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THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON MULTILATERAL PEACE OPERATIONS

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STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL
PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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Summary

Direct operational impacts

The Covid-19 pandemic brought direct operational challenges, and opportunities, to multilateral UN and non-UN peace operations. Personnel rotations were initially paused and later affected by quarantines, which reduced the effective time of personnel in the field. Operations needed to be socially distanced and activities moved partly online. Operations prioritized duty of care and the health of personnel. The online environment impeded training and assessment of personnel and units, with potential long-term impacts. Operational integration was both stimulated as well as complicated by the Covid-19 measures. Although there is no clear relationship between the pandemic and women's participation in peace operations, the increase of women in leadership may have been negatively affected. People-centred approaches were restrained by the lack of physical presence of operations in the field and by the restrictive measures hampering community engagement activities. This in turn affected the popular trust in and credibility of peace operations. Particularly at the start of the pandemic missions were vulnerable to misinformation by conflict parties, particularly when relationships had already been tense.

On a number of issues, however, the Covid-19 pandemic created the momentum to deal with already existing challenges that were amplified by the pandemic, ranging from duty of care, operational integration and strategic communication to secure communications including for civilian components. Consequently, multilateral peace operations are currently better prepared for the next pandemic than before.

Mandate implementation

Mostly, peace operations have succeeded in holding on to the achievements they had made before and have prevented regressions, but little progress was made. The direct operational impacts of the Covid-19 crisis on mandate implementation were largely mission and time specific, and differed per mandate task. Despite the challenges, most military operations continued, although some activities were delayed, or not as effective and efficient. The overall impact of Covid-19 on the protection of civilians was limited although as a consequence at times protection of civilians activities were affected. The Covid-19 measures clearly obstructed capacity building, training and mentoring activities of missions, as virtual and socially distanced activities are less effective, yet the long-term consequences cannot yet be assessed. Similarly, while in the short run peace operations could build on their existing networks for early warning, in the long term activities may have been compromised. Mediation and community engagement continued in adjusted forms, but supporting local activities and particularly including marginalized voices was more difficult. Democratization, human rights monitoring and ensuring humanitarian access were particularly hit initially, by postponement of elections, lockdowns and border closures. At the same time, peace operations took on a variety of new Covid-19 related activities. As such, without a doubt Covid-19 has had a large operational impact on missions, however, it is too early to tell how large the overall long-term impact will be.

Strategic level and long-term impacts

Although, strategically the Covid-19 pandemic may not have significantly changed the short-term global conflict map, either in terms of number or in intensity of conflicts

and terrorism, its negative impact on international tensions, as well as on governance and socio-economic challenges, may in the long term have a negative effect on global security. This in turn may increase the demand for peace operations. However, these long-term strategic impacts are in many ways still potential or thus far substantiated with limited evidence. At the same time, the Covid-19 pandemic may even be another 'indirect' nail in the coffin of many peace operations, as among other things it appears to have focused governments on their own internal affairs and to have intensified polarization and competition between the great powers, reducing their ability and willingness to collaborate in the UN Security Council on conflict management and peace operations.

Recommendations

1. Invest in multilateral peace operations to deal with increased need for conflict management due to Covid-19.
2. Invest in being on the ground instead of virtual alternatives as in-person contact is essential for many mandated tasks.
3. Invest in strategic communication to counter disinformation and supporting awareness-raising and sensitization campaigns.
4. Invest in local partner networks to maintain situational awareness and early warning capacity in the absence of physical presence on the ground.
5. Invest in psychological health of peace operations personnel as the Covid-19 pandemic and the related restrictions intensified the need to ensure the psychological health of personnel.

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Abbreviations

AMISOM	African Union Mission in Somalia
AU	African Union
CAR	Central African Republic
CIMIC	Civil–military cooperation
EU	European Union
EU CSDP	EU Common Security and Defence Policy
EUTM	EU Training Mission
MINUSCA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic
MINUSMA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MONUSCO	UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC
ODA	Official development assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
QIP	Quick-impact project
SMM	Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine
SPM	Special political mission
UN	United Nations
UNAMID	UN–AU Hybrid Operation in Darfur
UNIFIL	UN Interim Force in Lebanon
UNFICYP	UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus
UNITAMS	UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan
UNISFA	UN Interim Security Force for Abyei
UNMISS	UN Mission in South Sudan
UNPOL	UN Police
VTC	Video teleconferencing

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has posed an unprecedented challenge to multilateral (United Nations and non-UN) peace operations. Never before have missions and conducting organizations had to deal with a global crisis affecting not only the mission areas, but also personnel-contributing countries, headquarters and potential evacuation locations. Long-term structural adjustments have now replaced the crisis measures initially taken by the missions and headquarters in March–April 2020. While shortly after the start of the crisis some papers were written on the topic, now, as the dust is settling, it is time to revisit the question of what the possible impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on peace operations has been in the short term and may be in the long term.

This paper aims to examine the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on multilateral peace operations. It looks first at the operational (short-term) impacts, which were the immediate challenges and opportunities posed by the Covid-19 pandemic (chapter 2), followed by what the impacts meant for mandate implementation (chapter 3). In chapter 4 the paper surveys the strategic impact of the pandemic on peace operations by looking at its effects on conflicts and multilateralism, as well as socio-economic affairs and governance in mission areas, and what these mean for the long-term future of peace operations. Chapter 5 reflects on the overall impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on peace operations and the paper ends by drawing up five recommendations.

The overview in chapters 2 and 3 is based on 17 interviews (7 women, 10 men) with mission and headquarters personnel of the European Union (EU) and the UN, documents and literature. The description of the long-term impacts in chapter 4 is based on a literature review and a workshop on the impact of Covid-19 on peace operations, co-organized by SIPRI and the UN Department of Peace Operations.[1]

[1] Workshop on the impact of Covid-19 on peace operations, co-organized by SIPRI and the United Nations Department of Peace Operations on 6 Oct. 2021.

