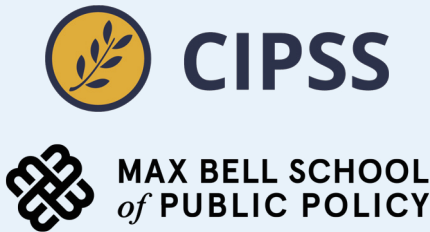




Being Present Where It Counts: Peacekeeping Responsiveness to Violence against Civilians

Lisa Hultman and Ornella Corsant-Colat

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Lisa Hultman is Professor of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University. Ornella Corsant-Colat was a Research Assistant at the Department of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University.

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Executive Summary

UN peacekeeping missions are often criticized for failing to act when civilians are under threat. Yet recent empirical evidence suggests that peacekeepers can and do respond to violence by adjusting where and how they deploy forces in the field. This issue brief examines patterns of subnational deployment across African missions from 2012 to 2022, focusing on whether and how missions with protection of civilians (POC) mandates adjust their military presence in response to attacks on civilians.

The findings indicate that peacekeeping missions are more likely to strengthen their presence in areas experiencing recent violence—especially violence perpetrated by non-state armed groups—but that such missions also respond to state-led violence, albeit less consistently. This responsiveness highlights the operational flexibility some missions can exercise and thus challenges the assumption that host-state consent fully constrains the implementation of POC mandates. The findings also underscore the need to assess peacekeepers' behavior not only in terms of how mandates are designed but also in terms of how missions adapt on the ground.

This brief contributes to current policy debates on the future of peace operations in three ways. First, the research provides new data-driven insight into mission responsiveness as an observable behavior rather than an aspirational principle for contemporary peacekeeping. Second, the brief encourages more critical discussion of the political constraints on POC by showing that missions can sometimes act decisively in politically sensitive settings. Third, the findings reinforce the importance of mandate and planning frameworks that enable dynamic force deployment. As peace operations face growing complexity and potentially shrinking footprints, their ability to swiftly adapt to emerging threats will be essential to protecting civilians effectively.

Introduction

Protection of civilians (POC) has been an integral part of UN peacekeeping since the first UN Security Council mandate authorizing the use of force to protect civilians in 1999. However, recent political developments pose a challenge to the POC agenda. In eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where the UN mission (MONUSCO) has had a strong and sustained military presence, armed groups have expanded their territorial control and escalated violence against civilians. Violence has escalated both in Ituri and North Kivu provinces, where the mission remains, and in South Kivu, which the mission withdrew from in June 2024 at the request of the Congolese government.¹ This persistent violence has contributed to MONUSCO's low level of popular support and legitimacy among the population and weak confidence in the mission's ability to provide security.² This is just one example of a severe challenge to the POC agenda, where political and military realities threaten a mission's successful implementation of its POC mandate.

This issue brief examines how peacekeeping missions with POC mandates manage the increasingly hostile environments created by today's armed conflicts. Specifically, it explores whether and how peacekeeping operations actively respond to threats against civilians by strategically redeploying troops to the most violence-affected areas. Research has demonstrated that peacekeeping successfully reduces violence against civilians in the areas where peacekeepers are deployed.³ Peacekeepers can deter violence through active patrolling and a visible physical presence, which increases the operational cost of targeting civilians for armed groups.

At the same time, several missions have faced accusations of inaction and have been criticized for their inability to project force effectively in response to local insecurity. In 2016, for instance, the mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) failed to act decisively when fighting erupted in Juba, leaving

hundreds of civilians vulnerable to lethal attacks and sexual violence.⁴ Similarly, in 2017 and 2018, the mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) was unable to protect civilians from a wave of attacks by armed groups, partly due to poor prioritization of tasks and a failure to identify and analyze conflict hot spots.⁵ Nevertheless, we must be cautious not to draw sweeping conclusions from a few high-profile cases. Instead, these instances underscore the need for a more systematic analysis of how UN peacekeeping operations respond to violence against civilians.

In this issue brief, we present spatial and temporal data on the location of peacekeeping deployments over a ten-year period (2012–2022). We then use that data to analyze how POC missions adjust their presence and allocate military resources to counter threats to civilians. By mapping peacekeeping deployment patterns against data on civilian harm, we offer insights relevant to future mission planning, mandate review processes, and the implementation of POC strategies.

Why Local Presence Matters

POC mandates authorize peacekeepers to use force to protect civilians under imminent threat of violence in their areas of operation. While the UN's POC doctrine establishes a holistic approach to protection, including broader efforts to build a protective environment, physical protection by peacekeepers where they are deployed is a core and distinctive element. Quantitative research has consistently shown that military presence is a key determinant of the effectiveness of peacekeeping in reducing violence against civilians.

One study assessing the subnational effectiveness of peacekeeping presence, covering all missions in Africa with a POC mandate during the period 2000–2011, found that peacekeeping was effective in protecting civilians from rebel groups.⁶

1 UN Peacekeeping, "MONUSCO Ending Its Mission in South Kivu after More Than 20 Years of Service," June 25, 2024.

2 Albert Trithart, "Local Perceptions of UN Peacekeeping: A Look at the Data," International Peace Institute, September 2023.

