

The Future of the Protection of Civilians in UN Peacekeeping Operations

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INTRODUCTION

As we enter the **third decade** of implementation of protection of civilians (POC) mandates in peacekeeping contexts, this note details possible trends, challenges and needs for the future of POC in peace operations over the next five-to-ten years. It explores the protection threats that are likely to arise, the contested but very possible continuation of POC mandates in peace operations, the political consensus on which a POC mandate could be based, and the array of policy and operational challenges that will arise under a range of scenarios.

I. ANALYSIS

The following analysis breaks down the future of POC, understood as three areas of concern:

- (1) the evolution of the **POC mandate** in UN peacekeeping
- (2) the evolution of **protection threats** weighing on civilians populations
- (3) the **practice** of protection in the field

A. MANDATING

Current trends offer an indication of the future of POC in mandating processes. The inclusion of POC in peacekeeping mandates is likely to be maintained, but will occur in a context of revitalized discussions on the concept itself, its expansion, and its possible politicization and manipulation. The POC mandate has traditionally focused on protecting civilians, broadly defined, from threats of physical violence. The mandate began in 1999 as a relatively minor aspect of a robust mission mandate in Sierra Leone but has become the Security Council's most common and most broad authorization for the use of force in the past two decades. The mandate often comes with a perceived emphasis on military means but DPO doctrine has clarified that POC employs the full range of a mission's political and programmatic capacities.

The POC agenda under stress

Peacekeeping stakeholders inside and outside the UN have long criticized the POC mandate as overambitious and have predicted a decrease in POC mandates, only to witness an increase in the breadth and scope of POC.¹ At the same time, a set of trends throws the future of the mandate into question:

- budgetary pressures will almost certainly result in smaller missions with fewer troops, if not a preference for special political missions, making the POC mandate appear unrealistic;
- fatigue with POC failure scandals will reduce the Council's appetite for POC mandates;
- retrenched US leadership, even if reinvigorated by a Biden administration, may not view POC as a central focus for multilateral efforts;

¹ For example, as a DPKO Office of Operations presenter opined in 2012 at an internal retreat, "in the next five years [2012-2017], we foresee a decrease in POC mandates and an increase in rule-of-law mandates in peacekeeping missions". The following year witnessed DPKO's most ambitious rule-of-law-oriented mission, UNMISS doubling-down on its POC mandate, and the next two missions, MINUSCA and MINUSMA, receiving substantial and forward-leaning POC mandates.

- deployments towards great-power proxy conflicts in Europe, the Middle East and East Asia, where Security Council members will be less adamant to include POC and will resort to more “niche” or “specialized” mandates;
- an increasingly influential China, which has historically tolerated the POC mandate in peacekeeping, but may become more assertive about the importance of host state consent and its hostility to human rights-related concepts in the Security Council, including POC (see below).

Continued use (and politicization) of POC

Despite these factors, there are a set of significant trends that point to a continued use of the POC mandate in the future. To understand them, however, it is important to recognize that the POC mandate has rarely been solely about protecting civilians, but rather has offered a convenient conceptual umbrella for Member States with a variety of interests and goals, many of which have never been solely about civilian protection.² The likelihood that civilians will continue to suffer in great numbers and, importantly, that technology will allow this suffering to be witnessed by billions around the world, often in real time, will only increase the already significant public attention paid to the moral imperative of POC, and encourage countries that have traditionally remained sensitive to public opinion and humanitarian concerns to support inclusion of POC in mandates. Finally, there will almost certainly continue to be a core set of important troop and police contributing countries that continue to support the POC mandate in some form, as a moral cause elevating the value of their participation in peacekeeping.

Most importantly, POC will continue to represent a **useful umbrella** concept to garner support for UN peacekeeping operations in the next five-to-ten years, and to maintain consensus around sensitive issues related to the use of force, stability operations, and host state support. As UN peacekeeping operations may face growing criticism, particularly from Western publics, for their support to states with questionable legitimacy and human rights records, Council members may wish to **maintain “POC” in mandates to better justify** deployments and “sell” them as community-based and people-centred endeavours. In addition, Member States comfortable and willing to use peace operations in more offensive capacities (such as the G5 Sahel, AMISOM and the MONUSCO FIB) may be unable to generate broad support, unless they resort to the language of POC to justify robust operations. Finally, with the human rights framework likely to be the locus of significant normative disagreement between, on one hand, China and Russia, and, on the other, Western powers, the language of POC may continue to be a useful compromise that allows each side to save face while pursuing respective national interests.