2. Operational impacts

The Covid-19 pandemic presented immediate operational challenges to peace operations, stemming primarily from the ways missions had to adjust to the pandemic. However the pandemic also presented some opportunities for peace operations, which are discussed alongside the challenges below.

Generally, the immediate response of peace operations at the start of the pandemic was to go into full crisis-management mode with lockdowns and contingency plans for potential large-scale outbreaks among personnel or evacuations.[2] UN and non-UN multilateral operations alike were confronted with the same practical challenges. They all needed to find solutions to the main issues arising from Covid-19 in the areas of: personnel rotations; social distancing and working remotely; duty of care and health of personnel; preparation, training and assessing personnel and units; operational integration; women's participation; people-centred approaches; and misinformation and disinformation. In many cases the Covid-19 pandemic created a momentum to deal with existing challenges in these areas that were amplified by the pandemic. The EU, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the UN sat down together to learn from each other's solutions for dealing with the challenges of conducting operations during the pandemic. Other organizations, such as the African Union (AU), often followed similar approaches to the UN's.[3]

Personnel rotations

The Covid-19 pandemic and the crisis that emerged from it in March–April 2020 were unprecedented because they affected the whole world. Missions are normally prepared to evacuate personnel to neighbouring countries or to repatriate them home in the case of crises, but this crisis had a global reach. Consequently, in order to avoid Covid-19 there was nowhere to evacuate personnel, and capacities at headquarters were equally affected as those in the field.[4]

The UN prioritized presence. However, many host countries were alarmed by the potential spread of the Covid-19 virus through peace operations personnel rotations. Therefore, on 3 March 2020 South Sudan requested the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) put rotations from troop-contributing countries that were regarded as high-risk—Cambodia, China, South Korea and Nepal—on hold.[5] The UN took a conservative approach to prevent peacekeepers from becoming a vector of contagion, as had happened with the cholera epidemic in Haiti in 2010. Consequently, on 6 March, the UN Secretariat requested that nine countries with significant Covid-19 outbreaks delay their troop rotations. Some UN peace operations subsequently introduced further limitations, extending tours by at least three months. In addition, operations took precautionary measures such as quarantine and containment of incoming personnel. In-mission movement of personnel was also limited as far as possible. On 4 April, the UN secretary-general suspended the rotation and deployment of all uniformed personnel until 30 June.[6] Although the UN took a conservative approach and wanted

[2] de Coning, C., 'The impact of COVID-19 on peace operations', IPI Global Observatory, 2 Apr. 2020.

[3] European External Action Service (EEAS) official 1, interview with author, 15 Apr. 2021; de Coning, C., 'COVID-19 and the resilience of Africa's peace and security networks', *African Security*, vol. 14, no. 4 (2021); and Madeira, F., 'The effects of COVID-19 on AMISOM operations in Somalia', 14 Oct. 2020.

[4] EEAS official 2, interview with author, 28 Apr. 2021; and United Nations official 1, interview with author, 5 May 2021.

[5] Woja, E., 'SSPDF suspends rotation of peacekeepers from Asian countries', Eye Radio, 13 July 2018.

[6] UN official 2, interview with author, 15 Apr. 2021; UN official 3, interview with author, 2 June 2021; Department of Peace Operations (DPO), Policy, Evaluation and Training Division (DPET), Policy and Best Practice Service (PBPS), CAT, 'Community engagement during COVID-19: Community engagement and COVID-19 field consultations',

to prevent a repetition of Haiti, UN and most other multilateral peace operations successfully maintained a presence.[7]

The EU took a different approach as it aimed to ensure medical coverage for its personnel and did not want to be a potential drain on local intensive care units' capacity. Consequently, it interrupted its non-essential activities. EU Training Missions (EUTMs) stopped operations for a period at the start of the pandemic and EU civilian Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions by and large came to a stop.[8] Some 70 per cent of personnel in civilian CSDP missions—particularly vulnerable and non-essential staff—were repatriated. Only the EU Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX Kosovo) and the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM Georgia) prioritized their presence given their respective executive and monitoring tasks.[9] Overall, including military missions and operations, personnel in the field fell on average by about 40 per cent.[10]

On 1 July, the UN put in place a policy that included rigorous quarantines of two weeks before and after arrival in host countries for incoming personnel and units, which brought further challenges. In practice, the quarantine measures meant that personnel had to stay at their main base or mission headquarters, which in turn became choke points. The measures created initial logistical difficulties, which were eventually dealt with. However, the quarantining measures also had a severe impact on the capacity of peace operations. They decreased the effective time of personnel in the field and as such reduced the capacity of missions to conduct military operations, build relations and ensure team building within missions.[11] Nonetheless, the measures allowed personnel rotations to resume again and consequently, during the second half of 2020, 77 per cent of rotations of uniformed UN personnel were completed, 21 per cent were ongoing, while only 2 per cent were still postponed.[12] EU CSDP missions and operations took similar measures and rotations of personnel were restarted.[13]

Initial fears that member states would be reluctant to continue contributing personnel to peace operations during the Covid-19 pandemic did not transpire. On 28 March South Korean UNMISS peacekeepers were withdrawn without replacement after ending their nine-month tour. Some other troop-contributing countries considered pulling out as the areas they were deployed to only had level-one hospitals—with immediate life-saving and resuscitation capabilities along with routine clinical care—available. However, despite initial hiccups, personnel-contributing countries did not pull out or become more hesitant to contribute to UN peace operations, nor to EU CSDP missions and operations.[14]

14–22 May 2020; International Crisis Group, 'COVID-19 and conflict: Seven trends to watch', Crisis Group Special Briefing no. 4, 24 Mar. 2020; Lacroix, J.-P., 'Of peacekeepers and pandemics', UN Peacekeeping, 2 Apr. 2020; de Coning (note 2); and United Nations Department for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, Department for Operational Support, Department for Peace Operations, 'COVID-19 and field missions: Biweekly update', no. 3, 9 June 2020.