3 Hanne Fjelde, Lisa Hultman, and Desirée Nilsson, "Protection through Presence: UN Peacekeeping and the Costs of Targeting Civilians," *International Organization* 73, no. 1 (2019).

4 Patrick Wintour, "UN Failed to Protect Civilians in South Sudan, Report Finds," *The Guardian*, November 1, 2016.

5 Namie Di Razza, "Accountability System for the Protection of Civilians: Case Study Central African Republic," December 2020, available at <https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CAR-Case-Study.pdf>.

6 Fjelde, Hultman, and Nilsson, "Protection through Presence".

Specifically, the study assessed the risk of violence against civilians in the areas surrounding peacekeeping bases. It found that peacekeeping operations prioritized managing violence by non-state actors. UN peacekeepers were deployed to the most exposed and vulnerable locations, and their presence reduced the risk of violence by rebels. These findings underscore the need for operational flexibility and real-time intelligence to guide subnational deployment decisions.

Similar results have emerged from other empirical work using subnational data on deployments and civilian killings. These studies, often focused on one or a few missions, have found that peacekeepers deter violence through proximity—at least under certain operational conditions.⁷ Taken together, these findings provide cause for measured optimism. While some earlier missions failed to reduce violence locally, missions in the 2000s with explicit POC mandates have proven to be more effective in protecting civilians.⁸

Nevertheless, several caveats persist. First, deployments need to be sufficiently large to be effective.⁹ However, a larger peacekeeping base is not a sufficient condition for successful POC; it still matters how active military units are and how they approach armed groups.¹⁰ Bigger contingents provide the opportunity to conduct more patrols, physically cover a larger area, and project power further away from bases.

Second, peacekeeping is less consistently effective in protecting civilians from state actors.¹¹ In the subnational study referred to above, the presence of peacekeepers was not associated with the reduction

of violence against civilians by state forces.¹² In fact, missions were less likely to deploy to areas where state forces targeted civilians. Political constraints, including the need to maintain host-state consent, limit missions' operational flexibility to confront state-sponsored violence. Relatedly, given limited resources, missions often need to prioritize some threats over others and thus may make pragmatic decisions to focus on action against armed groups that is likely to have fewer political repercussions.

Third, most studies on local peacekeeping effectiveness do not include the last ten years of increasingly challenging operational contexts and critique against several UN missions. These situations may pose new challenges to POC that are not captured by the older models.

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Measuring POC Responsiveness

While previous research has demonstrated that local presence matters, less attention has been paid to how peacekeeping missions respond to escalating violence. In order to protect civilians, missions need to be prepared to deploy where the risk of violence is high. In this study, we explore whether UN missions indeed are responsive to violence against civilians.

Given that POC mandates authorize peacekeeping missions to protect civilians within their areas of operations, a spatial approach is useful for assessing the performance of UN missions on POC. We can judge mission responsiveness by analyzing where violence takes place and where peacekeeping operations set up their bases—with particular attention to the timing, scale, and frequency of deployments in

7 Jessica Di Salvatore, "Obstacle to Peace? Ethnic Geography and Effectiveness of Peacekeeping," *British Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 3 (2020); Laura Peitz and Gregor Reisch, "Violence Reduction or Relocation? Effects of United Nations Troops Presence on Local Levels of Violence," *Zeitschrift für Friedens- und Konfliktforschung* 8 (2019); Anup Phayal, "UN Troop Deployment and Preventing Violence Against Civilians in Darfur," *International Interactions* 45, no. 5 (2019); Anup Phayal and Brandon C. Prins, "Deploying to Protect: The Effect of Military Peacekeeping Deployments on Violence Against Civilians," *International Peacekeeping* 27, no. 2 (2019). These studies identify factors that condition whether peacekeepers effectively protect civilians, including ethnic settlement patterns and whether armed clashes are taking place in the same area. The question of whether peacekeeping deployments simply displace violence to new locations is still debated.

8 For example, an early study of local peacekeeping effects in Bosnia from 1992 to 1995 concluded that the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) failed to reduce violence locally. Stefano Costalli, "Does Peacekeeping Work? A Disaggregated Analysis of Deployment and Violence Reduction in the Bosnian War," *British Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 2 (2014).

9 Fjeld, Hultman, and Nilsson, "Protection through Presence"; Phayal and Prins, "Deploying to Protect"; Peitz and Reisch, "Violence Reduction or Relocation?"; Phayal "UN Troop Deployment and Preventing Violence Against Civilians in Darfur."

10 Stian Kjeksrud, *Using Force to Protect Civilians: Successes and Failures of United Nations Peace Operations in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

11 Fjeld, Hultman, and Nilsson, "Protection through Presence"; Phayal and Prins, "Deploying to Protect."

12 Fjeld, Hultman, and Nilsson, "Protection through Presence."

relation to reported threats.