For example, potential deployments to West Africa (Cameroon, Niger, Burkina Faso), the Middle East (Yemen, Syria), South East Asia (Philippines, Myanmar) or the Mediterranean, will certainly be motivated by strategic interests relating to securing strategic installations and resources, countering insurgencies and terrorism, stopping migration, and restore “law and order” in areas of influence. For these deployments, POC mandates may offer a convenient political narrative to cover other interests.

² These include Member States such as the P-3, who viewed peacekeeping primarily as a military tool to promote stability, contain conflicts and expand influence in fragile states and ungoverned spaces; for P-3 allies (including even “neutral” European allies) and the international (Western) NGO community, which felt comfortable promoting a human rights- and humanitarian-based conceptual framework; for Troop Contributors and other peacekeeping stakeholder states who sought to remain engaged in peacekeeping without explicit adoption of the most robust mandates and appreciated the potential to interpret POC broadly. It should be noted that these understandings took time to develop and that the Secretariat played a role in diminishing the military aspects of POC and making it more palatable for some TCCs and other Member States, and that this trend towards a more civilian, “soft” POC concept is likely to continue.

In this context, the concept of POC is likely to be further **expanded, questioned and reframed to fit different contexts and different interests**. Mandates may frame POC in a way that further blurs the boundaries between humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping and stabilization. Distinguishing civilians from combatants, perpetrators from victims, and attackers from defenders will be more and more challenging, as the identity and intents of all stakeholders will grow intentionally vague. This will raise crucial questions on who are the “civilians” to be protected, and what should they be protected from.

China’s growing role and implications for POC.

The influence of China on future POC mandates also warrants discussion. Even if it historically opposed more contentious issues like R2P and human rights “naming and shaming”, China has been a cautious supporter of the POC agenda in the Security Council as it sought to take on a visible role in peacekeeping and protect its reputation as a “responsible great power.” China has generally promoted state sovereignty and equality between states but, at the same time, may remain open to robust POC mandates for peacekeeping operations where it conforms to other national interests, including supporting its expansion of political, economic or military influence.³ This trend is likely to continue.

On the other hand, P3 retrenchment for financial and ideological reasons could result in less pressure globally for non-Western states—including China but other non-aligned countries as well—to conform to current notions of a “responsible great power” that include endorsing some form of the POC or human rights agenda. A more assertive China may agree to continue deploying peace operations in situations where civilians are under threat, and to use the POC mandate as an umbrella concept to garner support from a wide range of Member States, but is likely to become more assertive in opposing the rights-based framework that lies at the heart of the POC mandate. At the same time, China may increasingly push towards a focus on “tier 3” POC (protection through building a protective environment), and, in particular, support to host states and development activities – which may contribute to further dilute the POC concept and pave the way to more partial (pro-government) POC approaches.

The reckoning over human rights

Human rights is the long-held “third pillar” of the United Nations and, while the next 5-10 years is unlikely to see a complete erosion of these norms, it may well witness China and like-minded countries work to **block human rights-specific mandates**.⁴ This may result in few-to-no new missions with human rights mandates, or even “monitoring” mandates (traditionally associated with human rights components) and a restricted space to name (much less shame) perpetrators of violations. The likely increase in “grey zone” actors, including private companies (including security/military contractors but also including technology companies that support cyber operations) will also create increased challenges for establishing accountability in an internationally recognized manner.

³ For the P3 and like-minded countries, POC mandates have historically represented a convergence of a set of norms and a set of tools: an interest in a “liberal order” based on human rights, on the one hand, and the projection of force through proxies (primarily non-western peacekeepers), on the other. To date, China has displayed mild opposition to the former normative framework, but an increasing yet cautious interest in the latter operational tool.

⁴ The United States, under some scenarios, could potentially be included amongst such like-minded countries and has blocked human rights language in many country-specific situations in the past. At the same time, likely US-Chinese competition and the reality that the US has a historical commitment to a rights-based framework and better international reputation on human rights issues means that the US is unlikely to join forces with China for a large-scale removal of human rights from the UN architecture. It is more likely that the US will selectively use human rights language and human rights mechanisms to try to frustrate Chinese ambitions and damage its international reputation, as with the Soviet Union.

