



# **Challenges of Peacekeeping in Authoritarian Settings**

*Final Report from Expert Roundtable*

King's College London

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The expert roundtable brought together academics and practitioners to examine the challenges that UN peacekeeping operations face when deployed to host states where elites engage in authoritarian practices. Relations with host states are a delicate matter in any context but dealing with illiberal or autocratic elites poses particular difficulties. Contemporary peacekeeping missions are often mandated to pursue a range of liberal goals, while national elites may have different preferences or priorities. Peacekeepers also face a dilemma when their mandate requires that they work closely with host governments to extend state authority and strengthen the capacity of the security services; in these contexts, fulfilling their peacekeeping mandate may entail bolstering authorities who engage in repressive practices and political violence. Peacekeepers also often operate in complex environments where multiple international actors pursue a variety of peacebuilding objectives. Peacekeepers must therefore calibrate their responses in light of their international partners' actions.

The Roundtable was divided into three panels, each of which examined a specific theme. These included:

- (1) Working with host governments and national security forces;
- (2) Unintended consequences of democracy promotion;
- (3) Challenges of supporting democratization in a crowded field.

The following summary of presents the key issues and concerns raised by panellists and participants.

### **Context of the Roundtable**

The roundtable was hosted as part of a major research project on [Democratization and UN Peacebuilding](#), funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (November 2018 – October 2022). The project team includes Prof Oisín Tansey (King's College London), Prof Sarah von Billerbeck (University of Reading), Dr Birte Gippert (University of Liverpool), and Dr Kseniya Oksamytna (City, University of London). The project focuses on the challenges that UN peacekeeping operations face when deployed to non-democratic host countries. Most peacekeeping missions take place in authoritarian contexts and seek to overcome the legacies of conflict in part by assisting with transitions to democratic rule. However, most regimes that experience peacekeeping still retain some form of authoritarian rule after the peace operation leaves. In recent years, some commentators and scholars have begun to ask if international

peacekeepers may actually play a role in contributing to the stability of authoritarian host governments. In this project, we examine the relationship between peacebuilding and authoritarianism and explore the ways in which peacekeeping operations may inadvertently contribute to authoritarian behaviours by host country authorities.



## Summary of Discussions

### *Panel 1: Working with host governments and national security forces.*

This panel considered the dynamics of working with host governments and national security forces in UN peacekeeping operations, including the challenges of managing relationships with national counterparts and the role of consent. How can the UN work with local political and military elites whose goals are not completely aligned with international peacekeepers' objectives in terms of democratization, human rights, and political openness? Under what circumstances (if any) should the UN compromise on its goals, hold firm, or even walk away?

The panel discussion quickly established that many of these issues apply not only to the UN, but also to other international and regional actors. Several key themes emerged: leverage and

consent, priorities and compromises, and partnerships. First, participants highlighted the trade-off between international leverage and the risk of losing host government consent. Peace operations have several sources of leverage (such as quick impact projects, programmatic funding, or information-sharing) that they could use to influence the host government. This leverage can, however, be weakened by mandates that are not fit for purpose; downward pressures on peacekeeping budgets; underequipped troop- and police-contributing countries; and fluctuating political support for the operation depending on great powers' interests.

Peace operations face serious constraints when they have to implement their mandates without active support of the host state. In the context of protection of civilians, for example, peace operations may lack resources or opportunities for acting decisively, particularly if violence against civilians is perpetrated by state security forces. The need to gain and retain the consent of the host government limits peacekeepers' options. As one participant noted, 'you need the state' for a plethora of practical aspects such as visas, getting through checkpoints, or customs clearance. This role of the host state in enabling peace operations to function was referred to as 'reverse leverage'.





It was noted that the complex political settlements that exist in countries emerging from war can make it difficult for UN peacekeepers to engage productively with state authorities, especially where the risk of a relapse into extreme violence is high. Together, these constrain the ability of missions to pressure political elites to abide by democratic, human rights, and civilian protection norms. Furthermore, participants noted that the narrow understanding of consent as the consent of the host government, rather than of all conflict parties or the broader civil society, has created a situation in which stabilization and efforts to reach an inclusive political settlement may be pursued in parallel rather than together. In this situation, peace operations function well if there is a fortunate alignment of interests in sustainable peace and human rights between the host government and the international community.

Second, peace operations have multiple mandated objectives, which can clash and therefore require prioritization and/or sequencing. Usually, a UN mission, backed by the Security Council, will prioritize stability and avoiding a relapse into conflict, even if it means that democratization and justice do not take centre stage for a period of time. Often, the problem is state weakness – ‘violent degradation of state institutions’ – rather than host government’s ability to engage in systematic and sophisticated repression. As one participant noted, ‘the UN reacts to violence, not authoritarianism’. Importantly, the way in which peace operations prioritize mandate objectives has implications for their legitimacy, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Haiti have experienced a popular backlash against UN missions that were seen as failing to deliver on promises relating to protection of civilians or democratization. The compromises entailed by the prioritization of certain objectives raised the question of what the UN should focus on. Protection of civilians and rule of law were key suggestions.

Finally, this discussion segued into the question of whether Western states’ use of human rights and democracy-related language alienated international partners. Some participants noted a change in vocabulary, away from ‘democracy’ and towards ‘constitutional order’ to accommodate countries such as China. At the same time, it was pointed out that rights-based language is not purely a Western concept, with, for example, Afrobarometer surveys continually showing a popular demand for civil and human rights across the African continent.

