



Give Peacekeeping a Chance

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29 May 2019

Peacekeeping often gets a bad rap and is coming under increasing budgetary pressure. But when one looks at the broader picture, peacekeeping is a surprisingly effective tool.

May 29 is International Day of UN Peacekeepers, when the United Nations honors its nearly 4,000 members who [gave their lives](#) in the service of peace. Today, there are nearly [100,000](#) UN peacekeepers stationed in [14](#) different conflict zones. In other words, there are more blue helmets deployed in conflicts around the world today than any other type of uniformed troop.

Peacekeeping, however, is poorly understood. It often gets a [bad rap](#) in the media, its [mandates](#) are confusing, and it is coming under increasing [budgetary pressure](#). But peacekeeping works. According to more than two dozen statistical studies, peacekeeping is a surprisingly effective tool for saving lives and ending wars. My new book, *Power in Peacekeeping*, explains how peacekeepers exercise power to attain their goals. Below I explore the record of UN peacekeeping, how it works, mandate confusion, and why peacekeeping is worth funding.

The record of peacekeeping effectiveness

When we read about peacekeeping in the media, we often hear about [sexual abuse](#) and [exploitation](#) or other [peacekeeping failures](#). (Note that the abuse makes headlines, but not the [significant steps](#) the UN has made to stem and prevent the problems.) Moreover, of the current 14 missions, the “big five” in the Central African Republic, Darfur, the Democratic Republic of the Congo,

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Mali, and South Sudan are not generally progressing well toward implementing their mandates.

When one steps back, however, and surveys the [general picture](#), it turns out that peacekeeping is a surprisingly effective tool. Of the 16 complex peacekeeping missions completed since the end of the Cold War, 11 have successfully implemented their mandates and departed the countries. None of those countries has returned to civil war. That is a 2/3 success rate—considerably higher than, for example, [the success rates for counterinsurgency](#). In the most recent of the UN's successfully-completed multidimensional missions—Eastern Slavonia, Timor Leste, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, and Liberia—UN peacekeepers deployed after, or in tandem with, regular military forces (a point to which I will return below).

Recently, my colleagues [Barbara Walter](#), [V. Page Fortna](#) and I reviewed more than two dozen statistical studies of peacekeeping, and the results surprised us. Researchers from different universities around the world—with different funding streams, using different data sets, and controlling for everything one can imagine—have found consistently positive results for peacekeeping in civil wars. The findings can be grouped into four main types. 1) Warring parties are [more likely](#) to reach a negotiated settlement when there is a [promise of UN peacekeepers](#) to oversee the agreement. 2) Peacekeepers contain the geographic spread of war, both [within, and across borders](#). 3) All else equal, [peacekeepers save lives](#), both [military](#) and [civilian](#). 4) Civil wars often restart, but they are [shorter](#), and recur [less often](#) when [peacekeepers](#) are [present](#). All told, peacekeeping enjoys a surprisingly positive record of statistical correlation. But correlation does not reveal underlying causal mechanisms. How do peacekeepers change behavior? In other words, how do they exercise power?

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How peacekeeping works

Peacekeeping is not warfighting. Although the vast majority of peacekeepers are uniformed troops, they do not use firepower to achieve their ends. Each UN peacekeeping mission is made of **troops from dozens of different countries**. Peacekeepers do not train together in advance, speak each other's languages, or follow a standard military chain of command. They also must abide by the **three doctrinal rules of peacekeeping**: consent of the warring parties, impartiality, and the limited use of force. These basic facts mean that peacekeepers cannot fight their way to peace. But somehow, peacekeepers get to peace more often than not. If we think of power as the ability of one actor to get another to change its behavior, peacekeepers effectively exercise power in three forms: persuasion, inducement, and coercion short of the offensive use of force.

Persuasion is the most common type of power that peacekeepers employ. Most of the time, when confronted with obstacles, peacekeepers *mediate* to prevent disputes from escalating. When talking doesn't work, peacekeepers go up the chain of command to ask leaders to employ the key psychological motivator of public *shame*. Additionally, peacekeepers engage in numerous *symbolic displays* that are intended to convey their message of peace (e.g., by patrolling in white vehicles and wearing blue hats). Peacekeepers also use symbols in their *outreach and information* campaigns, wherein peacekeepers engage directly with people in local communities to try to understand their needs, and convey the intentions of peacekeepers. Finally, peacekeepers increasingly rely on *education and training* programs. Ultimately, persuasion is difficult to achieve, and it is only effective if peacekeepers agree on their central political message (which is a big "if"). Peacekeepers must also work to understand the

citizens who are the targets of the messaging, and behave in ways consistent with the message (which means not exploiting or abusing the people whom peacekeepers are sent to protect). Persuasion, or soft power, is not material in nature, unlike the other two forms of power.