Limitations or outright opposition to peace operations' involvement in human rights issues will impact their effectiveness to protect civilians even where POC mandates are clearly established.⁵ They might lead to **'à la carte' or fragmented POC/human rights mandates**, where the Council authorizes some POC/human rights goals but not the full range of activities required to make those goals achievable. For instance, the Council may authorize POC without human rights monitoring, limiting the mission's situational awareness and its ability to understand protection challenges. Even from member states that are traditionally supportive of human rights agenda, policy preferences might shift towards human rights compliance frameworks that emphasize collaborative and capacity-building approaches with states, rather than monitoring, investigating, and public reporting.

B. POC THREATS & CHALLENGES

The conflicts of the middle-twenty-first century are likely to see a continued targeting of the civilian population to spread fear and establish political-economic leverage, as in Darfur and the Democratic Republic of the Congo; a disregard for protected people and infrastructure in the means and methods of warfare, as in Yemen; and an increasing "grey zone" conflict designed to disrupt targets' economic and political capabilities, as in Ukraine. They will be aggravated by new trends that the UN will need to grapple with, including (but not limited to) **"grey zone" and hybrid conflict**; peacekeepers called upon to respond to **complex humanitarian emergencies**; **social unrest and state-society relations**, with potential implications for **urban conflict**; the increased influence of new **technologies** and effects of the digital age; the prevalence of **infodemics**, among others.

"Grey zone" and hybrid conflict

A significant dynamic for peace operations in the coming decade may be an increase in the number and sophistication of both hybrid and "grey zone" conflicts, as powerful states compete against each other while seeking to avoid full-scale (potentially nuclear) war.⁶ Such conflicts offer many advantages to global and regional powers, with greater opportunities to inflict damage or disrupt daily life with minimal physical presence and deny responsibility.

These conflicts create significant concern for POC. They seek to diminish the appearance of state control or competence, undermine the confidence of local populations in their government (as in Ukraine) and disrupt civilian lives and livelihoods. Grey zone warfare, by its undeclared nature, also avoids distinguishing between civilian and military targets, and civilian infrastructure or targets are rarely off-limits, creating challenges of ensuring compliance with IHL. However, ceasefire monitoring missions in

⁵ While DPO policy has traditionally drawn a distinction between the POC mandate (protection from physical violence) and the protection of human rights, in practice these are deeply related tasks.

⁶ "Grey zone" and "hybrid conflict" are both terms that lack consensus definitions but are useful in the current context because they describe situations for which peacekeeping is not well prepared. "Grey zone" operations are those that may fall short of war but nonetheless have a significant disruptive effect, whether alone or in combination with other actions that may or may not be coordinated. The uncertainty ("may", "may not") and difficult characterization of such operations is central to what makes grey zone situations so challenging. Similarly, hybrid conflicts are those that involve a greater spectrum of civilian and military tools and methods of war than peacekeeping may be familiar with—including cyber or information operations—as well as a mix of state and non-state actors. With some exceptions, peacekeeping operations have so far been largely involved in conflicts between states or between a government and non-state groups).

strategic (grey zone) areas might have no POC mandate, or mandates limited to protection through political dialogue (tier 1).⁷

Complex humanitarian crises

The coming ten years will likely see continued migration on a massive scale, including economic migrants as the population of young, educated people in the poorest countries grows; people fleeing conflict, state repression and government collapse; and people fleeing climate-induced catastrophe, particularly in low-lying areas of the Asia-Pacific region and extreme-heat zones. These will all bring significant protection challenges, particularly given the increased fragility of the global refugee architecture, the increased role of predatory human trafficking networks, the border closure policies gaining in prominence in the aftermath of Covid-19, and the rise of anti-migrant sentiments. As discussed above, the Security Council may call upon peace operations to address such contexts of complex and politically sensitive humanitarian need.⁸

Social unrest and state-society relations

The economic fallout of disruptions in global trade, the rise of nationalism in many quarters, and the distrust between many governments and their populations may result in domestic unrest in many countries that may give rise to violence, especially in urban areas. Government efforts to strengthen state control—whether to manage pandemics, threats of violent extremism, or social unrest—will bring protection concerns. As xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering increase in contexts under stress, societal divisions will also deepen or be deepened by political interests, resulting in violence between communities. It is very possible, perhaps likely, that at least one such socio-political conflict rises to the level of mass atrocity against a civilian population within the next ten years. If, as suggested above, UN peace operations become focused more on state-support, these dynamics can put the UN in a difficult position. Member states may increasingly ask for UN interventions to enhance their authority (border control, riot control, counter-terrorism, etc.) while civil society actors may call upon the UN protect civilians threatened by the state actors.