[7] UN official 2 (note 6); UN official 3 (note 6); UN official 4, interview with author, 5 May 2021; and DPO/DPET/PBPS/CAT (note 6).

[8] Pietz, T., 'The impact of COVID-19 on CSDP: Forging opportunity out of crisis?', European Union Institute for Security Studies, Brief no. 17, Sep. 2021; EEAS official 2 (note 4); EEAS official 1 (note 3); and EEAS official 3, interview with author, 12 Apr. 2021.

[9] EEAS official 2 (note 4); and EEAS official 3 (note 8).

[10] Pietz (note 8).

[11] United Nations, Department for Peace Operations, Department for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, Department for Operational Support, 'Transitional measures for uniformed personnel rotations in a COVID-19 rnvironment', effective July 2020; UN official 1 (note 4); UN official 5, interview with author, 26 Feb. 2021; and UN official 3 (note 6).

[12] United Nations, Security Council, Letter dated 27 Jan. 2021 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Secretary-General and the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council, S/2021/90, 28 Jan 2021, annex II. See also United Nations, 'Midterm review of the partial resumption of rotations of United Nations uniformed personnel in a COVID-19 environment', Feb. 2021.

[13] Pietz (note 8).

[14] de Coning, C., 'Examining the longer-term effects of COVID-19 on UN peacekeeping operations', IPI Global Observatory, 13 May 2020; Nagel, R. U. and Verveer, M., 'What the pandemic means for UN peacekeeping work',

Social distancing and working remotely

All multilateral peace operations put social distancing measures in place at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. This often meant that non-essential national civilian staff worked from home and international civilian and military staff worked remotely from their accommodation or from outside the mission area. Activities were initially limited to critical functions, although sometimes adapted, while non-critical functions were paused. For example, patrols were adapted to ensure social distancing rules and many meetings were moved online.

Working remotely was not a solution for all personnel. The activities of military units and support functions could often not be performed remotely. Moreover, some staff, particularly junior and national staff, did not have internet access at home. In addition, some activities required for mandate implementation did not allow for complete observation of the Covid-19 regulations, as, for example, social distancing is impossible in armoured personnel carriers.[15]

An additional challenge was that missions or personnel in missions and headquarters often did not have the required secure lines of communication to work remotely. While this is less of an issue for training activities, participants in training activities also needed to be aware they were using a public platform. Although secure communication was picked up in EU CSDP missions and UN operations, not all challenges were dealt with, as the issues at hand were complex, crossed different organizational entities and therefore had different legal and budget implications.[16]

An additional challenge with remote working is that it is less effective than collaborating face-to-face, because it does not allow for personal chemistry to grow. In missions, remote working prevents effective teambuilding. It is also more difficult to induct personnel remotely; staff that are inducted remotely are less attuned to the organizational culture and are less aware of the environment in which missions are deployed. It is even more challenging when working with partners. Many multilateral peace operations are deployed in low tech environments in which partners do not have access to stable internet with sufficient bandwidth. However, the Covid-19 pandemic provided opportunities too. For example, for the UN headquarters it was an opportunity to improve its antiquated video teleconferencing (VTC) environment.[17]

Duty of care and health of personnel

Duty of care was an immediate priority for the EU, the UN and their member states. As early as December 2019, the UN's Division of Healthcare Management and Occupational Safety and Health started readiness checks in preparation for a potential Covid-19 pandemic. Initially this consisted of ensuring enough personal protective equipment, and testing machines and kits were available. Later it developed guidelines and training and raised awareness to prevent transmission inside and outside the fence. Maintaining a duty of care during the pandemic meant answers needed to be found to organizational issues such as: Should staff be evacuated or repatriated home, and how can staff staying in mission areas be protected? How can a duty of care ensure that seconded staff and contracted staff are dealt with in a comparable

PassBlue, 8 Apr. 2020; UN official 6, interview with author, 21 May 2021; UN official 7, interview with author, 31 Mar. 2021; and EEAS official 4, interview with author, 28 Apr. 2021.

[15] de Coning (note 2); Lacroix (note 6); DPO/DPET/PBPS/CAT (note 6); UN official 8, interview with author, 16 Apr. 2021; and UN official 1 (note 4).

[16] UN official 8 (note 15); UN official 9, interview with author, 19 Apr. 2021; EEAS official 1 (note 3); and DPO/DPET/PBPS/CAT (note 6).

[17] UN official 3 (note 6); UN official 9 (note 16); and UN official 4 (note 7).

manner? Similarly, how can a duty of care ensure equal treatment for civilian and military personnel, and later in the process, how should vaccinations proceed?[18]

In addition to the immediate practical challenges, coordination between host governments and missions became a challenge, particularly when lockdowns were put in place. As borders closed it also became difficult to bring in resources to several missions, and with regular commercial flights being disrupted, the evacuation of Covid-19 patients from mission areas became difficult too. Some European countries were willing to accept UN personnel with Covid-19, and in time the UN established dedicated UN Covid-19 field hospitals in Accra and Nairobi and arrangements with member states were made on the use of their health facilities. Also, the EU put in place concrete measures to ensure staff in its missions and operations had access to the right health care, including medical evacuation (MEDEVAC).[19]