For this purpose, our research draws from the Geocoded Peacekeeping Operations (Geo-PKO) dataset.¹³ This is a comprehensive dataset that extracts information from all UN deployment maps, coding the estimated number of peacekeepers, as well as the type of units and the troop-contributing countries, in each location. While the location of bases is largely a static measure that does not take into account what peacekeepers do in these locations and how they respond to violence, the spatial deployment of peacekeepers does vary over time within missions. This suggests some relocation of resources in response to changes in the security landscape.

To differentiate between different armed actors and types of threats against civilians, we use data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program on instances and locations of one-sided violence.¹⁴ From this source, we estimate fatality counts based on reported acts of violence by organized armed actors that specifically target civilians.¹⁵ These are the instances we would expect UN peacekeeping missions to pay attention to and prioritize when relocating military capacities within the host country.

To assess the responsiveness of peacekeepers to violence against civilians, we focus on African countries that have hosted a UN peacekeeping mission with a protection mandate in the

period 2012–2022. We divide those countries into grid squares of approximately 55 x 55 kilometers, adding information on (1) the number of peacekeepers deployed to that location, if any, and (2) the number of civilians killed by armed actors in that location. Given our interest in the dynamics of violence and peacekeepers' response, we observe each grid square over time using monthly data on our variables of interest.

Figure 1 summarizes the data for 2012–2022. The map illustrates a few important points. First, there

is significant overlap between peacekeeping presence and violence against civilians. This reflects the fact that peacekeepers are deployed where violence takes place and where civilians are at risk. Second, some areas show a strong peacekeeping presence but limited violence. Third, there are also multiple areas that experienced high levels of violence without a peacekeeper presence. To assess the responsiveness of missions (i.e., whether they relocate peacekeepers when violence escalates), we need to account for changes over time.

Are Peacekeepers Deployed Where They Are Needed?

One way to answer the question of whether peacekeepers are deployed where they are needed is by analyzing the dynamics of peacekeeping deployments. We identify all instances when UN peacekeeping operations strengthened their military presence at a specific location. This is measured either as new deployments (i.e., when a mission sets up a new peacekeeping base within a country) or as an increase in troop numbers at an already established base (e.g., by deploying another company). We then explore whether this decision can be linked to the recent history of violence against civilians in the same location. A key feature of this analysis is that

Peacekeeping operations respond to violence against civilians by increasing their presence in areas where civilians are being attacked.

we not only look at the locations where the military presence increased but also compare these to all other locations in the country. This allows us to assess whether the intensity of violence against civilians in a particular location increased, the probability that the UN increased its military strength in that same location. When modeling this effect, we control for a number of relevant factors that may influence both the feasibility of peacekeeping deployment and the dynamics of violence.¹⁶

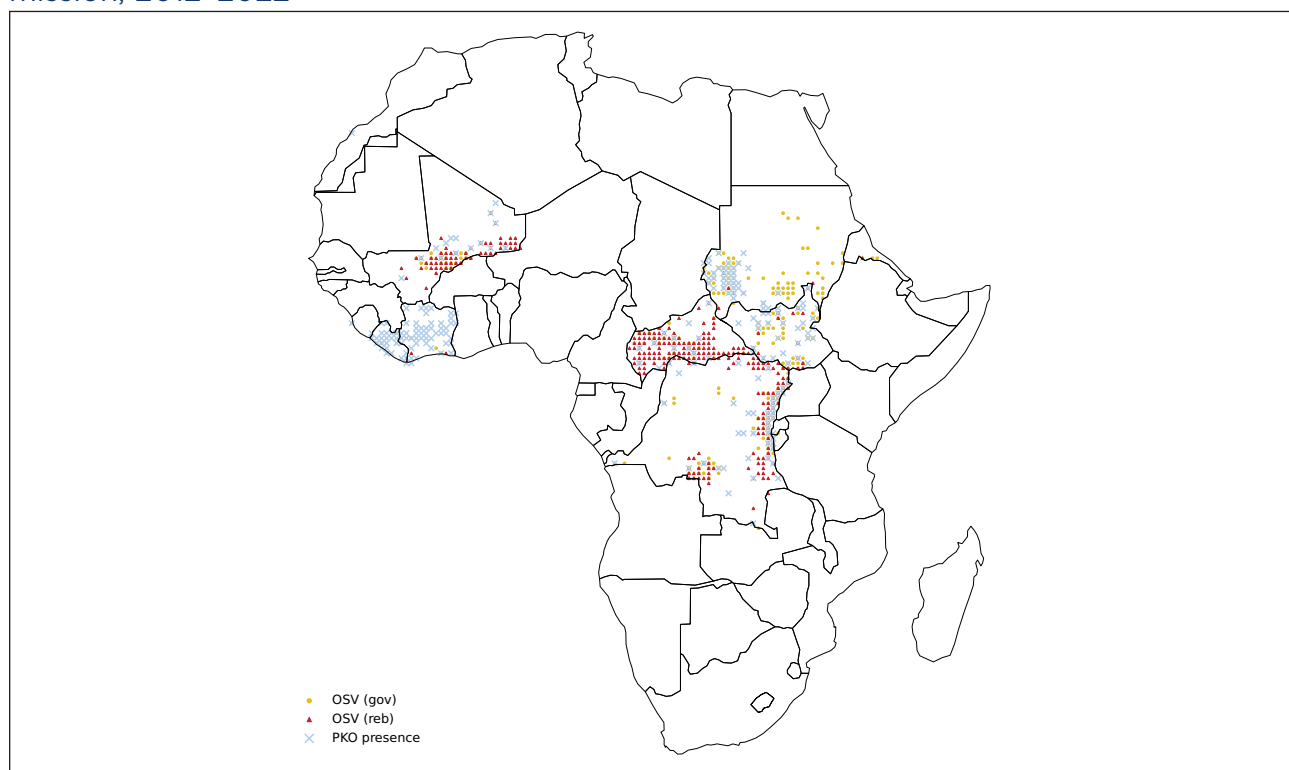
13 Deniz Cil, Hanne Fjelde, Lisa Hultman, and Desirée Nilsson, "Mapping Blue Helmets: Introducing the Geocoded Peacekeeping Operations (Geo-PKO) Dataset," *Journal of Peace Research* 57, no. 2 (2019). Here, we use version 2.2, which is updated to 2022, available at <https://www.uu.se/en/departments/peace-and-conflict-research/research/research-data/geo-pko-dataset.html>.