POC threats at a digital age

Technology, including AI, robotics, cyberwar and automated weapon systems, will give rise to new POC challenges and threats. Technologies can empower perpetrators, whether states or non-state armed groups, by helping identifying and geolocating civilian targets, quickly disseminating calls for violence, disrupting civilian infrastructure, and facilitating the organization of attacks against civilians. Technology-supported misinformation, disinformation campaigns, media manipulation, sabotage and propaganda will make it more difficult to deescalate tensions, adding the POC risks. Deceptive methods of warfare,

⁷ While monitoring was in many respects the original purpose of peacekeeping missions, technological advances that allow distant countries to access detailed, real-time data may make peacekeepers' witness-bearing role less important; monitoring may also face resistance in the Council, where some countries may prefer that the "grey zone" remain as opaque as possible. Where monitoring and verification missions take place, there will thus be an increased onus on them to add value by at least matching the technological capacities of other conflict-watchers; this may require private-sector partnerships for satellite data and arms tracing. It will also require political dexterity in developing messages that meet political realities while also fulfilling expectations of UN principles.

⁸ From the perspective of Member States, such as China, that are cautious regarding international (mostly Western-based) humanitarian NGOs and are more comfortable with organizations that are state-centric, a UN peacekeeping mission mandated with humanitarian tasks could provide an attractive alternative to conventional humanitarian arrangements. Peacekeepers under the control of the Security Council would be particularly attractive when humanitarian assistance needs to be delivered to a politically sensitive context, such as Myanmar.

psychological and media warfare already appear in the defence strategies of powerful states, and in the modus operandi of non-state armed groups, including extremist groups. They have the potential to undermine the capacities and reach of protection actors, by aggravating the crisis of confidence among and between communities, state actors, and UN peacekeepers.

Technology may also divert and obfuscate responsibility and accountability for violations of international law, especially in the context of hybrid warfare or where autonomous weapon systems are being used – and involved in violations of IHL. The normative gap that will persist for the coming years in this regard, coupled with the potential involvement of tech companies and private actors in the design, management and control of weapon and AI systems, will give room to new types of abuse being left unaddressed.

C. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR EVOLVING MISSIONS

This note explores the potential that the UN will deploy new **types of peace operations** and increased use of novel arrangements, such as support missions like UNSOS and conditional funding arrangements like the compliance framework for the G5 Sahel, to meet new conflict dynamics. These tailored missions and new situations will have a number of different practical implications for POC, and require modular approaches going beyond a one-size-fits all POC framework.

Civilian-oriented missions

Budgetary constraints are almost certain to limit the size of missions in the near term, potentially leading to peace operations that have a small military component or none at all be mandated to protect civilians, and thus increasing the importance of unarmed protection strategies. Unarmed or lightly armed missions will, however, have much less ability to prevent and respond to widespread violence against civilians, due to their limitations in resources and leverage. This has the potential to create important reputational risks for the UN.

While protection through political dialogue (tier 1) and building a protective environment (tier 3) have always been part of DPO doctrine, the tools, strategies and assessment of these activities will need to be refined. Missions with few or no troops and limited mobility assets will need to strengthen their networks to maintain situational awareness, identify entry points to change the behaviour of potential perpetrators of violence against civilians, develop realistic expectations for such behaviour change, and lay the groundwork accordingly for expectation management. In parallel, the full range of UN system capacities, including within the political, human rights and humanitarian fields, may offer alternative sources of protection and can be leveraged for the establishment of a protective. Professionalizing civilian staff within the different UN entities for protection-related activities, and ensuring that protection skills and mindsets percolate within the broader UN system will be essential. “Peacekeeping” too easily becomes about culture and personal networks, rather than specific skills that can be developed and later re-deployed in UN political, human rights and humanitarian fields beyond peacekeeping.

Stabilization and state support missions

In stabilization and state-support missions, whose tasks may include anti-gang operations and crowd control tasks, POC will tend to become **a function of governance and be approached in capacity-building terms**, and require a strong role for UNPOL. These missions will risk being co-opted by governments seeking to neutralize opponents and protesters, and will have to navigate the crisis of

confidence between the state and communities. In particular, UNPOL will be expected to distinguish itself from predatory police forces, in a global context of debates on the legitimacy of policing functions.