In practice, numbers of Covid-19 cases peaked at different times in different missions. In general, the number of cases in missions followed developments in host countries. Where there were discrepancies, these were generally explained by the health measures maintained in missions. EU CSDP missions and operations prioritized a duty of care, and respected local curfew regulations. The UN never took a less conservative approach than host countries.[20] By January 2021 the UN's MEDEVAC Task Force had conducted 140 medical evacuations, as part of an inter-agency and system-wide effort.[21]

When vaccines became available, the next step was to roll out the vaccination effort. The first doses for peacekeeping missions were provided by Israel to seven UN peacekeepers in Camp Ziouani, Golan Heights.[22] A number of troop-contributing countries vaccinated their own personnel. The UN Secretariat sought alternatives when the host country or the personnel-contributing countries could not provide vaccines. As a result by August 2021 all UN peacekeeping personnel had had access to a vaccine, and, although virtually all incoming rotations have been vaccinated, the UN system-wide Covid-19 Vaccination Programme has continued to provide boosters.[23] The vaccination campaign, while clearly beneficial, had minor effects on operations, as it increased the numbers of UN peacekeeping personnel on sick leave for a few days.[24]

Despite prudence, personnel members in multilateral peace operations did catch Covid-19. On 29 May 2020, the International Day of UN Peacekeepers, the UN secretary-general announced the first peacekeepers to die due to Covid-19 were two peacekeepers in Mali.[25] The number of Covid-19 deaths in UN peace operations has been politically sensitive. Officially, by 10 March 2022, across all UN field missions (peacekeeping and political operations), 7476 members of personnel and dependents had tested positive for Covid-19, and 39 had died as a result of the disease. There was a clear increase in the number of cases and a sharp decline in the case-fatality rate: in 2020 there were 2235 positive cases and 24 deaths, in 2021, 3795 cases and 14 deaths, and the first 69 days of 2022, 1446 cases and 1 death.[26] At the same time, the number of fatalities in UN peace operations due to malicious acts was significantly lower during the pandemic: 14 in 2020 and 17 in 2021, compared to 29 in 2019 and even higher figures

[18] EEAS official 1 (note 3); UN official 1 (note 4); and United Nations, Security Council (note 12), annex III.
[19] UN official 1 (note 4); UN official 6 (note 14); and EEAS official 1 (note 3).
[20] EEAS official 2 (note 4); UN official 1 (note 4); and UN official 3 (note 6).
[21] United Nations, Security Council (note 12), annex III.
[22] United Nations, Security Council (note 12), annex III.
[23] UN officials 11 and 12, email exchange with author, 9–11 Mar. 2022.
[24] UN official 3 (note 6).
[25] AP News, 'UN announces first 2 deaths of UN peacekeepers from COVID-19', 30 May 2020.
[26] Covid-19 UN Common System Case Counts, UN internal database shared by email with author, 10 Mar. 2022; and UN official 13, email exchange with author, 8–10 Mar. 2022.

in previous years.[27] Although there is no clear single explanation for this decrease in fatalities, it is likely that it can be partly explained by the reduced number of patrols conducted by some troop-contributing countries.[28]

Few cases of Covid-19 were reported in EU civilian CSDP missions before mid-2020. There were 273 cases by the end of 2020, 321 cases in 2021, and 443 cases in the first 7 weeks of 2022. As of the end of February 2022, one staff member of a civilian EU CSDP mission has died as a result of Covid-19.[29]

Another challenge was for missions to balance their duty of care to personnel with mandate implementation. Civilian and military personnel were deployed for prolonged periods in, at times, harsh circumstances with worries about family at home. This increased fatigue and stress, and decreased morale, which in turn impacted mission effectiveness. The suspension of troop rotations and reduced numbers of particularly civilian personnel had major implications for the remaining staff. Missions were understaffed and deployments were prolonged until after summer 2020. The pressure on those who remained increased and at times staff felt overwhelmed. Furthermore there were limited opportunities to relax or engage socially, the online environment further blurred the distinction between work and free time and there were limited possibilities for rest and recuperation. Together these factors had major mental health implications. The lack of staff counsellors became increasingly apparent in UN peace operations, particularly for military personnel who do not have access to them, as well as in EU CSDP missions and operations.[30]

At the same time, the Covid-19 pandemic has served as an opportunity to progress on many of the previously existing duty of care issues. For example, the EU is reviewing how to improve health capabilities for its own personnel. Whatever the outcome, it is likely to increase the costs of missions.[31]

Preparation, training and assessing peace operations personnel and units

Pre-deployment and induction training, assessment and advisory visits, pre-deployment visits, and in-field verification and performance assessments in UN peacekeeping operations had to be stopped because of the Covid-19 pandemic, and were later moved partially online. This had major consequences. For example, incoming mission leadership and personnel could not be effectively trained because knowledge transfer is more limited, given that the online attention span is shorter. Therefore, senior leadership courses for UN missions were stopped and mission leadership was selected from the existing pool. Several UN Integrated Training Service courses have become virtual or blended, however it is difficult for trainees to practice and to be assessed in pre-deployment and in-mission induction training and exercises. Trainees cannot be put under stress and tested in practice in virtual settings. For the same reason, remote pre-deployment visits and in-field verification and performance assessments to evaluate the standards of units have been less effective, while being more time-consuming.[32]

[27] SIPRI Multilateral Peace Operations Database, <http://www.sipri.org/databases/pko/>.

[28] Smit, T. and Van der Lijn, J., 'Global and regional trends and developments in multilateral peace operations', *SIPRI Yearbook 2021: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2021); and UN official 3 (note 6).

[29] EEAS official 1 (note 3); EEAS official 3 (note 8); and EEAS official 4, email exchange with author, 12–18 Mar. 2022.

[30] Nagel and Verveer (note 14); de Coning (note 2); Di Razza, N., 'UN peacekeeping and the protection of civilians in the COVID-19 era', IPI Global observatory, 22 May 2020; UN official 8 (note 15); UN official 5 (note 11); UN official 9 (note 16); UN official 3 (note 6); and EEAS official 2 (note 4).

