

Examining the Longer-Term Effects of COVID-19 on UN Peacekeeping Operations

May 13, 2020 by Cedric de Coning

The SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus has forced United Nations peacekeeping missions to reassess which of their activities are essential for carrying out their mandated responsibilities. Missions have also had to adapt operations to minimize the risk of spreading the virus to both the people the UN is tasked to protect, and to the peacekeepers themselves.

Peacekeepers part of the UN Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) conducting a mission to strengthen protection of civilians and to raise awareness of preventative measures for COVID-19 in Kivwanja, DRC. (MONUSCO/Flickr)

Some of these new practices are specific to the pandemic and will change over time in response to the severity of the risk the virus poses. Others are likely to be more lasting, including a more essentialist approach to mandate implementation and adaptive approach to planning and mission management.

The most severe disruption to UN peacekeeping is likely to be caused by a side effect of the COVID-19 pandemic: a global economic recession. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) recently **changed their global economic forecast** for 2019 from 3.3 percent growth to 3 percent contraction. The 2008 global financial crisis already **contracted UN peacekeeping** funds by approximately 20 percent, and the COVID-19 pandemic may reduce it by a further 30 to 50 percent.

The United States, one of the countries most affected by COVID-19, is also the largest financial contributor to the UN peacekeeping budget and is already in **arrears** on its commitments. Those countries that have contributed the most peacekeepers in the past—**Ethiopia, Rwanda, Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan**—may also come under domestic pressure to reduce troop numbers for financial or coronavirus risk-related reasons.

In the medium term of 12 to 18 months, UN peacekeeping operations may be faced with a situation where they will have 30 to 50 percent less capacity than today. It is **unlikely** that the risk to civilians in these situations will change significantly for the better in the short to medium term. The **more likely scenario** is that the effects of the coronavirus, coupled with other factors such as climate change, will increase instability and risk. This will raise the pressure on UN peacekeeping operations to further improve the **effectiveness of their operations**, while they are already under pressure with shrinking finances and operational environments constrained by the coronavirus.

In the short term, peacekeeping operations will have to manage a number of other challenges. In some countries there are fears, rumors, and even active disinformation campaigns that foreign peacekeepers are responsible for spreading the virus. In South Sudan, for instance, government forces have **put up checkpoints** outside UN compounds in several locations to stop or reduce UN movements. These actions have also **impacted** the approximately 150,000 people sheltering in UN protection of civilian camps.

The UN has to manage similar fears and rumors in the **Central African Republic**, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Mali. Relatively straightforward questions such as whether troops should wear masks become more complex, as doing so in situations where that is not the norm may only increase such fear, rather than reassure the population.

To address these concerns and to avoid any risk that the UN may become a vector in the spread of the disease, peacekeeping mission operations have been **limited to the most essential**. These include patrols and activities related to protection of civilians, convoy escorts and other forms of support to humanitarian assistance, force protection, protecting key infrastructure, and support to host state institutions and local authorities. Those operations that are continuing have been adapted to avoid social proximity, for instance by not dismounting in populated areas.

Missions try to compensate for the loss of social interaction with increased outreach in other areas. For example, UN radio stations like **Radio Okapi** in the DRC and **Radio Miraya** in South Sudan are helping to share accurate information about the coronavirus in local languages. In most missions, **Quick Impact Projects** and programmatic funding have been repurposed to help local authorities and institutions prepare for and cope with the virus.

In order to reduce risk to host populations and peacekeepers alike, the UN has frozen all rotations until June 30. Among the approximately 80,000 soldiers and police officers currently deployed, 20 to 40 percent are due to be rotated home and replaced in the next few months. There will thus be significant demand in July and August on the available airlift capacity and logistical personnel. All new troops rotating in will go into quarantine for 14 days, which poses another logistical challenge. It also means they can't be operational over this period, which increases the workload on the rest of the units.

COVID-19 has also changed the way many civilian functions are utilized. Almost all staff are working from their homes or mission accommodations, and approximately 5 to 10 percent of international civilian staff are now working from outside the mission area. This means that almost all work is now being done electronically, including via video-conferencing, and this has forced the UN to adopt, or speed-up the implementation of digital approval and related processes. This will modernize the way the UN utilizes some civilian functions in future.

The shared challenge has also resulted in closer cooperation among peacekeeping missions and the rest of the UN system. UN agencies are relying on missions for medical treatment, protection, and evacuation, and missions and agencies are cooperating on the procurement and distribution of personal protection equipment and other COVID-19 related equipment.

In the next few months, the UN's Fifth Committee will **consider** the peacekeeping budget for the upcoming financial year. Hopefully, UN member states will show the same agility that missions have demonstrated over the past 50 days, and afford missions flexibility in the use of funds, as this will be necessary for them to continue adapting to rapidly changing circumstances. Thus far, UN headquarters and peacekeeping missions have demonstrated **remarkable resilience** in this regard. Some of the changes they have implemented are specific to the pandemic period and will be reversed when circumstances allow. Others are more systemic and will change the way the UN undertakes peacekeeping in the future. Irrespective of country context or ability to be flexible, all missions will likely face a significant reduction in funding and troops over the medium term as peacekeeping contracts in lockstep with the global economy.

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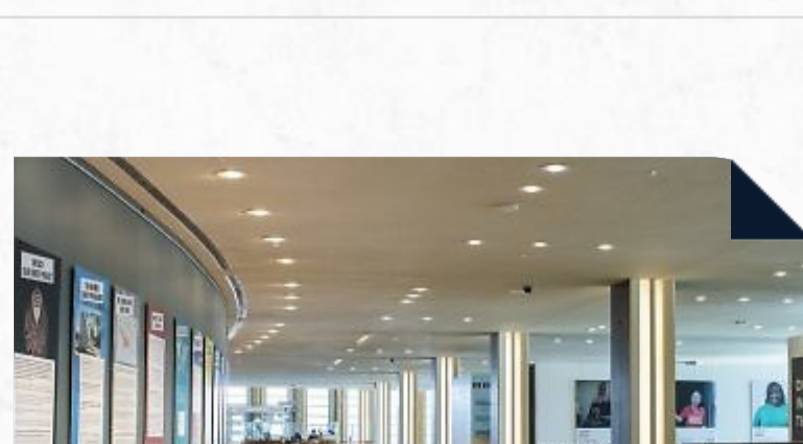


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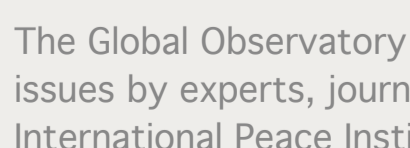
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