14 The Uppsala database defines one-sided violence as the direct and deliberate killing of civilians by an organized actor. See: Shawn Davies, Garoun Engström, Therese Pettersson, and Magnus Öberg, "Organized Violence 1989–2023, and the Prevalence of Organized Crime Groups," *Journal of Peace Research* 61, no. 4 (2024); Ralph Sundberg and Erik Melander, "Introducing the UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset (UCDP GED)," *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no. 4 (2013).

15 These counts are conservative estimates and hence do not capture the full scale of civilian suffering. However, they can be taken as a measure of the most obvious forms of civilian atrocities that are publicly reported—and that the UN mission should reasonably be aware of.

16 These factors include, for example, the percentage of mountainous terrain, travel time to the nearest city, population, and rainfall levels.

Figure 1. One-sided violence and peacekeeper presence in African countries with a UN mission, 2012–2022



We find that the intensity of violence against civilians raised the probability of a UN peacekeeping mission increasing its military presence. Figure 2 shows how this probability rose as the intensity of violence by non-state actors escalated. While this overall relationship is statistically significant, there is also a limit to how often UN missions are able to readjust their military presence. We only observe an increased military presence in 398 instances—likely far short of the number of instances where there was an increase in threats to civilians. This suggests that both resources and mandates enabling the dynamic relocation of forces may be critical to increasing missions’ real-time responsiveness to threats against civilians. In other words, missions need the operational flexibility to adapt their presence swiftly when violence erupts.

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Figure 3 shows the same results for one-sided violence by government actors. In contrast to earlier studies, we also find a positive effect: peacekeeping operations enhanced their military presence in response to violence by state perpetrators.¹⁷ However, the responsiveness of missions to state violence is weaker compared to violence by non-state actors. This suggests that while UN missions are not shying away from situations involving state violence against civilian popula-

¹⁷ It should be noted that we look not only at initial deployments of peacekeeping bases but also the strengthening of an existing military presence. This could help explain the difference between the earlier subnational analysis and our more recent study of the 2012–2022 period.

Figure 2. One-sided violence by non-state actors and enhanced military deployments, 2012–2022