[31] UN official 4 (note 7); and EEAS official 4 (note 14).

[32] UN official 9 (note 16); UN official 7 (note 14); and UN official 3 (note 6).

While there is a push from some UN member states to move courses and assessments completely online, this will not be possible. First and foremost, many member states do not have the adequate equipment, bandwidth or capacity. Second, training will always require physical activities such as tabletop exercises, and assessments will always require physical visits. Third, online training has not proven to be more cost-effective, as proper equipment, online bandwidth and technical support personnel are expensive and sometimes inaccessible. Missions, personnel and mandates may have been put at risk since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic because of limited knowledge transfer and the absence of practice, exercise and assessment, according to two UN officials interviewed. The real impact of not being able to physically assess trainees and units, however, will only be visible in the long term, either in the field when deployed, or more structurally in the troop-contributing countries when physical assessments are possible again.[33]

Operational integration

There are mixed views on the impact of Covid-19 on mission integration—the guiding principle for the design and implementation of many peace operations that links the different dimensions and units into a coherent support strategy implemented by the peace operation as a whole.

On the one hand, interviewees noticed a positive drive towards more integration in UN peace operations and EU CSDP missions and operations. For example, the European External Action Service, civilian missions, and military missions and operations had to find joint answers to healthcare, human resources, duty of care and repatriation challenges, as personnel and member states did not accept differences in the treatment of military and civilian personnel. The development of standard operating procedures and guidelines for all operations was coordinated in a civil–military collaboration, between the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) and the Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability (CPCC), and in cooperation with the member states by reporting frequently to the Political and Security Committee (PSC). At the same time a balance needed to be struck between what was decided in Brussels and what was decided in the field. Also, different components of missions in UN peace operations had to work together in an integrated manner to ensure health, safety, security, etc. Procedures became more streamlined as a consequence. Once virtual communication became the standard, in-mission communication became more intense as well. Above all, in order to reduce mission footprints, different UN components needed to integrate their efforts further, particularly in terms of joint patrolling and engaging local counterparts. Lastly, both in UN peace operations and CSDP missions and operations, the military supported civilian components and missions on such issues as strategic communication, secure communications, and medical and casualty evacuation.[34]

On the other hand, whenever military and civilian personnel lived in different compounds, which is often the case, operational integration was severely hampered during lockdowns. This is because interaction between civilian and military personnel was hindered as they no longer met face-to-face. In some instances, requirements to ensure social distancing also pushed the different components to spread into different offices and compounds, which may have contributed to further challenging day-to-day collaboration. Moreover, certain civilian tasks were occasionally assumed by military components because the military continued to go into the field while civilians were

[33] UN official 7 (note 14); and UN official 9 (note 16).

[34] DPO/DPET/PBPS/CAT (note 6); EEAS official 3 (note 8); EEAS official 1 (note 3); UN official 8 (note 15); UN official 2 (note 6); and UN official 3 (note 6).

forced to operate remotely. This may in the long term contribute to the perceived and real militarization or securitization of peace operations.[35]

Women's participation

Some analysts hoped initially that women's participation in peace operations would be boosted by the Covid-19 pandemic, as due to rotation freezes and prolonged deployments more female peacekeepers might be required to be deployed to the field.[36] However, no clear relationship is visible to confirm this hypothesis. The increase in the proportion of women uniformed personnel in multilateral peace operations appears to have slowed down over 2020, and among UN military experts and staff officers it has even decreased one percentage point. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic was a temporary negative factor for increasing the number of women in mission leadership, as the UN senior leadership training was paused, and no new women leaders were trained. This did not affect the number of women in civilian and UN Police (UNPOL) leadership positions because the pipeline was sufficiently well developed. However it did affect women UN Force Commanders.[37]

People-centred approaches

UN peace operations take a people-centred approach because local populations are the end-users of the peace they aim to contribute to. Therefore, to ensure that the communities and societies where they work feel ownership of the peace operations' efforts, UN peace operations complement their state and peacebuilding efforts with initiatives that engage with these communities. These community engagement activities were hampered by restrictive measures during the pandemic, in some cases by demand of the host government. At the start of the pandemic, civil affairs divisions were only able to engage with local stakeholders in virtual meetings, and therefore they were less able to support local initiatives and, in particular, marginalized voices. Mission access was limited to a smaller group of richer, more urbanized and empowered community elites that had access to phones, internet and electricity. It was difficult to engage with the broader spectrum of stakeholders beyond these elites, without in-person engagement. Important counterparts for these purposes, such as civil society organizations, were also affected by national Covid-19 restrictions, such as lockdowns. Community liaison assistants were only allowed in exceptional cases to join patrols to implement priority tasks that required in-person interaction with local counterparts. Missions were able to capitalize on phone or digital app networks of local stakeholders in places where missions had previously established these. [38]

The lack of physical presence of peace operation personnel undermined their credibility as a partner, particularly as in many places meeting face-to-face is essential to gain trust, and build and maintain relationships. The UN was at times seen by host country populations as too prudent and distancing itself from them.[39]

However, the negative impact of Covid-19 on regular civil affairs activities may have been relatively limited. As early as summer 2020, many of the activities were picked up again, not only virtually, but also socially distanced and in smaller group settings. There were even some benefits to the new way of working. For example, in some

[35] UN official 8 (note 15); and UN official 3 (note 6).

[36] Nagel and Verveer (note 14).

[37] Pfeifer, C., Smit. T. and Van der Lijn, J., 'Women in multilateral peace operations in 2021: What is the state of play?', SIPRI report, Nov. 2021; EEAS official 4 (note 14); UN official 7 (note 14); and UN official 9 (note 16).