Inducement is about giving and taking things away, and building institutions to regulate behavior. *Humanitarian and development aid* come in many forms, and are sometimes effective for inducing behavior change. Such carrots are often employed in conjunction with deprivation tactics in the forms of *market restrictions*—weapons bans, mineral trade limits, and economic sanctions. Peacekeepers also induce by [helping to build state institutions](#) that steer behavior toward peaceful dispute resolution. Effective inducement is predicated on the peacekeepers possessing the means to induce, and coordinating inducements with a persuasive/political strategy.

Coercion is the most confusing aspect of power in peacekeeping.

Peacekeepers wear military uniforms, and they are usually armed, but they do not possess the capacity or resolve to employ kinetic force, or as [Thomas Shelling](#) would say, “compellence.” Actual military forces may have the capacity and resolve to compel, but not U.N. peacekeepers. Building on Schelling’s work, Robert Art delineated several essential forms of military power in his classic 1980 article, [To What Ends Military Power?](#) Militaries exercise compellence, deterrence (preventing an attack by possessing the capacity and resolve for counter attack), and defense (the ability to ward off attack). The military requirements for defense are much lower than compellence or military-based deterrence. Peacekeepers may defend themselves and civilians, but they cannot compel or deter militarily (they may deter through persuasion or inducement, but not the credible threat of counter-attack). I would add

surveillance and arrest to the panoply of coercive instruments that military and peacekeeping forces alike sometimes use. In sum, peacekeepers may deter, defend, surveil, and arrest, but unlike actual military forces, they cannot—by doctrine and design—exercise the power of compellence.

Mandate confusion, budget cuts, and unintended consequences

United Nations peacekeeping is not designed to exercise power by using force, but there is considerable confusion surrounding peacekeeping mandates. All current multidimensional missions are *mandated to use force* to protect civilians, but they are *not designed or equipped* to use force effectively. Some voices from within the U.N. system are calling for peacekeepers to “*use overwhelming force and be proactive and preemptive.*” This mixing of peacekeeping and military power is partly why the current “big five” missions are faltering. A case illustration serves to clarify.

When I was conducting field research in the Central African Republic in 2015, I saw firsthand the ways in which French Special Forces exercised compellence. If armed groups attacked civilians, they would be hit back by the French; the armed groups therefore stopped attacking. These limited-mandate French *Sangaris* forces were deployed alongside U.N. peacekeepers, who had a broad, multi-dimensional mandate. The U.N. Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) were doing all the things peacekeepers do pretty well—*persuading* by mediating disputes, *inducing* by helping to build state institutions, and *coercing* by surveilling and arresting leaders of armed groups. The division of labor between green and blue helmets worked admirably from 2014-2016.

The civilian killing stopped, displaced people returned home, and the economy re-started. Then the French troops withdrew in the midst of a [sex abuse scandal](#), and everything fell apart. United Nations peacekeepers were handed the compellence mandate before the national army had been re-established (it was partially trained, but not equipped because of an international weapons ban). After the departure of the French (and the American special forces in the southeast, who were recalled from their search for Joseph Kony), the U.N. peacekeepers were unable to hold the line; armed groups took control. To this day, armed groups control about 80 percent of this mineral-rich, landlocked territory the size of Texas. Last week, armed groups killed [more than fifty Central African civilians](#), and beheaded an [elderly Catholic nun](#) from Spain.

Civil war is an important driver of first-order threats such as [international terrorism](#) and [displacement](#). Peacekeeping is the most effective means of ending civil wars (especially when blue helmets are backed by green helmets who can compel). If we want less terrorism, more burden-sharing, and lower U.S. costs for counter-terrorism, it makes sense to invest in peacekeeping. The current U.S. administration is putting pressure on the United Nations to [cut budgets](#). By [June of 2019](#), the United States will be about [\\$1 billion in arrears](#) to the United Nations, which directly threatens the work of several crucial, life-saving U.N. peacekeeping missions. These moves are penny wise, pound foolish. Peacekeeping works. Let's give it a chance.

Image credit: [US Army photo/public domain](#).

About the author

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