the Security Council in October 2019. Even though President Félix Tshisekedi was inaugurated in January 2019, the Congolese government only formed in September 2019 due to extensive negotiations among Congolese political parties. As a result, the government could not offer its formal position on MONUSCO before the independent team leader had to submit the final report. See: UN Doc. S/2019/842, para. 83.

related scenarios presented in the report were not as timely or impactful as they could have been.[160]

Assessing the UN's strategy in a country is impossible absent a coherent analysis of neighboring countries and regional organizations. Most review teams explicitly use a regional lens in their analysis and meet with diplomats of neighboring countries in New York, the host country, or regional hubs. For example, the team reviewing MONUSCO visited capitals in the Southern Africa region to consult with regional stakeholders, and the team reviewing UNMISS in 2020 dedicated part of its analysis to cooperation on South Sudan between all UN entities, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and the AU.

Independent reviews of UN peace operations that are mandated to support regional partners can be particularly sensitive. These reviews must navigate broader—and often delicate—partnership dynamics that influence the politics and operations of the missions under review (see Box 4). To date, these reviews have exclusively focused on UN missions that are closely linked with the AU (i.e., UNSOS, UNOAU, and international security support to Somalia), but in the future it is plausible that the Security Council could request independent reviews that indirectly cover peace operations that are not expressly mandated by the UN (such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force or the Multinational Joint Task Force in the Lake Chad Basin).[161] In such cases, questions over political primacy, joint planning and activities, finances, and logistics often influence both the substance and the operations, much as they have for previous joint UN-AU reviews (see Annex for a list).

Transparency, Ownership, and the Final Report

Dissemination of the final report has an outsize influence on the review's transparency and, by extension, its independence, credibility, and impact. But when it comes to the final report's confidentiality, the interests of the Secretariat and member states diverge more than on any other area of the review, reflecting contention over the ownership of the report and its intended audience.

Independent reviews are infamous for the secrecy that surrounds many of their final reports.[162] Only three of the nineteen independent reviews—the reviews of MONUSCO, UNMISS (2020), and UNSMIL (2021)—are publicly available (see Table 3); a fourth, the review of international security assistance to Somalia, was submitted to the council in its entirety but has not been released to a wider audience. The executive summary and recommendations of the review of UNAMI were presented to the council, but the full report remained confidential.[163] None of the reviews initiated by the secretary-general are public, in part or in whole.

Debates over confidentiality reveal different stakeholders' competing ideas about the objectives of independent reviews. Some within the Secretariat consider independent reviews to be unvarnished advice for the secretary-general, who can accept or reject the findings and recommendations as he sees fit. Member states, on the other hand, consider independent reviews to be standalone inputs into their deliberations. The recent increase in independent reviews mandated by the Security Council, partially to assert its ownership of the final product, is a clear pushback against this confidentiality.

Confidential reports are controversial because of the Secretariat's past practice of filtering or sanitizing information with which it does not agree. Some of the Secretariat's summaries of the independent review reports featured in reports of the secretary-general have misrepresented review teams' findings and recommendations through omission. For example, the secretary-general's reports do not say that the UN disagreed with certain aspects of the report but instead suggest that the Secretariat's summary is the review team's

160 Interview 18, outside expert, February 2021; Interview 20, current UN official, March 2021; Interview 34, outside expert, May 2021; Interview 39, current UN official, June 2021.

161 This would be particularly relevant in the future if the Security Council authorizes the use of assessed UN funding to support non-UN security operations.

162 Jacquand, "Too Great Expectations?" p. 13.

163 The review of UNAMI was the first independent review requested by the Security Council. The decision was made to share the executive summary and recommendations despite the highly politicized nature of the review.

Box 4. UN-AU relations and competing independent reviews of Somalia/AMISOM

The Security Council's May 2020 request for an independent review of international security assistance to Somalia became a flashpoint in the broader relationship between the Security Council and the AU Peace and Security Council (AUPSC).[164] It was the first time the council had sought an independent review of a non-UN-led mission. Even though the review's formal mandate was broader than the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), questions about the international security assistance are inseparable from questions about the mission's future beyond 2021.[165]

Discussions about AMISOM's transition—and the UN's role in this transition process—have been endemic to broader questions about Somalia's political and security situation.[166] Debates over whether (or how) to reconfigure AMISOM also tie into financial, doctrinal, and political disagreements between UN and AU member states over the potential UN financing of AU-led peace operations.

Previous assessments of AMISOM had been done as joint exercises between the UN Secretariat and the AU Commission.[167] African member states at the UN pushed for the 2020 independent review to instead be either a joint assessment or a joint independent review.[168] Nonetheless, the UK (the Security Council penholder on Somalia) pushed for the proposed review to be an independent exercise mandated solely by the council, which was ultimately requested to consider the views of the Federal Government of Somalia, the AU, and other partners.