[38] DPO/DPET/PBPS/CAT (note 6); UN official 6 (note 14); UN official 2 (note 6); and UN official 4 (note 7).

[39] UN official 2 (note 6); UN official 6 (note 14); UN official 3 (note 6); and DPO/DPET/PBPS/CAT (note 6).

cases virtual meetings offered opportunities to pursue mediation between groups that otherwise did not want to meet in person. Furthermore, as UN Security Council missions to the field were moved online, the VTC setup allowed civil society sessions to be included, allowing local representatives to speak with decision makers.[40]

Misinformation and disinformation

The general anxiety, particularly at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, created space for rumours and mistrust among local populations. This was further intensified as missions withdrew to their camps and community engagement efforts were either paused or continued at lower levels. In several cases conflict parties and spoilers politicized Covid-19 and used it to intensify their anti-UN or anti-peace operation discourses. They portrayed missions as the spreaders of the virus instead of as protector. Some host government politicians had an interest in blaming external actors for their own failures. The narrative of Covid-19 as a western conspiracy has proven to be strong in mission settings, and this may have a long-term impact.[41]

In South Sudan, the government blamed UNMISS for bringing the disease to the country, and government forces restricted UNMISS movements outside their bases. The UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) became subject to a smear campaign by a Bangui-based pressure group, which called the mission MINUSCAVIRUS. The legitimacy of the EUTM in the Central African Republic (CAR) also suffered as a result of disinformation among local populations. In Somalia, al-Shabab referred to the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) when it warned for the spread of Covid-19 'by the crusader forces who have invaded the country and the disbelieving countries that support them'.[42] Extremist groups engaged in disinformation campaigns against the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), which at times saw its patrols blocked by angry mobs. Similar discourses were reported in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Such disinformation was effective, as the perception that Covid-19 was brought into their country by a peace operation was widespread among populations in CAR, Iraq, Mali and South Sudan.[43]

Local perceptions of missions were also affected by the fact that often the health agenda is not perceived as neutral by populations. Missions collaborated with governments in the implementation of Covid-19 measures and supported their efforts in places where serious grievances against government actors existed and support to them was not seen as neutral.[44]

As the pandemic endured and spread around the world, the argument that Covid-19 was a conspiracy, a disease imported by peace operations, however, lost its strength. Moreover, peace operations picked up their community engagement efforts again, although socially distanced. Additionally, many missions improved on countering such narratives with public information and strategic communication campaigns. Nonetheless, at times misinformation and disinformation may have affected mission implementation.[45]

[40] UN official 2 (note 6); and UN official 6 (note 14).

[41] UN official 8 (note 15); UN official 4 (note 7); UN official 2 (note 6); and UN official 6 (note 14).

[42] 'Coronavirus: Fighting al-Shabab propaganda in Somalia', BBC News, 1 Apr. 2020.

[43] Anyadike, O., 'Briefing: What's behind South Sudan's COVID-19 inspired UN-backlash', *New Humanitarian*, 10 Apr. 2020; Liechtenstein, D., 'How COVID-19 is impairing the work of the OSCE in eastern Ukraine', Security and Human Rights Monitor, 17 Apr. 2020; Losh, J., 'Foreigners targeted in Central African Republic as coronavirus fears grow', *The Guardian*, 10 Apr. 2020; Di Razza (note 30); DPO/DPET/PBPS/CAT (note 6); UN official 2 (note 6); EEAS official 3 (note 8); EEAS official 2 (note 4); and UN official 6 (note 14).

[44] UN official 2 (note 6).

[45] EEAS official 1 (note 3); UN official 4 (note 7); UN official 8 (note 15); and UN official 6 (note 14).

3. Mandate implementation

When the Covid-19 crisis started in March–April 2020, the pandemic had direct operational impacts on peace operations, as discussed in chapter 2, which, in turn, affected mandate implementation. For the first time the UN and other organizations deploying multilateral peace operations were forced to decide which mandated tasks were critical. They continued to implement critical tasks while adjusting or putting less critical tasks on hold. Strategies had to be revamped to balance measures for Covid-19—such as reducing footprints, scaling back patrols, limiting in-person engagement and social distancing, and protecting personnel and local communities—with continuing to implement, in particular, the critical mandated tasks. Business-as-usual, including extensive contact with local populations, was no longer possible.[46]

The impacts were largely mission and time specific; the pandemic had different impacts in different mission areas over time, and on different mandate tasks. Even within missions impacts differed depending on location, for example whether it was located in a capital city or in a rural area. Peace operations were also working at reduced capacity because some civilian personnel went home. Consequently, much of the substantive work slowed down for a period. While some of the EU CSDP missions and operations paused their operations, the UN was able to continue many activities, and save results and achievements made earlier in various ongoing peace processes. However, one should be cautious in drawing overly positive conclusions about the UN. In reporting, such as code cables, and in interviews, staff felt the urge to be positive and focus on progress made and solutions found. Generally, they prefer not to report problems without being able to propose a solution, as they do not want to be seen as 'doing nothing' or being 'not effective'. Still, despite the challenges, by summer–early fall 2020 most activities in most multilateral peace operations had restarted.[47]

This chapter looks specifically at the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on mandate implementation. The areas covered are (military) operations and patrolling; protection of civilians; capacity building, mentoring and training of host nation actors; early warning and situational awareness; mediation and community engagement; democratization, human rights monitoring and humanitarian access; and the new tasks that were taken on by mission in light of dealing with the pandemic.