*Panel 2: Unintended consequences of democracy promotion*

This panel addressed the unintended consequences of democracy promotion in the context of peacekeeping. UN peace operations often seek to promote democratic governance but in divided societies, this can raise the risk of conflict. Is there an inherent tension between promoting democracy and promoting peace? Does electoral competition threaten political stability? Does the need to keep all parties committed to the peace process lead to a lowering of electoral standards?

The discussion centred on the role of elections in peace operations and for transitions from conflict more generally, the difference between democracy (or democratization) and elections, and the risks to stability arising from electoral competition. First, elections signal the beginning of a transition from conflict to peace, legitimize the transition, and can serve as an important symbol of change in the eyes of the population. Peace operations focus on elections (rather than other forms of democracy support) because they provide a clear exit strategy, offer a natural entry point for international assistance, and are a visible sign of progress.



However, elections after conflict can also reproduce exclusionary politics and create a false promise of representation. Elite bargains at the conclusion of the conflict often leave very little space for other local actors to be involved and can hence lower the quality of democracy and create popular disillusionment. For example, gender is rarely addressed in a comprehensive manner in such settlements. Peace operations often reproduce pre-existing structures through follow-on elections, continuing the cycle of exclusion. Peace operations can lose popular legitimacy if they are viewed as tools used by elites to maintain a status quo that marginalizes certain groups.

Participants rejected the idea that there is an inherent tension between peace and democracy, but pointed out that the *process* of democratization can be risky, noting specifically that the competitive nature of elections can lead to violence. It is therefore questionable whether elections necessarily build trust or legitimacy, and participants stressed they should be part of a broader political process. This means trying to mitigate the consequences of ‘winner-take-it-all’ politics and finding ways to prevent the losing side from rejecting the electoral outcome. Participants emphasized that developing democracy takes time and requires concerted efforts by elites and societies. Throughout history, state formation has been a long-term process often linked with war and violence. Therefore, expecting conflict-affected societies to completely transform themselves during relatively short tenures of peacekeeping missions is rarely realistic. At the same time, peacekeeping operations can help lay foundations for such transformations.

Overall, participants suggested that there may be an inherent tension between stability and elections, with the latter often used as shorthand for peace and democracy. Neutral and effective post-election arbitration can help mitigate the risk of return to violence, and thus set the stage for longer-term democratization to take hold.

### *Panel 3: Challenges of supporting democratization in a crowded field*

This panel addressed the challenges for UN peace operations of working with various partners and stakeholders. The peacebuilding field is increasingly crowded, which raises issues such as donor coordination and the balance between local ownership and international priorities.

The discussion raised several issues, including the complexity of partnership and practical strategies for improving coordination and avoiding silos. First, the complexity of partnership

in conflict-affected states is visible at multiple levels. At the local level, the proliferation of actors involved in peace processes can complicate UN's work, especially if there is a disconnect between their and the UN's goals and norms. At the same time, this diversity of actors can aid the peace process and local communities. Furthermore, the diversity of tools that peace operations use beyond their core military and police duties can help build a foundation for democratization: for example, some UN peacekeeping missions have succeeded in leaving behind public radio broadcasters and revitalized media environments. Participants noted how the UN has improved community engagement, which nevertheless may be difficult to square with the UN's focus on the state. There are concerns that the phrase 'the primacy of politics' has become synonymous with a focus on national-level political elites as opposed to involving actors from different sectors of the society. At the regional level, there are issues of coordination with regional organisations. Participants raised the question of whether the UN can 'lead from behind'. At the international level, geopolitics remained crucial, particularly the influence of China's and Russia's actions in Africa.





Second, in terms of improving institutional coordination, there are likewise three relevant levels. The structural level was considered ‘personality driven’ and participants suggested improving coordination by embedding it into accountability and/or performance frameworks. At the institutional level, an easy starting point for facilitating communication and coordination is engaging with like-minded actors, but the challenge is to extend engagement to those with differing viewpoints. At the strategic level, institutions should consider their comparative advantages when coordinating work and tasks. Many resist doing so, as it involves acknowledging weaknesses, but the focus should be on joint results and, ideally, analysis. Overall, setting realistic expectations and convincing other actors of potentially powerful advantages were stressed as key to successful coordination. But as one participant noted, ‘coordination is more of an art than a science’. The challenge of operating in a crowded field was to avoid being instrumentalized by national elites.

Overall, the participants have noted good practices in supporting transitions to peace and democracy as well as considerable challenges posed by the changing understanding of consent, deepening geopolitical differences within the international community, and the proliferation of peacebuilding actors.

#### *Participants:*

- Prof **Mats Berdal**, Professor of Security and Development, King’s College London
- Dr **Christine Cheng**, Senior Lecturer in International Relations, King’s College London
- Dr **Katharina Coleman**, Associate Professor of Political Science, University of British Columbia
- Dr **Anjali Dayal**, Associate Professor of International Politics, Fordham University
- Mr **Alan Doss**, Chair of the Peace Advisory Board of the UN Institute for Training and Research
- Mr **Kenny Gluck**, Professor of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University
- Dr **Jibecke Joensson**, Head of Brussels Office, CMI - Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation
- Mr **Josh Jorgensen**, UN and Peacekeeping Advisor, Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC)
- Dr **Mateja Peter**, Lecturer in International Relations, University of St Andrews
- Dr **Babu Rahman**, Senior Principal Research Analyst, UK Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office (FCDO)
- Dr **Jenna Russo**, Director of Research, International Peace Institute
- Ms **Helena Vazquez Sohlström**, Head of the Department for Governance, Folke Bernadotte Academy