The two councils struggled to find common ground even once the independent assessment was formally mandated. The AU lobbied for an independent reviewer jointly appointed by both organizations and a team of two experts (one nominated and financed by each organization) and for the report to be presented to both the Security Council and the AUPSC. However, some UN member states' long-standing concerns about the political relationship between the two councils prevented this idea from moving forward.[169]

Nonetheless, the review team was intended to reflect the joint nature of the initiative: it was composed of three external experts, not a hybrid mix of an independent team leader and UN staff, reflecting that the review was not focused on a UN operation. Despite these efforts, the AUPSC and AU publicly rejected the review and prohibited AU Commission officials and AMISOM from providing the team with formal inputs.[170] The AUPSC appointed its own independent assessment team, whose recommendations differed from those of the independent review team mandated by the UN.[171] The review became a public sore point in subsequent engagement between the UN and AU.[172]

164 For more context of this relationship, see: Daniel Forti and Priyal Singh, "Toward a More Effective UN-AU Partnership on Conflict Prevention and Crisis Management," International Peace Institute, October 2019; UN DPO, "Synthesis Lessons Learned Report"; and International Crisis Group, "The Price of Peace: Securing UN Financing for AU Peace Operations," January 2020.

165 UN Doc. S/RES/2520, para. 38; Security Council Report, "African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) Reauthorisation," May 28, 2020; UN Security Council, *Report of the Ad Hoc Working Group on Conflict Prevention and Resolution in Africa for 2020*, UN Doc. S/2020/1292, December 29, 2020.

166 For background, see: Fiona Blyth, "Transitioning to National Forces in Somalia: More Than An Exit for AMISOM," International Peace Institute, April 2019.

167 See: UN Security Council, *Letter Dated 10 May 2019 from the Secretary-General Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, UN Doc. S/2019/388, May 13, 2019; and *Letter Dated 25 July 2017 from the Secretary-General Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, UN Doc. S/2017/653, July 31, 2017.

168 This was formally requested in the communiqué from the AU Peace and Security Council's 923rd meeting on May 7, 2020 (para. 15) and reiterated in the communiqué from its 949th meeting on November 27, 2020 (para. 10). In 2017, the secretary-general proposed options for UN authorization and funding of AU peace-support operations. See: International Crisis Group, "The Price of Peace."

169 Amani Africa, "Consideration of the Report on the Independent Assessment on the Future of AMISOM," July 30, 2021.

170 Interview 23, outside expert, March 2021.

171 Amani Africa, "Consideration of the Report of AMISOM."

172 Office of the UN Secretary-General, "Joint Communiqué: United Nations–African Union Joint Task Force on Peace and Security Holds its Nineteenth Consultative Meeting on 16 October 2020," Press Statement, October 20, 2020.

Table 3. Dissemination strategies for independent reviews

Dissemination	Count	Independent review initiated by secretary-general	Independent review initiated by Security Council
Full report public	**3**		MONUSCO, UNMISS (2020), UNSMIL (2021)
Full report submitted to Security Council (but not public)	**1**		Somalia/AMISOM
Part of report submitted to Security Council	**1**		UNAMI
Secretary-general's summary submitted as stand-alone document	**7**	UNMISS (2018), UNOWAS, UNOAU	UNAMA, UNFICYP, UNIOGBIS, UNOCA
Secretary-general's summary integrated into regular report	**7**	MINUSMA, UNISFA, MINURSO, MINUSCA, UNDOF, UNSOS	UNSMIL (2017)

summary. In the case of the reviews of UNSMIL, MINUSMA, and UNOAU, the public documents omitted analysis and recommendations from the report that either went against the UN's existing approaches or were deemed too politically sensitive.[173] It is precisely to avoid such omissions and protect his report's credibility that Youssef Mahmoud premised his participation in the review of MONUSCO on the understanding that his full report would be made public.

> Independent reviews are infamous for the secrecy that surrounds many of their final reports, but most arguments in favor of confidentiality fall apart under scrutiny.

The Secretariat has also been inconsistent in how it presents its summaries of independent reviews, exacerbating concerns about confidentiality and credibility. Some reviews have been discussed in a stand-alone report or letter to the Security Council. Others, however, have been integrated into regular reports to the council, sometimes in a dedicated section or with subheadings that call out the reviews' recommendations, and other times with no separate headings. This practice of integrating the findings and recommendations of independent reviews into routine reports of the secretary-general blurs their independence.

Most arguments in favor of confidentiality fall apart under scrutiny. Some UN officials argue that confidentiality is meant to insulate the independent review from member-state pressure.[174] But the tensions surrounding the independent review of MINUSMA showed how member states can shift this pressure from the review team onto the Secretariat, which is less prepared to withstand such pressure because of its dependence on

173 IPI research workshop with independent team leaders, February 2021; Interview 3, independent team leader, January 2021; Interview 11, independent team leader, January 2021; Interview 12, independent team leader, February 2021

174 Jacquand, "Too Great Expectations?" p. 13; Interview 4, current UN officials, January 2021; Interview 5, current UN officials, January 2021.

member-state funding and political support. While a summary prepared by the Secretariat enables the UN to influence the report's message, a public report allows parts of the UN system to openly dissent from specific findings or recommendations while still supporting its overall direction. In addition, confidentiality at the UN has been cynically characterized as "an illusion" considering that highly sensitive reports across the organization have been leaked to the broader UN membership and to the research community.[175] When confidential reports get out, the UN's close guarding of them ends up accomplishing little while giving the impression that it has something to hide.