(Military) operations and patrolling

In response to Covid-19, the UN Secretariat and several multilateral peace operations acted early on to limit the activities of peacekeepers to the critical functions—patrols, protection of civilians, support to humanitarian assistance, support to local and national host country institutions, force protection, and protection of key infrastructure. These functions either continued as normal or were adapted.[48]

Military operations were directly impacted by the introduction of quarantine regulations and the slower pace of remote induction training. All incoming troops and individual officers needed to quarantine for 14 days upon arrival, and in some host countries outgoing troops needed to quarantine again. This created operational voids of up to two or three weeks in some missions, and UN forces had to adapt their activities and objectives. Missions carried out fewer patrols, and those were carried out more often in vehicles and less on foot, and were not able to do as much or work as continuously as before. In addition, although adjusted regular operations

[46] UN official 4 (note 7); UN official 6 (note 14); and Di Razza (note 30).
[47] UN official 8 (note 15); UN official 5 (note 11); UN official 4 (note 7); and UN official 6 (note 14).
[48] de Coning (note 2); and DPO/DPET/PBPS/CAT (note 6).

could continue, some troop-contributing countries used Covid-19 to justify a less active posture. In other cases, the conflict parties restricted movement of peace operations personnel. For example, the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM) had its movement restricted by 'members of the armed formations' based on Covid-19 measures.[49] Moreover, the pandemic had a major budgetary impact on some missions. For example, to sustain its operations, the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) had its personnel tested each day before their patrols. These tests were not covered in the budget.[50]

The Covid-19 pandemic also affected the deployment and drawdown of multilateral peace operations. At the start of the crisis, the establishment of UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS) was delayed, as the meeting at which the decision was meant to be taken was postponed due to virus containment measures. Covid-19 measures affected logistics, delayed procedures, and reduced the willingness of host countries and transit countries, for health reasons, to collaborate in the field. It delayed the full redeployment and increase of operations of the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF). It slowed down troop reductions in the UN Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) and AMISOM, as well as the drawdown of the UN–AU Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID).[51]

Despite the challenges, within months most military operations had returned to their previous level of activity. Operations were conducted although some efforts were possibly delayed and may not have been as effective and efficient.[52]

Protection of civilians

The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent measures affected headquarters before missions, and in turn missions were affected before local populations. Consequently, missions were already prepared to some extent when it came to the impact of Covid-19 on the protection of civilians. The UN managed to maintain its protection of civilians' operations despite initial expectations that mandate implementation would be affected.[53]

This does not mean that Covid-19 had no impact on the protection of civilians; it is very likely the decrease and adjustment of patrols had an impact on the protection of civilians. In MINUSMA, for example, military patrols had to prioritize aerial patrols and the UNPOL fell back on mechanized patrols, usually by car. UNAMID had to reduce its patrols and local engagement due to movement restrictions. UNISFA was limited in its enforcement of the weapons-free-zone due to Covid-19 restrictions. The UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) had to reduce its protection of civilians exercises. Due to these adjustments, missions had less situational awareness of threats to civilians, and their capability to prevent or mitigate the threats was reduced. This has likely created security vacuums for violent actors to fill.[54]

In many missions, the reduced civilian staff numbers in the field limited local mediation and intercommunal dialogue activities. Furthermore, travel and movement restrictions constrained civilian efforts to provide protection, and the assessment of

[49] Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine, 'Members of the armed formations continued to deny SMM patrols passage at checkpoints in both Donetsk and Luhansk regions', OSCE SSM Spot Report 14/2020, 17 Apr. 2020.

[50] UN official 3 (note 6); UN official 8 (note 15); and UN official 6 (note 14).

[51] International Crisis Group (note 6); UN Security Council Resolution 2519, 14 May 2020; UN Security Council Resolution 2520, 29 May 2020; and UN Security Council Resolution 2525, 3 Jun. 2020.

[52] UN official 3 (note 6); UN official 2 (note 6); and UN official 4 (note 7).

[53] UN official 4 (note 7).

[54] UN official 4 (note 7); Di Razza (note 30); and United Nations Department for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, Department for Operational Support, Department for Peace Operations (note 6).

threats and alert mechanisms. In addition, a main challenge for protection of civilians was inside the mission. As it is an integrated effort, building and maintaining personal relationships in missions is essential to ensure the smooth interpersonal cooperation between different components. As meetings continued virtually, this became more difficult, while opportunities to leverage leadership on protection issues were more limited, as staff were no longer able to chat with them outside formal meetings.[55]

Capacity building, mentoring and training of host nation actors

Training and mentoring activities were discontinued in multilateral peace missions when the pandemic started, not least because counterparts often did not want them to continue. Mission efforts and projects to strengthen the institutional capacity of local stakeholders, state authorities and civil society for conflict resolution and reconciliation were also postponed or cancelled. As the pandemic endured, capacity building, training and mentoring efforts resumed in EU and UN multilateral peace operations, but either virtually or socially distanced in smaller group settings. However, the number and size of activities decreased significantly, and some training efforts were cancelled altogether.[56]

EU and UN officials generally consider virtual capacity building, training and mentoring activities to be less effective than face-to-face support. Online training requires electronic connectivity, interaction with trainees is less direct and the attention span of trainees is shorter. Knowledge transfer is limited as training times need to be reduced. In addition, as trainees are not seen in person, it is not possible for them to practice skills face-to-face or for trainers to assess their skills. Mentoring, in particular, requires in-person meetings to establish and maintain relationships. Initially missions were able to build on established relationships, however, later rotations of personnel struggled as it was difficult to establish personal relations virtually. Moreover, due to gaps in rotations in some cases contacts and relationships were lost. Later, when in-person training and mentoring picked up again, the capacity of missions to train and their ability to maintain good relationships was significantly reduced due to quarantine measures. Moreover, the conduct of training courses was hampered as trainers and trainees occasionally caught Covid-19.[57]

Although the Covid-19 pandemic clearly has had an impact on capacity building, training and mentoring activities of missions, the long-term impacts cannot yet be assessed as the potential consequence of reduced capacity building of host nation institutions are expected to be mainly long term.[58]

Early warning and situational awareness

Some UN peace operations, like the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO), had a remote early warning network of trusted partners in place before the pandemic that reported warnings to the mission via a network of mobile phones. These networks allowed operations to capitalize on earlier investments for a couple of months without being physically present when the Covid-19 pandemic forced missions to operate remotely. However, these networks were affected when members fell ill. Moreover, in the case of members dying, new hotspots or new recruitments,

[55] Di Razza (note 30); and UN official 4 (note 7).