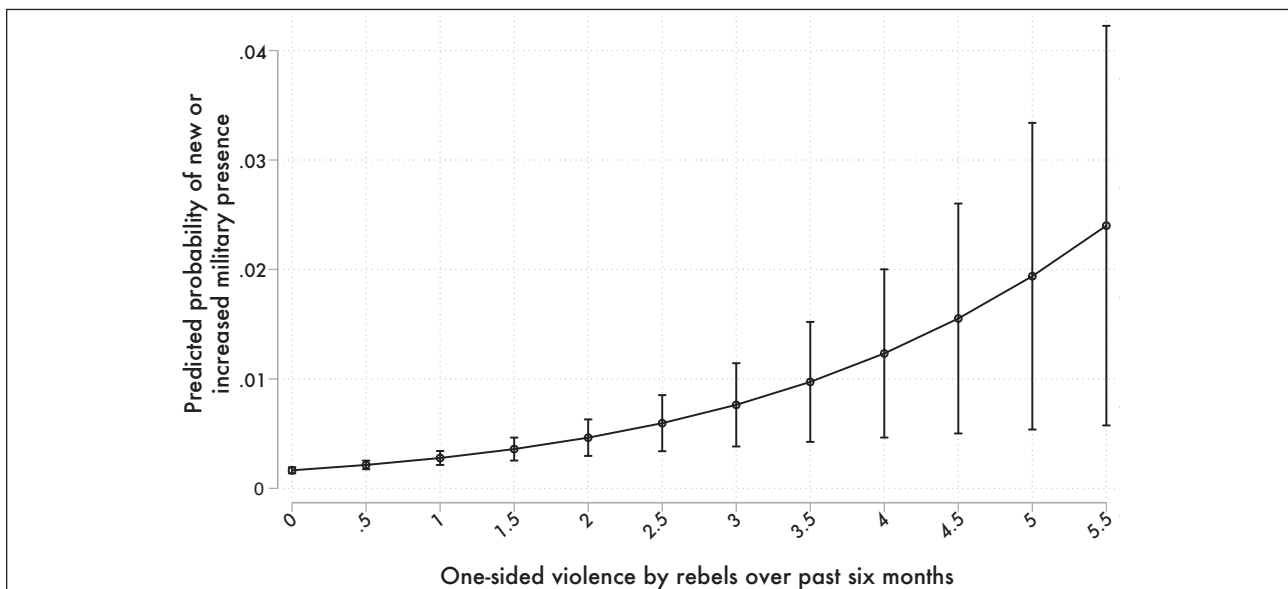
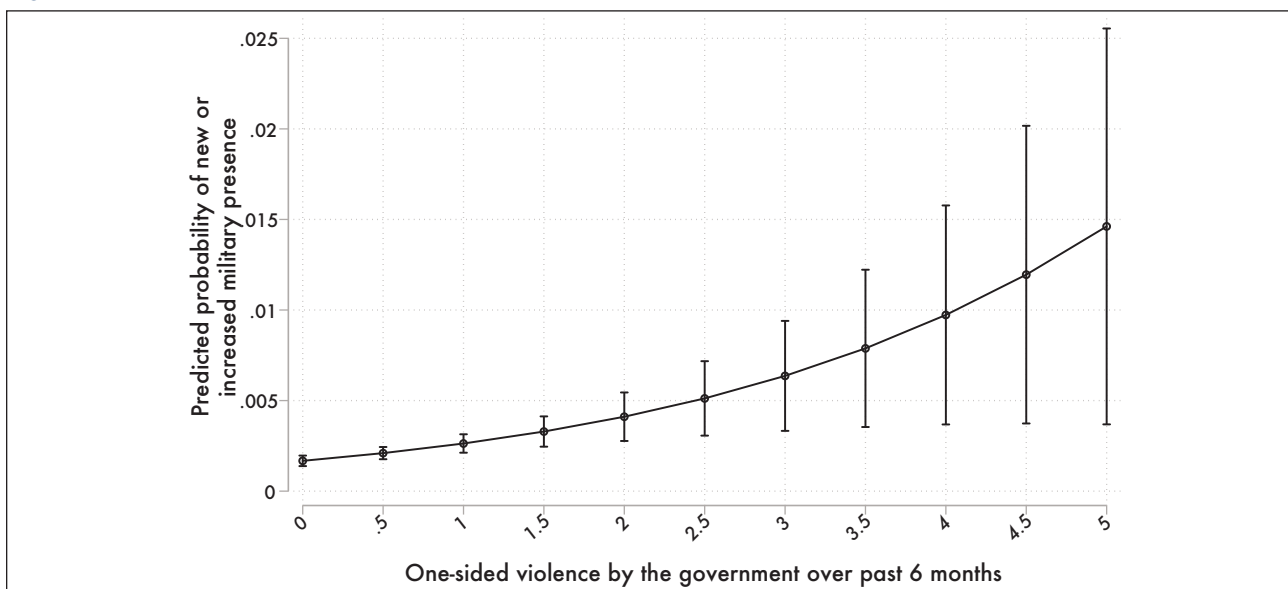


Figure 3. One-sided violence by state actors and enhanced military deployments, 2012–2022



tions, they do seem to prioritize addressing threats from non-state actors.

This data yields several insights. Most importantly, it indicates that peacekeeping operations respond to violence against civilians by increasing their presence in areas where civilians are being attacked. This does not necessarily mean that peacekeepers actively engage the actors that target civilians; the

data tracks presence, not behavior. Nevertheless, by deploying more troops to these areas, peacekeeping operations can increase the number of patrols and cover larger areas. A recent study on the UN–African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) found that the mission regularly carried out patrols in areas where civilians were facing violence, although often close to their base.¹⁸ Responsiveness through military presence can thus be viewed as a

18 Luke Abbs and Allard Duursma “Tracing the Footsteps of Peace: Examining the Locations of UN Peacekeeping Patrols,” *International Interactions* 50, no. 6 (2024).

critical first step toward force projection and more proactive operations to protect civilians.

It is important to note that our analysis only captures the presence and military strength of peacekeeping bases. There are other ways for missions to enhance their responsiveness, such as through temporary operating bases. These bases allow peacekeepers to access more remote areas and demonstrate presence where civilians are at risk without setting up a permanent base. This kind of mobility is not captured in our finding.