While transparency should be the default posture for independent review reports, there are moments when a confidential report (or at least a confidential section of a report) may prove necessary. The Secretariat pushed for the 2017–2018 phase of independent reviews in part to elicit independent and credible feedback. From the perspective of an independent team leader, having a confidential component to their report could allow them to transmit more delicate analysis and politically sensitive messages, knowing that they are addressing one client (the secretary-general) rather than fifteen clients on the Security Council.[176]

Multiple interlocutors stressed that independent team leaders could prepare a comprehensive report written entirely for public consumption and complement it with a confidential cover letter or annex. This approach would preserve the review's analytical rigor and ensure that its recommendations are presented in full while also creating dedicated space for the team leader to convey particularly sensitive details (for example, related to communications with heads of state or government and military details about parties to the conflict). Independent team leaders could also use oral briefings to the secretary-general's Executive Committee and potentially to the Security Council to transmit politically sensitive information that cannot be documented in a public report.

Policy Orphans: The Dilemmas of Implementing Review Recommendations

Translating independent review recommendations into tangible changes in strategy is among the most uncertain parts of the process. Independent reviews are advisory in nature regardless of their intended audience. Member states, the Secretariat, and missions are not required (or even incentivized) to adopt policy changes if the recommendations diverge from their interests. UN reports of all shapes and sizes are left to "collect dust" as their recommendations fall by the wayside.[177] But in the context of independent reviews, which require significantly greater political and financial investment compared to internal processes, concerns that they do not always have an impact may prove to be their Achilles' heel.

Some independent reviews have led to meaningful political and policy changes. For example, the review of the AU partnership and UNOAU critiqued the growing number of cooperation frameworks between the two organizations across different substantive areas, prompting a streamlining of internal policies. The review of MINUSMA helped the mission begin adjusting its footprint in the north so that it could better respond to protection priorities in the country's center amid a waning peace process. The review of MINUSCA spurred the mission to embrace a more active role in the country's track I political process and helped align international stakeholders behind the mission's mandate to support elections. The internal UN study of the 2017–2018 independent reviews also observed that some Security Council mandates had changed modestly based on review recommendations.[178]

However, most independent reviews have not led to large strategic shifts. Implementation is a multifaceted challenge. Reviews often struggle to overcome the political divisions among member

175 Interview 38, current UN official, May 2021.

176 IPI research workshop with independent team leaders, February 2021.

177 See quote from former Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in: "Pandemic Report: 'We Are Not Short on Recommendations. We Are Short on Action,'" produced by Elana Gordon, *The World*, radio broadcast, May 12, 2021, available at www.pri.org/stories/2021-05-12/pandemic-report-we-are-not-short-recommendations-we-are-short-action .

178 UN DPO, "Synthesis Lessons Learned Report."

states that led to their inception, even if the reports are valuable inputs to discussions among council members or between the council and the Secretariat. Absent a coalition of member states willing to invest the political capital necessary for translating recommendations into shifts in strategies or mandates, many of the issues raised in reviews fall victim to political deadlock. For example, the review of MINUSCA questioned the primacy of AU leadership in facilitating the 2019 peace agreement, while the review of MINUSMA discouraged the mission from supporting (or being perceived to support) counterterrorism efforts. However, both of these core recommendations confronted political divisions among council members.[179] In another example, the independent review of MONUSCO provided a detailed critique and policy recommendations concerning the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB), a mechanism that is politically sensitive both among member states and in the Secretariat.[180] Absent meaningful Security Council ownership of the report following its submission, strategic discussions on the FIB permutated into more technical compromises on language and were overtaken by the military-oriented review of the FIB led by Santos Cruz.[181]

> Reviews often struggle to overcome the political divisions among member states that led to their inception, even if the reports are valuable inputs into their discussions.

It should be noted that not all independent reviews have recommended fundamental changes to UN strategies. Some reviews have sought to make mission mandates "more achievable by scaling up political and operational efforts."[182] In these instances, the UN system has tended to mobilize around recommendations that are low-hanging fruit (often based on operations, activities, or administrative issues) while avoiding the contentious political issues that often underpin the decision to request an independent review in the first place. For example, most of the 2017–2018 reviews recommended scaling the mission's political or operational efforts to its existing mandate.[183] The reviews of UNOCA, UNAMI, and UNSOS affirmed the relevance of these operations' existing work but encouraged shifts that led to amended staffing tables and mission footprints.[184] The independent review of UNOWAS affirmed its mandate but also recommended the creation of a deputy SRSG post to manage the mission's work with UN country teams and development partners in the spirit of stronger cross-pillar cooperation and coordination.[185]

Implementation is also impacted by the lack of an institutional home for independent review processes; once submitted, the reports quickly become orphans within the UN system. Independent team leaders' contracts normally end once they present their reports to the secretary-general's Executive and Deputies Committees. UN officials who participate in reviews do not own the final report by design, and they are unable to champion it when they return to their home departments. Mission leaders and staff are distanced from the process even if the report focuses most directly on their work. Absent the formal endorsement of recommendations through decisions of the Security Council, budget allocations within the Fifth Committee, or the decisions of the Executive or Deputies Committees, UN officials do not have the freedom to enact major policy shifts.

As a result, there is no standardized practice or clear UN entity responsible for supporting or tracking the implementation of review recommendations that

179 IPI research workshop with independent team leaders, February 2021; IPI research workshop with UN officials, February 2021; Interview 11, independent team leader, January 2021; Interview 19, outside expert, March 2021; Interview 34, outside expert, March 2021; Interview 37, former UN official, May 2021.