Counter insurgency and support to parallel forces⁹

Similarly, support missions to counterinsurgency, counterterrorism and parallel forces may focus on **logistical support to protection initiatives and civilian harm mitigation**. They might see their human rights monitoring function be explicitly undercut, even if human rights-friendly Member States (potentially including the pen holders) may seek to include some POC/human rights language in the mandate, in order to keep the UN's "hands clean", especially through the new model of "human rights compliance frameworks". For missions mandated to directly conduct counterinsurgency operations, and even for those who are not given an explicit "POC" mandate, civilian harm mitigation will also become an increasingly prominent issue. Non-state armed groups targeted by UN operations might seek to undermine popular trust in UN forces, including through retaliatory attacks against communities. In contexts where missions are mandated to both conduct offensive operations and protect civilians from violence, some armed groups might even perpetrate major attacks against civilians to distract peacekeepers from their offensive operations.¹⁰

Specialized missions, including humanitarian operations

Finally, **specialized missions** with limited mandates and niche roles may emerge. Peacekeeping operations might be asked to do more in the context of pandemics, climate-induced disasters, and massive population movements, which can lead the Council and the Secretariat to consider expanding the "protection" role of peacekeeping missions beyond the issue of "physical violence.". The Security Council may find consensus for peacekeeping missions around "humanitarian"¹¹ goals: delivering assistance in the aftermath of natural or man-made disasters (Lebanon); helping to feed and house people in the aftermath of state collapse (North Korea); support the health response to pandemics (DRC); or serve as both providers of assistance and barriers against waves of migrants and refugees (Myanmar, Mediterranean).

This kind of missions may blur the distinction between humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping's POC, and stabilization. The POC concept may be expanded beyond the traditional definition of "threat of physical violence" and be applied to the protection of migrants, the support of complex medical responses, the protection of cultural sites, or the protection of economically important facilities (such as oil installations). Such missions are also likely to operate in a complex ecosystem of protection actors, and entail important partnership arrangements and coordination requirements towards other protection and security stakeholders.

D. CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE POC PRACTICE

⁹ Deadlock in the Security Council agree on peacekeeping operations only where there is a strong national interest from certain P-5 members and from the host state in addressing a specific security threat, such as insurgencies or violent extremism. While the extent to which the UN should take on such roles has been controversial, the political and operational potential for such missions exists.

¹⁰ This tactic has already been observed in DR Congo, in the context of MONUSCO's offensive operations against the ADF.

¹¹ The term "humanitarian" is used in quotation marks here to indicate recognition that the delivery of assistance consonant with traditional (UN-endorsed) humanitarian principles is ordinarily incompatible with a militarized presence, even a peacekeeping force. This term nonetheless serves as a useful shorthand and is very possibly the language that the Council would choose. Discussing the potential for these missions is not necessarily an endorsement of them.

Strategic engagement and partnership with new peace operators and protection actors

The range of actors involved in conflict resolution generally and protection in particular may also grow and diversify, creating opportunities for UN peace operations but also making some operations more complex. If the Security Council limits its peace operations activity, **multiple state and non-state actors may rise to tackle peacekeeping and protection.** These engagements may involve the EU, AU, NATO and other regional organizations or regional coalitions, some of which may be comfortable with unconventional operating methods, such as private security contractors.¹² Some of these operations may take place outside peace operations settings, others may operate in parallel and others may have a partnership arrangement (such as AMISOM-UNSOM, the G-5 sahel or UNAMID). In all cases, but particularly for parallel and partnered operations, ensuring that political strategies are coherent, and that cooperation is guided by human rights and POC considerations, will be paramount.¹³

The coming years may also see a growth in the prominence of local organizations (sometimes mediated or supported by international NGOs or donors) and the private or philanthropic sector in either directly providing protection or supporting protection efforts. As more constrained and smaller peacekeeping operations see their ability to reach protection hotspots and engage with civilians at the local level significantly reduced, these actors may present comparative advantages. Some of them can more easily overcome the obstacles of a less globalized world by working around national borders through local networks, while others can provide the technological means to offer “remote protection,” including through social media. With localization prioritized by many UN agencies and remote working methods more widely accepted after COVID-19, the next five-to-ten years will create new opportunities and models to learn from, but also more pressure to innovate and adapt in order to remain relevant.¹⁴ Localization and remote management are both areas in which peacekeeping will have a great deal to learn. DPO will also be in a position to pass on POC good practice and ensure coherence in international responses.