Constraints on Mission Responsiveness

Several factors constrain the responsiveness of peacekeeping missions to violence against civilians. First, attacks against peacekeepers have been a long-standing problem over the past decade, particularly in high-risk environments where non-state actors reject the unique and protected status of UN peacekeepers. According to UN data, malicious acts against peacekeepers have been a consistent issue over the years, with an average of nearly 33 peacekeepers killed per year between 2012 and 2022.¹⁹ Non-state actors may target peacekeepers to signal their strength and compensate for their inability to make substantial military gains in their conflict with the government.²⁰ Given the importance of force protection within peacekeeping operations, the presence of armed groups that openly attack peacekeepers limits the ability of missions to carry out their mandates.

Second, non-state actors often have an advantage over peacekeepers in terms of their mobility and familiarity with the terrain. For example, during rainy seasons, peacekeepers have limited access to remote areas as roads deteriorate. Rebels and militias, however, have other means of transporta-

tion and can take advantage of the challenging environment. In fact, our data shows an increase in violence against civilians by non-state actors during rainy seasons. Even if UN missions try to improve how their military capacity is distributed, they cannot always respond to violence effectively. This means that peacekeeping presence does not necessarily equate to effective protection of civilians. It is, nevertheless, an important first step.

A Closer Look at MINUSCA

While cross-mission analysis can point to general trends, examining specific cases can generate deeper insight into how the conflict context, political dynamics, and mission support shape the responsiveness of peacekeepers to violence against civilians. The UN mission in the Central African Republic (CAR) has been deployed since 2014, with the challenging task of protecting civilians in a context with multiple armed groups with different

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tactics and goals. Yet popular support for the mission is relatively high, with 71 percent of respondents reporting a very favorable or favorable opinion of

MINUSCA, according to a survey conducted by the mission in May 2022.²¹ MINUSCA has also enjoyed relatively strong host-state consent and close collaboration with the national government (although not without tensions), which has facilitated its POC efforts.²²

Figure 4 shows the intensity of violence against civilians throughout MINUSCA's deployment. While violence peaked dramatically in the early phase of the mission, fatality levels have decreased significantly over time, with a few spikes in 2016 and 2017. These findings suggest that MINUSCA has been relatively successful in curbing the most extreme violence against civilians but that violence has persisted throughout the mission's presence.

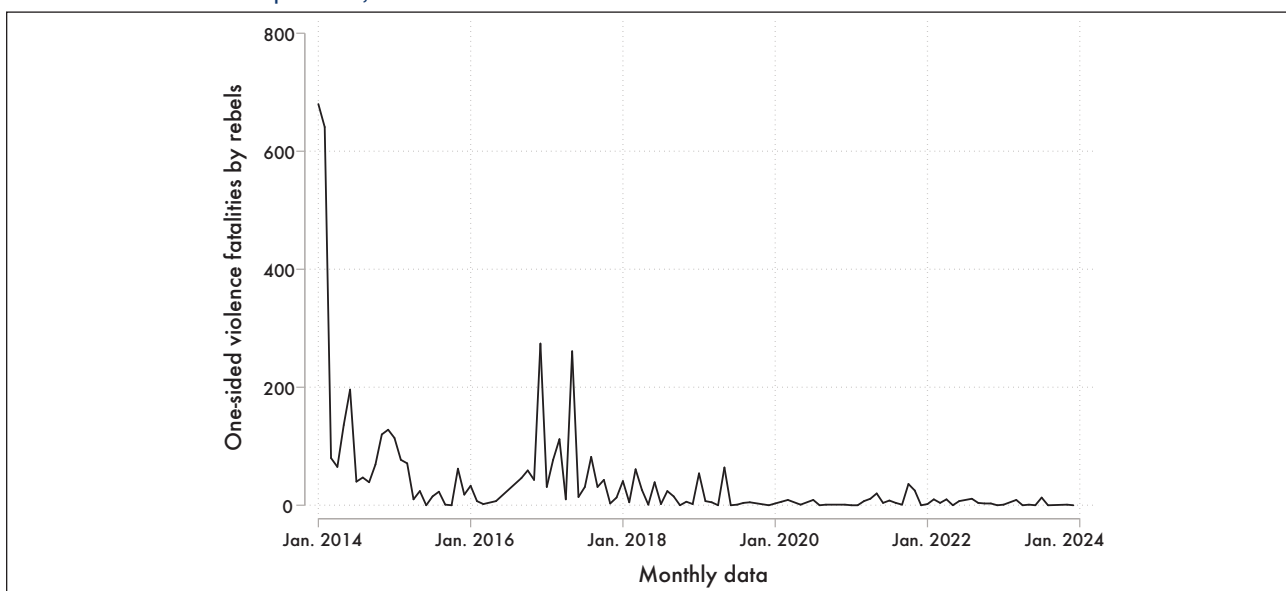
¹⁹ UN Peacekeeping, "Fatalities," available at <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/fatalities>.

²⁰ Hanne Fjelde, Lisa Hultman, and Sara Lindberg Bromley, "Offsetting Losses: Bargaining Power and Rebel Attacks against Peacekeepers," *International Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (2016).

²¹ Trithart, "Local Perceptions of UN Peacekeeping."

²² Allard Duursma, Sara Lindberg Bromley, and Aditi Gorur, "The Impact of Host-State Consent on the Protection of Civilians in UN Peacekeeping," *Civil Wars* 26, no. 1 (2023).