180 Interview 20, current UN official, March 2021; Interview 39, current UN official, May 2021.

181 Security Council Report, "Democratic Republic of the Congo: MONUSCO Mandate Renewal," December 17, 2020.

182 UN DPO, "Synthesis Lessons Learned Report."

183 Ibid.

184 IPI research workshop with UN officials, February 2021; UN Security Council, *Letter Dated 15 November 2017 from the Secretary-General Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, UN Doc. S/2017/966, November 20, 2017; Interview 6, independent team leader, January 2021; Interview 14, current UN officials, February 2021; Interview 21, current UN official, March 2021.

185 UN Security Council, *Report on the Strategic Review of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel, 10 September–17 October 2019*, UN Doc. S/2019/890, November 19, 2019.

have been endorsed by the Security Council or secretary-general. While the EOSG's Strategic Planning and Monitoring Unit facilitates some parts of the review process and coordinates the meetings of the Executive and Deputies Committees, it does not have the mandate or capacity to coordinate policy implementation; implementation ultimately falls to integrated operational teams, regional desks, and mission leaders.

In some cases, the Secretariat has substantially followed up on reviews. Following the politically charged review of UNAMI, the secretary-general established a multidisciplinary group to review the report and set a clear implementation plan with deadlines; the Secretariat subsequently provided updates through multiple reports and a stand-alone letter to the Security Council and participated in a closed-door informal interactive dialogue on the review.[186] The UN set up a similar task force following the review of the AU partnership and UNOAU to coordinate policy changes and prepare research proposed by the review.[187] Shortly after the conclusion of the 2018 review of UNMISS, former Assistant Secretary-General for Africa Bintou Keita visited South Sudan to discuss "modalities for the implementation of the recommendations from the independent review" and the mission's new mandate.[188] Following the review of MINURSO, the mission set up a small, internal working group to review certain operations.[189]

> Once submitted, independent review reports quickly become policy orphans within the UN system.

But other reviews have received less attention from the Secretariat. Only nine of the nineteen independent reviews were referenced (either actively or in passing) in the secretary-general's first report on the mission or country following the review's conclusion; only five were mentioned in the second report.[190] Few of these reports had subheadings specific to the independent review. While references in public reports do not reflect the totality of internal monitoring and reporting, they do reflect a hierarchy of organizational priorities, strategic narratives advanced by the mission and Secretariat, and relevant policy hooks. They also signal organizational priorities to member states and the general public.[191]

Equally as concerning is the lack of consistent engagement by the Security Council following the completion of independent reviews. Only eight of the nineteen outcome documents released immediately following independent reviews reference the reviews in their operative paragraphs.[192] In only two cases—the reviews of UNAMI and UNOWAS—did the council convene an informal, interactive dialogue to discuss the review with the participation of the independent team leaders and relevant Secretariat officials.[193] In other cases, independent team leaders only met bilaterally and in small groups with council members to share their reports' findings and recommendations.[194] Independent reviews are often initiated by the penholder for a specific mission, so much of the practice surrounding council engagement on the final reports (or their summaries) is influenced by the penholder's political investment in the process. Council members have not discussed independent reviews as a thematic issue outside of formal debates on UN peacekeeping operations.

Some independent reviews have mitigated the

186 UN Doc. S/2017/966; *Letter Dated 17 May 2018 from the Secretary-General Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, UN Doc. S/2018/479, May 21, 2018; *Report of the Secretary-General Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2367 (2017)*, UN Doc. S/2018/359, April 17, 2018; UN Security Council, *Implementation of Resolution 2421 (2018)–Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2018/975, October 31, 2018.

187 Interview 25, current UN official, March 2021.

188 UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on South Sudan (Covering the Period from 17 February to 3 June 2018),* UN Doc. S/2018/609, June 14, 2018.

189 UN Security Council, *Situation Concerning Western Sahara—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2019/282, April 1, 2019, para. 30.

190 The nine reviews mentioned in the first report of the secretary-general were the reviews of UNAMA, UNAMI, UNFICYP, UNMISS (2018), UNOAU, MINURSO, UNIOGBIS, UNOCA, and UNMISS (2020).

191 Interview 35, current UN officials, May 2021.

192 The eight reviews mentioned in the outcome document were the reviews of UNAMA, UNSMIL, UNAMI, UNFICYP, UNMISS (2018), UNIOGBIS, UNDOF, UNOCA (presidential statement), and UNOWAS (presidential statement). Outcome documents that do not mention reviews in operative paragraphs usually acknowledge them in the preamble.

193 Security Council Report, "Iraq: Informal Interactive Dialogue," February 6, 2018; Security Council Report, "Informal Interactive Dialogue on UNOWAS Strategic Review," November 26, 2019.

194 IPI convened a closed-door workshop for Security Council members and the UNOCA independent review team following the report's submission in August 2019.

impact of this orphan syndrome through two approaches: (1) providing specific, concrete policy options; and (2) building political constituencies for their recommendations. By basing policy options on a range of scenarios, review teams can articulate their core assumptions and provide council members and Secretariat officials alike with tools to develop compromises. Some member states emphasized that council members look to such policy options as part of the range of options they consider.[195]

Independent team leaders have also sought to build constituencies for their recommendations inside and outside of the UN. They have reached out to senior UN leaders during the final stages of report drafting to test recommendations and get feedback. According to one independent team leader, this enabled them to gain a better sense of political red lines, technical feasibility, and the resources available for specific sections or departments to carry forward recommendations.[196] While this feedback is nonbinding, it can help the review team frame its findings and recommendations in ways that are more palatable to the entities that could be tasked to implement them.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Independent reviews emerged in 2017 as exceptional responses to trust deficits among key stakeholders involved in UN peace operations. They have since taken on a life of their own and are now a featured practice within the organization's peace and security toolbox. Independent reviews are intended to provide rigorous and credible input into UN peace operations. Their intended independence from the Secretariat, missions, and member states enables these exercises to raise politically sensitive questions about a mission's strategy and operations.