Navigating the issue of host state ownership of POC

The current trend of increased **technical, financial or logistical support to governments and other partners’** stabilization and counter-insurgency operations may continue and strengthen, with reputational risks for peace operations. Peace operations and their protection functions may be increasingly defined as a state-support endeavour to the exclusion of an inclusive, community-based set of activities. This may lead missions to support or be seen to support governments perceived as repressive and predatory. Continued strengthening, refinement and dissemination of the HRDDP may be increasingly important in this regard, particularly given that the HRDDP forms an important blueprint for compliance frameworks for partner operations (such as G5 Sahel). Given the likely retreat of the human rights agenda at the Council, HRDDP practice might be the object of a series of adjustments and iterations that will give more space to collaborative measures with the host state, to avoid confrontations.

¹² For example, as the UN exits from DRC and CAR, the AU may take on a more proactive role in conflict management, including POC. Following the development of EU and NATO POC doctrines, more countries may also establish their own policy frameworks for POC. In a context of general pushback against the human rights agenda at the UN, regional organizations like the EU may also choose to deploy separate operations that continue to pursue protection and human rights.

¹³ See EPON UNAMID study, forthcoming.

¹⁴ “Remote management” is not new for the UN—humanitarians have engaged in providing remote assistance in inaccessible areas such as Syria or the Nuba Mountains in Sudan through unauthorized cross-border assistance or supporting local actors, and human rights components have conducted remote monitoring in Darfur and Afghanistan—but it will take on increased importance for peace operations as their operating space becomes more limited.

In this context, the Council and Secretariat may place greater emphasis on national POC strategies (such as that recently put forward by the government of Sudan to buttress its argument that a Chapter VII follow-on mission to UNAMID was unnecessary). There is significant potential value in promoting such plans where there is government support and capacity and they create opportunities to engage countries concretely on taking up their primary responsibility for protection. There is also significant risk, however, that such plans are shallow commitments used primarily to sway an international audience and reduce the mission's ability to prevent and respond to protection crises as an impartial, independent actor.¹⁵ Weighing national POC strategies through a clear-eyed assessment of security actors' political and economic incentives to implement them, and against a thorough assessment of the risks to civilians in a country, will be an important role for DPO to play as it advises the Secretary-General and, in turn, the Security Council.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND OPTIONS FOR THE SECRETARIAT

Policy issues

Prepare for divisions over human rights and POC. As noted, China and the P3 may be headed for deep divisions over human rights and, by extension, POC. It is very likely, however, that a few enterprising Member States will attempt to **bridge the divide** between China and the P3 by developing new concepts that incorporate elements of both POC and aspects of China's non-interventionist, protection-through-development approach.¹⁶ New mandates are very likely to present negotiated POC language that will be opaque for operators on the ground and require adapted policy guidance

DPO and the Secretariat should prepare to facilitate these discussions and promote the revision and consolidation of a POC concept that affords a serious opportunity to confront violence against civilians. Any new concepts that bridge the China-P3 divide should seek to retain longstanding normative principles enshrined in international law, such as international human rights and international humanitarian law.

Develop POC-focused policy planning around the following set of issues:

- **POC principles and standards that support mutual understanding and coordination with potential partners.** This includes political principles as well as operational approaches that for a common basis shared by the different protection actors. In addition to supporting policy coherence with multilateral actors (AU, EU, AU, etc.), this may also include engaging important bilateral actors (US, France, China, etc) on protection issues.

¹⁵ One can imagine a scenario, for example, of the exit of MONUSCO being followed by a civilian mission to support a Government-led Protection Strategy in the Congo. Such a mission could be mandated to assist state actors in implementing their national POC plan, support to the implementation of a human rights compliance framework for regional counter-insurgency operations, and offer political support and capacity-building for governance reforms. One risk, however, would be to have the Government using the existence of a national POC strategy and invoking its "primary responsibility to protect" to sideline the mission from the management of POC issues, and prevent it from offering its own analysis of POC threats and needed responses.