Figure 4. Monthly fatality counts in one-sided violence by non-state actors in the Central African Republic, 2014–2023



The conflict landscape in CAR has been complex and has included a myriad of actors. One of the largest groups, the anti-Balaka, has operated all over the southern part of the country and has killed thousands of civilians. It has also fought several other armed groups in CAR. The largest of those, the Popular Front for the Renaissance of CAR (*Front populaire pour la renaissance de la Centrafrique*, or FPRC), had its stronghold in the north and has also killed many civilians—especially in the south when fighting the anti-Balaka. Unity for Peace in CAR (*Unité pour la paix en Centrafrique*, or UPC), the third largest group, with its bases in a smaller area in the central-south, was most active in attacking civilians in 2016 and 2017. In addition to these groups, numerous smaller groups and fluid alliances contributed to both intergroup violence and attacks on the civilian population.

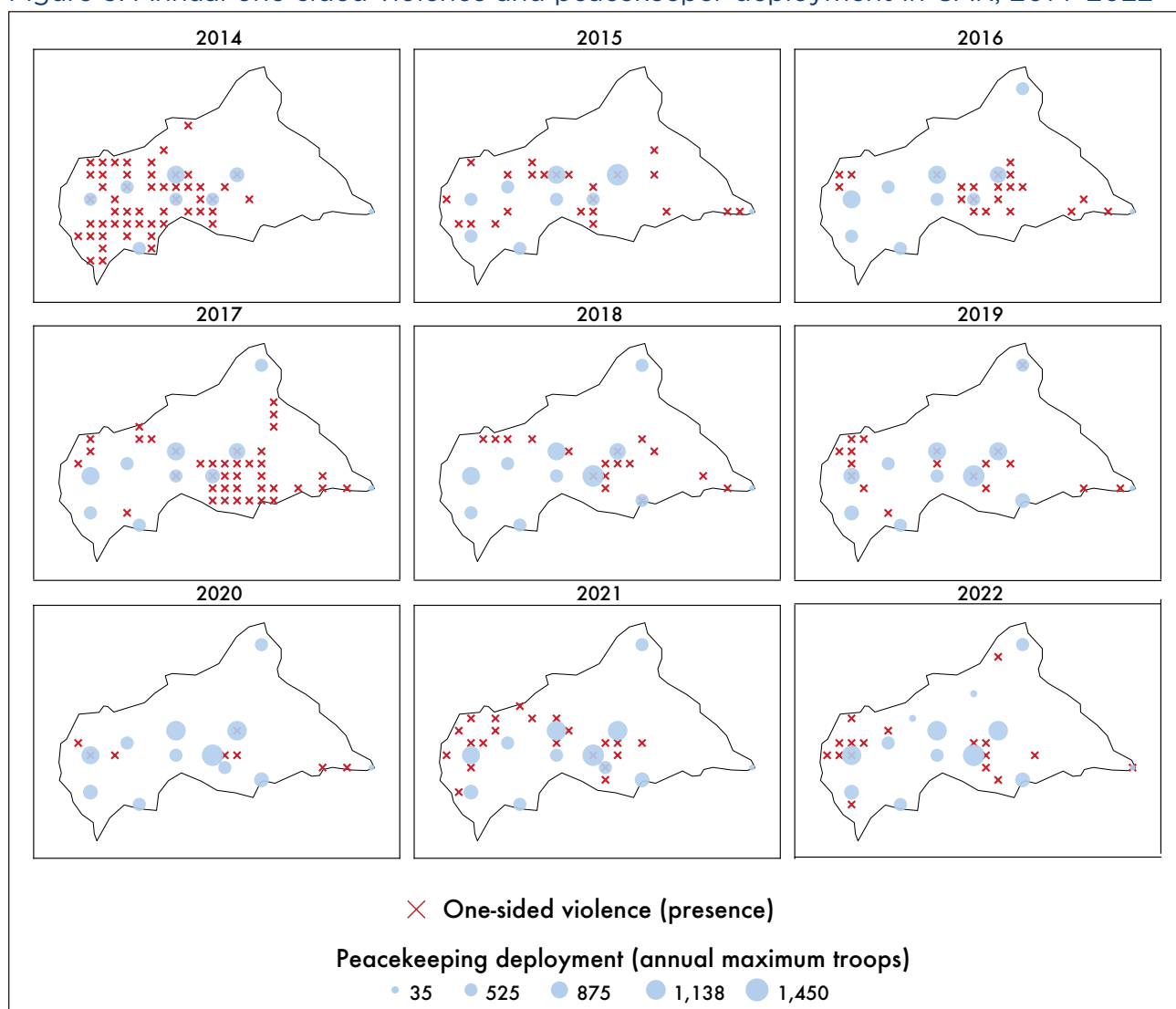
Figure 5 disaggregates these temporal patterns spatially, summarizing the geocoded data by year to show how the violence against civilians moved spatially and how the mission redeployed. When the mission first deployed in 2014, there was widespread targeting of civilians, and the bases were located in the areas of most intense violence. In 2015, the violence against civilians continued but at lower levels and was less spread out across the country.