But recent experiences also demonstrate that absent political will and sustained institutional support, independent reviews can merely reflect the contested interests that motivated them in the first place. Debates around the mandates and composition of review teams, the transparency of the final reports, and the lack of ownership over proposed recommendations underscore the challenges of fostering accountability amid the multiple lines of authority within the UN and among member states. From the outset, independent reviews also confront heightened expectations that are arguably impossible for them meet, especially because they have little influence over how their work will be carried forward.

Independent reviews are thus valuable but imperfect tools to help the UN and its member states reflect on peace operations. Navigating the politics and improving the practice of independent reviews require sustained support from member states, the UN Secretariat, and missions alike. The following considerations can guide the conception and practice of independent reviews in the future.

First, independence is a relative concept, and each review's independence and credibility are influenced by factors beyond the appointment of an external leader. The team leader's ability to issue findings and recommendations free from external influence is essential to this independence. Beyond that, however, political dynamics surrounding the mission, the review mandate and the review client, the composition of the review team and its methodology, and the transparency of the final report all influence a review's degree of independence and, by extension, its credibility to member states and UN officials alike.

Second, member states, UN Secretariat officials, and missions have diverse and often competing interests regarding independent reviews. Although reviews are conceptualized as rigorous processes of analysis and evaluation, their political dimensions should not be discounted. Council members and UN officials have subtly, if not overtly, tried to influence parts of the process or the recommendations. While competing interests and pressures are understandable, major divergences limit the degree to which stakeholders accept a review's findings and implement its recommendations, putting the added value of the entire exercise into question.

195 Interview 30, member-state diplomat, May 2021; Interview 33, member-state diplomats, May 2021.

196 Interview 13, independent team leader, February 2021.

While an independent team leader's political credibility gives them the tools to manage these interests, finding ways to more systematically and transparently balance them will be important for protecting the practice's legitimacy.

Third, independent reviews should be treated as exceptional responses to trust deficits, whether inside of the UN system, between the council and the UN system, or among council members. Independent reviews emerged to help the organization navigate a fractured geopolitical landscape and slowly rebuild support for its peace operations. The UN still faces many of the same pressures, and independent reviews could easily become the default tool for strategic reflection. But independent reviews are not the only tool available, and they should not replace the UN's own efforts to regularly evaluate its work. Independent reviews are most effective when creating space for sensitive political discussions about a mission's strategic orientation; over-relying on them or expanding their mandate to cover a very broad set of issues diminishes this added value.

> Navigating the politics and improving the practice of independent reviews require sustained support from member states, the UN Secretariat, and missions alike.

Fourth, key stakeholders do not share a common understanding of independent reviews' objectives or utility. Part of this divergence understandably stems from the tool's flexibility and adaptability to different contexts: independent reviews have been mandated by different entities, for different peace operations, and under different political conditions. But this divergence also indicates broader uncertainties surrounding other assessment and evaluation processes that have been cornerstones of the UN's recent efforts to reflect on its peace operations. Ensuring that both member states and UN entities can distinguish between these tools is imperative for helping the UN use them more effectively.

Toward this end, this report proposes criteria to distinguish between the four main review formats that can be applied to both peacekeeping operations and SPMs: strategic reviews, strategic assessments, independent strategic reviews, and independent strategic assessments (see Table 4). A common understanding of these formats would also minimize debates over whether the secretary-general or the Security Council should mandate a review, how the mandating entity relates to the topics discussed, and questions over the design and submission of the reviews.

Fifth, independent review teams continuously find themselves balancing methodological flexibility with the push for greater standardization. Independent reviews have evolved organically since their inception. This inherent flexibility allows review teams to better adapt to core political dynamics. It has also allowed them to adopt innovative practices, including lines of inquiry and conflict analyses, red teams, and data analytics—practices that are also being replicated in other parts of the UN's peace and security pillar.[197] But there are opportunities to standardize core elements of the methodology without regimenting the entire process. Review teams often feel like they are "reinventing the wheel" and have insufficient guidance about the experiences and lessons of previous reviews. More defined support could include guidance notes, standard operating procedures, best-practice documents, or after-action reviews, which could help review-team members understand the details of previous review processes and better adjust their own methodologies accordingly.

And sixth, independent reviews need to overcome their orphan status to have a lasting impact and deliver value for the time and resources invested in them. Without an institutional home or political champion, final reports can be swept aside if they push too hard against the status quo. Increasing the impact of independent reviews requires closing the distance between headquarters-driven review exercises and the missions that will ultimately be responsible for implementing the recommendations. It also requires a more deliberate approach to building constituencies. Some of the most effective independent reviews have prioritized widespread

197 For example, the UN convened a red team to stress test drafts of the Strategy for the Digital Transformation of UN Peacekeeping.