¹⁶ See Rosemary Foot, *China, the UN and Human Protection* (Kindle Edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) p 269-272. "The Responsibility While Protecting", Brazil's proffered alternative to R2P, is an example of such an alternative, albeit one that has yet to engage the mainstream. UNDP's "Human Security" framework is another example of an attempt to capture a set of protection and develop-oriented initiatives under a broad umbrella. See Oliver Stuenkel, "Responsibility while Protecting", in Alex J. Bellamy and Tim Dunne, eds, *Oxford Handbook of the Responsibility to Protect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); and United Nations Development Programme, *1994 World Development Report* (New York: United Nations, 1994); General Assembly resolution 66/290 (A/RES/66/290, 2012).

- **State-focused approaches, including national POC strategies.** While this is a broad area of work that includes SSR and host state compacts, considering the benefits and risks to championing national leadership on POC should be considered. Developing a deeper body of knowledge about national POC strategies could be important in this respect.
- **Unarmed protection and protection through political dialogue.** While not new, further policy work could help to highlight this area and establish successful case studies and contingency plans for future missions. Leveraging UN system-wide civilian capacities around POC will almost certainly be essential.
- **Review compliance frameworks and other cooperation mechanisms for support to partner forces,** and consider legal implications for the UN in the course of such support.

Forecasting public-private partnerships. Expertise from a range of private sector partners will become more important, from partnerships with social media companies to tackle disinformation, hate speech, and abuse facilitated by technologies the use of technology to monitor, analyze and respond to POC threats; to potential operational protection roles for private security companies in peace operations. As with any significant changes in peacekeeping, these developments may appear distant or even impossible, but that is all the more reason to begin exploring serious policy proposals and new coordination frameworks for new types of protection actors, including how they are vetted.

Scope operational gaps in new environments

- “Grey zone” conflict and social unrest may witness increased POC threats in **urban contexts**, where terrorism, gang activity, riots and tensions between communities have potential to coincide and put civilians and civilian infrastructure and objects at great risk. Current UN operations are inexperienced in such operations and likely to face challenges.
- Continued robust operations and support to parallel forces may call for refinement and expansion of **civilian harm mitigation** practices in peacekeeping and continued adaptation of **HRDDP processes**.

Skills and capabilities needed on the ground

The Secretariat should plan for new types of expertise, skills and capabilities in peacekeeping operations. Many of the civilian skills and capabilities discussed in this section speak to the need for re-thinking civilian staffing in the Secretariat, though these discussions are beyond the scope of this paper.¹⁷ Significant and sustained improvement in peace operations, however, begin with their civilian staff.

- **Technologies and AI** will hugely change the operations of advanced militaries and widen the already mammoth gap between the UN’s best- and worst-equipped peacekeepers. Considering how peace operations can incorporate advanced technology will be a challenging task with important implications for POC. Similar to some technical aspects of mission support, DPO will need to consider which skills need to be upgraded and professionalized (or outsourced) within the civilian component, which should be brought in from the military, and which can be an

¹⁷ Given the anticipated budgetary constraints and Member States’ rejection of past attempts to modernize civilian capacities during better budgetary times, the most sensible and straightforward solutions may not be available. Alternative solutions, such as bringing civilian on through UN agency contracts, a strengthened corps of UN volunteering service, or private sector contractors should be considered.

amalgam of both.¹⁸ “Cyber peacekeepers” (who may be field-based or not) savvy in social media, open-source intelligence and network analysis of digital information ecosystems could be envisioned. Technologies can also facilitate and quicken POC responses, including non-traditional, unarmed responses. Social media, for example, can be used to organize, mobilize and coordinate large groups who could provide unarmed protective accompaniment, or to expose perpetrators.

- **More social, community-based expertise**, will be needed to ensure inclusive analysis of POC threats, and ensure that responses are built on a reliable analysis of structural systems of political and social oppression. This will be critical to complement technical approaches to state support, SSR and DDR – and help missions avoid finding themselves in support of predatory, illegitimate government actors being rejected by “civilians.”
- **Remote management of mandate implementation**, which includes the methods of remote working that have become more widespread during COVID-19, and remote work by “cyber peacekeepers”. But it also includes exploring the use of local networks to conduct mandate activities, including monitoring protection threats and building situational awareness. Localization in peacekeeping often ends at the hiring of national staff, but this should only be the beginning; the most successful missions will be ones in which local actors fulfil the mandate, not the mission itself. This requires as much a change of mindset as strengthening skills in developing and utilizing local networks, though it relies on both.

¹⁸ Such skills include, potentially, computer imaging, cyber threats hunting, monitoring and investigation expertise to attribute responsibilities related to cyber-violence.