MINUSCA also enhanced its presence in the south-west. In 2017, attacks on civilians were largely concentrated to the central-south, where MINUSCA eventually strengthened its presence by increasing deployments to existing bases in the area. In subsequent years, violence continued to shift geographically, albeit at lower levels, and MINUSCA also shifted its deployments and set up new bases to enhance its military presence in more locations.

Early in its deployment, MINUSCA's POC strategy was primarily reactive rather than preventive. Over time, however, the mission sought to shift toward a more proactive and preventive approach by increasing patrols, preemptively deploying forces, and strengthening community-based alert systems. In high-risk areas like Bambari, Bria, and Alindao, it established joint protection teams and temporary operating bases to deter attacks. Joint protection teams were composed of UN civilian, police, and military personnel with the primary function of performing security and threat analysis and early-warning assessment. They also built confidence by meeting with local authorities and armed groups in remote areas. However, gaps in information sharing between the military and civilian components and peacekeepers' limited mobility, and slow response times have constrained these efforts.²³

23 This analysis is based on Ornella Corsant-Colat's own experience from working in the mission.

Figure 5. Annual one-sided violence and peacekeeper deployment in CAR, 2014–2022



While this map suggests that MINUSCA has been relatively responsive to shifting patterns of violence in the country, there remain large areas without permanent bases and thus limited peacekeeping presence. The mission's capacity to protect civilians also varied across CAR. As with many complex peacekeeping operations, the resources on the ground did not match the mandate from the Security Council.²⁴ This mismatch had consequences for the mission's legitimacy vis-à-vis the population. In places where MINUSCA did not sufficiently challenge the armed groups that had

filled the power vacuum left by the state, people were more critical of the mission's performance.²⁵ Large parts of the country remain effectively ungoverned, and armed groups frequently reassert control in areas where peacekeepers have a limited presence. What is more, military actors with links to Russia have been operating in the country since 2018, further complicating the security landscape.²⁶

Confronting armed groups is not the only way of improving the protection of civilians. For example, MINUSCA has also organized community-based

24 International Peace Institute, "Prioritizing and Sequencing Security Council Mandates in 2023: The Case of MINUSCA," November 2023.

25 Tim Glawion, "Living Up to Popular Expectations during Intervention: Filling Voids and Confronting Spoilers in the Central African Republic and Beyond," *International Peacekeeping* 32, no. 3 (2025).

26 Lotte Vermeij et al., "UN Peacekeeping Operations at a Crossroads: The Implementation of Protection Mandates in Contested and Congested Spaces," Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2022.

dialogues in conflict-prone areas like Bambari and Bria, engaging with community leaders and civil society to reduce tensions.²⁷ It has also implemented quick-impact projects to stabilize communities and rebuild trust between civilians and state security forces. What this case illustrates is that military responsiveness to escalating threats to civilians is only one part of the solution. It needs to be part of a broader political strategy for changing the incentives of actors to work towards peace.²⁸

Conclusion

Protection of civilians is a key priority for UN peacekeeping. Yet many missions lack sufficient means to address violence and are challenged by armed actors that do not view them as impartial. Despite these obstacles, our research shows that UN missions are responsive to violence against civilians. To protect civilians in a mission's area of operation, peacekeepers need to be present where civilians are most at risk.

Of course, the most successful POC strategy is a preventive one: a preemptive deployment in areas where civilians are at risk of violence in the near future, before any atrocities take place.²⁹

Nevertheless, with limited capacity and often limited intelligence, peacekeepers are also frequently expected to respond more reactively and “do what they can.”

Our research findings point to a set of important considerations for peacekeeping stakeholders with a strong commitment to POC. First, our data-driven insights into mission responsiveness indicate that missions not only aspire to protect civilians against evolving threats but are also in many cases actively doing so. A key ingredient in this responsiveness is operational flexibility. Second, while the difficulty of maintaining host-state consent can constrain the effective protection of civilians,³⁰ missions can sometimes act decisively even in politically sensitive settings. Nonetheless, the political consensus around POC as a key imperative for peacekeeping is crucial to sustain to pressure host governments to cooperate and enable peacekeeping missions to respond to violence. Finally, the findings in this brief underscore the importance of mandates and peacekeeping planning frameworks that allow for dynamic force deployment. In this period of reflection on how to adapt peace operations for the future, missions require ongoing support to adapt to evolving threats to civilians.

²⁷ Observation based on Corsant-Colat's experience working in MINUSCA.

²⁸ Jenna Russo and Ralph Mamiya. “The Primacy of Politics and the Protection of Civilians in UN Peacekeeping.” International Peace Institute, December 2022.

²⁹ Unfortunately, these success stories are not captured by our data; if missions are effective in prevention, there is nothing to observe.

³⁰ Duursma et al., “The Impact of Host-State Consent.”

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777 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017-3521, USA

TEL +1-212-687-4300 FAX +1-212-983-8246

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