Table 4. Proposed criteria for reviews of UN peace operations

Criteria	Strategic Review	Strategic Assessment	Independent Strategic Review	Independent Strategic Assessment
Political dynamic	No significant gap in political credibility or trust	No significant gap in political credibility or trust	Trust deficits between key stakeholders or a politically sensitive juncture in a mission's life cycle	Trust deficits between key stakeholders or a politically sensitive juncture in a mission's life cycle
Objectives	Test core assumptions underpinning a mandate or strategy	(Re)articulate common UN goals or align mandates or priorities with resources	Test core assumptions underpinning a mandate or strategy	(Re)articulate common UN goals or align mandates or priorities with resources
Key stakeholder	Mission	UN-wide presence (including all agencies, funds, and programs and regional offices or envoys with overlapping mandates)	Mission	UN-wide presence (including all agencies, funds, and programs and regional offices or envoys with overlapping mandates)
Aperture	Interrogation of mission mandate and performance (substantive, operational, logistical, administrative, financial)	Interrogation of UN-wide mandate and performance (substantive, uniformed personnel, logistical, administrative, financial)	Interrogation of mission strategy, impact, and geopolitical dynamics	Interrogation of UN-wide strategy, impact, and geopolitical dynamics
Context trigger	Change in political or security context	New government; potential mission transition or drawdown	Change in political or security context	New government; potential mission transition or drawdown
Policy process	One-off, stand-alone study	Iterative evaluation and reflection (triggered by other processes like development of an integrated strategic framework or development cooperation framework	One-off, stand-alone study	Iterative evaluation and reflection (triggered by other processes like development of an integrated strategic framework or development cooperation framework
Feed into	Mandate renewal	Mandate renewal; mission planning or reconfiguration process	Mandate renewal	Mission planning or reconfiguration process
Final report	Summarized in stand-alone report from the secretary-general	Summarized in stand-alone report from the secretary-general	Provided in full to member states and the public (with option for confidential cover note)	Provided in full to member states and the public (with option for confidential cover note)

consultations inside and outside of the UN. While consultations will not yield blanket agreement on all substantive issues, they can diversify the range of inputs into the review and make key stakeholders feel more invested.

The following recommendations are intended to help the UN system, independent review teams, and member states strengthen and sustain this growing practice.

Recommendations for the UN System

Codify independent reviews within formal UN policy: The UN should formally acknowledge the practice of independent reviews and identify ways to infuse it into its policy architecture. Toward this end, the UN should have two primary goals: (1) defining independent reviews and situating them within the range of tools available to support UN peace operations; and (2) providing broad guidance about the independent review process. There are multiple policy avenues that the Executive Office of the Secretary-General (EOSG), working alongside relevant UN departments, could pursue. For example, revisions to the UN Integrated Assessment and Planning policy could include references to independent reviews. When they update the 2016 policy on the planning and review of peacekeeping operations, the Department of Peace Operations (DPO) and Department of Operational Support (DOS) could highlight independent reviews alongside strategic reviews and strategic assessments. The EOSG could consider developing guidance documents and checklists on independent reviews for endorsement by the Executive and Deputies Committees. The secretary-general could also issue a UN-wide directive or memorandum elaborating on different review processes.

Consolidate internal best practices for independent review teams: The Secretariat should develop an on-boarding packet for future review teams that includes best-practices material as well as documents from previous independent reviews. One part of this packet should be a user-friendly guidance document that summarizes the main features of the process and highlights available resources. The Secretariat should also make materials from previous independent review exercises available to newly established review teams to examine, including lines of inquiry, methodologies, and any after-action reviews. The Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), DPO, and DOS should also update the data-analytics framework prepared for the 2017–2018 reviews and include it in the on-boarding packet. If a mission has already undergone an independent review, the Secretariat should make previous reports, in their entirety, available to the independent team leader under closed circulation.

Clarify roles and expectations of UN staff seconded to independent reviews: The EOSG, with support from the Office of Legal Affairs, should clarify the roles and expectations of officials who are seconded to independent review teams. This guidance should determine whether individuals serve independent review teams in their individual capacities or as representatives of their departments. If seconded officials are expected to act as formal departmental representatives, the respective home departments should develop internal mechanisms for transparently identifying and appointing individuals. The EOSG's guidance should also establish how these departments are expected to communicate with their officials when they are participating in an independent review team. In addition, the Secretariat should explore ways to provide temporary support to departments whose officials are seconded to participate on independent review teams.

Prioritize diversity in the composition of future review teams: Diversity should feature as a more prominent consideration in the selection of both independent team leaders and review team members. Gender, geographic, and linguistic diversity are particularly important when selecting team leaders to better reflect the spirit of the secretary-general's commitment to diversity in senior leadership appointments. Greater diversity among team leaders would also help to counteract perceptions that team leaders are selected to support a specific political agenda. Diversity of skill sets, demographics, and levels of seniority should similarly guide the selection of review team members. However, this pursuit of more diversity should be balanced with ensuring the team has all the skills required to successfully answer the

questions raised in the review.

Improve reporting on independent reviews: The Secretariat should improve its public and internal reporting on independent reviews (along with UN-led reviews). If an independent review report is not made public, the Secretariat should submit its summary to the Security Council as a stand-alone document (either as a report or a letter); it should not merge the summary with documents covering other substantive matters. DPO's Division of Policy, Evaluation and Training and DPPA's Policy and Mediation Division should collaborate in the preparation and regular maintenance of a consolidated master list of all strategic reviews and strategic assessments of UN field missions, including independent reviews. This list should track each review's findings, member-state decisions, and impact. The Deputies Committee, in its capacity as the Integration Steering Group, should convene at least one annual meeting on strategic reviews and assessments (including independent reviews) to track progress on implementation.

Establish a dedicated funding stream to support independent reviews: DPPA and DPO should establish a joint project and dedicated funding mechanism for independent reviews. A sustainable and flexible funding channel should allow review teams to develop more comprehensive methodologies for field visits and for soliciting external support. It would also reduce pressure on mission budgets and on other DPO and DPPA funding streams when independent reviews are requested. In addition, this funding stream could be used to provide temporary capacity to the DPPA and DPO divisions whose members are seconded to support independent reviews.

Recommendations for Independent Review Teams

Emphasize transparency and independence: Team leaders should prioritize transparency and independence at all stages of the review process and should plan from the outset that their entire report will be made public. Transparency affirms the team leader's independence within the wider UN community and therefore builds trust and strengthens the credibility of the report's findings. Independent team leaders should use cover letters, report annexes, or oral briefings if needed to convey sensitive political or military information; however, these should not detract from public engagement with the review's analysis and recommendations. Independent team leaders should also emphasize transparent engagement throughout research consultations, particularly with the mission under review and with member states, while nonetheless asserting the review's independence when preparing the final report.

Build internal and external constituencies: Independent team leaders should continuously work to build constituencies for the review process both within and outside of the UN. These efforts often require both formal and informal methods, and the review team's flexibility and adaptability are key to building trust. Review teams should aim to foster a shared understanding of the review's motivations and objectives within these constituencies and to appreciate the nuances of how various stakeholders understand the central issues at play. Building constituencies inside of the UN system through frequent, informal dialogue with the mission and senior leaders at headquarters can broaden ownership of the review and create conditions more conducive to uptake of its central recommendations. Support from external constituencies, particularly from national stakeholders and member states, can also bolster the review's independence and potential impact.

Systematize diverse research methods and approaches: Independent review teams should continuously look to research tools that can make their study more rigorous and high-quality. Review teams should advocate for more frequent sessions with red teams, especially during key moments of the research process. They should also consider complementing their internal capacity and skill sets by bringing in external capacity to provide gender and data analysis or to draft the report. Independent team leaders should also look to solicit perspectives from academics, journalists, and researchers based in the host country to complement international expertise on that country's dynamics and on the mission. Team leaders should consider appointing at least one individual from the mission or the UN country

team, who could provide important contextual knowledge and a strong network of interlocutors inside and outside of the UN. They should also reach out to individuals who have led previous independent reviews to act as a sounding board and to learn from their experiences.

Embrace red-team support: Independent review teams should proactively plan for support from the red teams and integrate them into their methodologies and workplans. Red-team sessions are intended to take place, at minimum, following the drafting of the lines of inquiry and the preparation of draft findings and recommendations. However, these exercises are often impeded by the limited amount of time allocated to these processes, let alone for the review as a whole. As one of their first steps, newly constituted independent review teams should identify both process and calendar milestones when they would benefit from red-team support. They should proactively communicate this to the EOSG so that they have enough time to facilitate a high-quality process. Proactive approaches to red-team support could also lead the independent review teams to identify additional moments for this support or push for more informal channels of collaboration with the red-team participants.

Recommendations for Member States

Treat independent reviews as exceptional instead of standard: Security Council members should consider independent reviews as extraordinary measures instead of an increasingly standardized part of their toolbox. Independent reviews emerged during a period of limited trust between member states and the Secretariat; they are consequently most impactful when providing a measure of analytical rigor and political credibility during periods of strategic uncertainty or limited trust. Council members should continue to regularly request that the secretary-general provide strategic reviews and assessments of peace operations and should only request independent reviews at decisive political junctures.

Debrief team leaders following the submission of an independent review: Council members should convene an informal interactive dialogue or an Arria-formula meeting with the independent team leader at the conclusion of each review process. These sessions, whether closed or open to the public, can help raise awareness of the report's analysis and recommendations among council members and stimulate discussion on next steps. The council should keep these informal sessions distinct from formal meetings of the Security Council where the secretary-general or senior UN officials present their own views of the mission and of the independent review.

Request a formal briefing on strategic reviews and assessments: Member states in the Security Council's Working Group on Peacekeeping Operations and in the General Assembly's Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations (C-34), Fifth Committee, and Fourth Committee should request annual briefings on system-wide improvements in the planning, analysis, and evaluation of UN peace operations. These would include updates on independent reviews as well as UN-led reviews and assessments that are ongoing or have recently concluded. These sessions would offer member states a comprehensive overview of institution-wide policies and practices while providing concrete updates on how the findings and recommendations of reviews have impacted the performance of UN missions.

Strengthen reporting requirements on the implementation of review recommendations: Council members should request that the secretary-general provide regular updates on the implementation of the independent review recommendations that have been endorsed by the secretary-general in mission-related outcome documents. These reporting requirements should last for a calendar year and focus on tangible changes spurred by the independent review process.

Provide ample time for conducting independent reviews: Council members should allocate at least seven months for an independent review exercise. This minimum time frame would account for both the time needed to conduct the review and some of the potentially lengthy administrative processes required to start and complete it. Council penholders should consider divorcing the deadline for an independent review from the expiration date

of the mission's mandate. When agreeing to request an independent review, the Security Council should also be prepared to adopt a technical rollover for the specific mission's mandate so that the independent review has sufficient time to be completed and is not constrained by the time frame of the mandate renewal cycle.

Annex: List of UN Strategic Reviews, Strategic Assessments, and Independent Reviews (2013–2021)

Date	Mission / Focus	UN Doc.	Review Type[198]
May 2013	BINUCA (CAR)	S/2013/261	Strategic Assessment
July 2013	UNOAU/AU Partnership	A/71/551	Strategic Review[199]
January 2014	UNOB (Burundi)	S/2014/36	Strategic Assessment
February 2014	UNAMID (Darfur)	S/2014/138	Strategic Review
March 2014	MONUSCO (DRC)	S/2014/157	Strategic Review
May 2014	UNISFA (Abyei)	S/2014/336	Strategic Review
May 2014	UNOCI and UNMIL (Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia)	S/2014/342	Strategic Review
June 2014	MINUSMA (Mali)	S/2014/403	Strategic Review
August 2014	UNMIL (Liberia)	S/2014/598	Strategic Review
August 2014	MINUSTAH (Haiti)	S/2014/617	Strategic Assessment
November 2014	UNIOGBIS (Guinea-Bissau)	S/2015/37	Strategic Assessment
December 2014	MONUSCO (DRC)	S/2014/957	Strategic Review
February 2015	UN presence in Libya	S/2015/113	Strategic Assessment
May 2015	UNOCA (Central Africa)	S/2015/339	Strategic Review
July 2015	UNAMI (Iraq)	S/2015/530	Strategic Assessment
October 2015	UNSOA (Somalia)	S/2015/762	Strategic Review
November 2015	UNMISS (South Sudan)	S/2015/899	Strategic Review[200]
January 2016	OSE-Sahel (Sahel)	S/2016/88	Strategic Review
March 2016	MONUSCO (DRC)	S/2016/233	Strategic Review
March 2016	UNOCI (Côte d'Ivoire)	S/2016/297	Strategic Review
May 2016	MINUSMA (Mali)	S/2016/498	Strategic Review
June 2016	UNAMID (Darfur)	S2016/510	Strategic Assessment*
June 2016	MINUSCA (CAR)	S/2016/565	Strategic Review

198 Asterisks denote joint UN/AU reviews.

199 This review took place in July 2013, but the results were only referenced in a public document in October 2016.

200 As requested in Security Council Resolution 224 (2015), para. 13, this exercise was requested as "a review of the [UNMISS] mandate" and was asked "to provide an assessment and recommendations."

Date	Mission / Focus	UN Doc.	Review Type[198]
October 2016	OSE-GLR (Great Lakes region)	S/2016/891	Strategic Review
November 2016	UNMIL (Liberia)	S/2016/968	Strategic Assessment
November 2016	UNMISS (South Sudan)	S/2016/951	Strategic Assessment
February 2017	UNIOGBIS (Guinea-Bissau)	S/2017/111	Strategic Review
March 2017	UNIFIL (Lebanon)	S/2017/202	Strategic Review
March 2017	MINUSTAH (Haiti)	S/2017/223	Strategic Assessment
April 2017	UNISFA (Abyei)	S/2017/293	Strategic Review
May 2017	UNAMID (Darfur)	S/2017/437	Strategic Review
May 2017	Somalia	S/2017/404	Strategic Assessment
July 2017	AMISOM (Somalia)	S/2017/653	Strategic Review*
August 2017	UNAMA (Afghanistan)	S/2017/696	Independent Review
August 2017	UNSMIL (Libya)	S/2017/726	Independent Review
September 2017	MONUSCO (DRC)	S/2017/826	Strategic Review
November 2017	UNAMI (Iraq)	S/2017/966	Independent Review
November 2017	UNFICYP (Cyprus)	S/2017/1008	Independent Review
February 2018	UNMISS (South Sudan)	S/2018/143	Independent Review
June 2018	UNAMID (Darfur)	S/2018/530	Strategic Review
June 2018	MINUSMA (Mali)	S/2018/541	Independent Review
July 2018	AMISOM (Somalia)	S/2018/675	Strategic Review*
August 2018	UNISFA (Abyei)	S/2018/778	Independent Review
October 2018	MINURSO (Western Sahara)	S/2018/889	Independent Review
October 2018	MINUSCA (CAR)	S/2018/922	Independent Review
December 2018	UNIOGBIS (Guinea-Bissau)	S/2018/1086	Independent Assessment
December 2018	UNDOF (Israel, Syria)	S/2018/1088	Independent Review
December 2018	UNSOS (Somalia)	S/2018/1149	Independent Review
March 2019	MINUJUSTH (Haiti)	S/2019/198	Strategic Assessment
May 2019	UNAMID (Darfur)	S/2019/445	Strategic Review*
August 2019	UNOCA (Central Africa)	S/2019/625	Independent Review

Date	Mission / Focus	UN Doc.	Review Type[198]
October 2019	MONUSCO (DRC)	S/2019/842	Independent Review
November 2019	UNOWAS (West Africa and the Sahel)	S/2019/890	Independent Review
October 2020	UNOAU/AU Partnership	S/2020/1020	Independent Assessment
November 2020	UN engagement in Burundi	S/2020/1078	Strategic Assessment
December 2020	UNMISS (South Sudan)	S/2020/1224	Independent Review
January 2021	International security support to Somalia	Submitted to the Security Council but not public	Independent Assessment
August 2021	UNSMIL (Libya)	S/2021/716	Independent Review
September 2021	UNISFA (Abyei)	S/2021/805	Strategic Review

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