[56] European External Action Service, Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability, 'Study on the impact of COVID on civilian CSDP Missions, Brussels', 8 Dec. 2020; DPO/DPET/PBPS/CAT (note 6); UN official 2 (note 6); EEAS official 2 (note 4); EEAS official 3 (note 8); EEAS official 1 (note 3); UN official 8 (note 15); and UN official 4 (note 7);

[57] EEAS official 3 (note 8); EEAS official 1 (note 3); UN official 9 (note 16); and UN official 8 (note 15).

[58] UN official 4 (note 7).

missions had to build and cultivate new relationships, which was difficult when done remotely. Also, sources of reports and allegations could not be cross-checked as community liaison assistants could generally no longer join patrols. Above all, the sustainability of early warning by missions was severely curtailed. Getting timely and reliable information depends on trust and familiarity with counterparts in the network. Socially distanced meetings are generally less effective in gaining trust, and as maintenance of the network and recruitment of new members was hampered, in the long term early warning activities may have been compromised. However, so far there is no evidence that these challenges have already impacted the early warning capacities of missions.[59]

Mediation and community engagement

Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, mediation by UN peace operations continued as much as possible to reduce intercommunal violence in places such as CAR and South Sudan. However, for shorter or longer periods, mediation efforts had to take virtual or hybrid forms. This was a challenge, as meeting in person is essential for establishing personal relations and having productive mediation meetings, particularly in sensitive situations or in certain cultures. Nevertheless, missions were seen to be trying and they introduced technologies that had not been used previously. Moving online gave space, at least in the short term, to younger more tech-savvy representatives, and virtual or hybrid meetings meant missions were, at times, able to attract broader audiences. Moreover, operations were able to be more flexible and adaptive to local initiatives early in the crisis, when peace operations still had to adapt to virtual environments, because command and control in missions was less detailed and allowed lower levels of the hierarchy to take more initiative.[60]

UN peacekeeping achieved successes in the virtual realm in places such as South Sudan, but positive results were more often achieved in special political missions (SPMs). On the one hand, UN peacekeeping operations are commonly deployed in low-tech militarized environments in more remote areas, and they are required to engage with populations, so when physically meetings are fewer in number, operations are less accessible to local populations. On the other hand, SPMs are more often deployed in more economically developed regions, particularly in capitals, with better online access, and they engage mainly with political elites. Consequently, it is often easier for SPMs to reach out virtually to partners than for peacekeeping operations to do so. It was also more difficult for UN peacekeeping to support local peace efforts, to bring opposing communities together to resolve tensions and conflicts, and to engage in social cohesion activities, and include, in particular, marginalized voices in these efforts. Nonetheless, local actors continued to speak with each other. However, it is too early to assess the sustainability and resilience of deals reached without the contribution of peace operations.[61]

Democratization, human rights monitoring and humanitarian access

Many peace operations engage in activities to support democratization and the organization of elections, to monitor and improve human rights situations, and to provide or secure the provision of humanitarian assistance. The Covid-19 pandemic

[59] DPO/DPET/PBPS/CAT (note 6); UN official 6 (note 14); UN official 4 (note 7); and UN official 2 (note 6).

[60] United Nations Department for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, Department for Operational Support, Department for Peace Operations (note 6); UN official 5 (note 11); UN official 10, interview with author 14 Jan. 2021; UN official 8 (note 15); and EEAS official 3 (note 8).

[61] DPO/DPET/PBPS/CAT (note 6); UN official 4 (note 7); UN official 2 (note 6); and UN official 6 (note 14).

had a negative impact on such efforts, particularly in the short term. Elections were postponed in places such as Libya, Niger and Somalia at the start of the pandemic, delaying democratization and the roles of peace operations in such processes. Humanitarian access for peace operations was initially affected by border closures, as the import and export of humanitarian assistance was restricted. Furthermore, human rights monitoring was hampered, as monitors could not cross borders. The travel of monitors within countries was also restricted and therefore in places such as CAR and South Sudan, peace operations continued to monitor human rights remotely through their local networks. In addition, Covid-19 measures were misused by some authorities to reduce political space or civil liberties. In places such as Darfur and Bosnia and Herzegovina, peace operations set up or supported projects to monitor the human rights impact of containment measures.[62]

New tasks

Nearly all multilateral peace operations have taken on new pandemic-related tasks in support of national Covid-19 responses. As operations are deployed in fragile environments, the infrastructure and organization they bring is often a solid complement to existing state and non-state structures.[63] For this reason, at the end of May 2020, UNAMID was the first UN peacekeeping operation mandated by the UN Security Council mandated to provide support to a government, in this case the Sudanese Government's efforts, to contain the spread of Covid-19, and to facilitate and support unhindered humanitarian access.[64] Its successor mission, UNITAMS was requested, within the context of Covid-19, to support the mobilization of economic and development assistance and the coordination of humanitarian assistance.[65] It was not until July 2020 that the UN Security Council formally requested all UN peace operations provide support to host governments to contain the pandemic, mentioning in particular the facilitation of humanitarian access and medical evacuations.[66] Subsequently it used similar language in mandate renewals. Multilateral peace operations deployed by other organizations, such as the EU, initiated Covid-19 related projects within the context of their strategic communication and civil–military cooperation (CIMIC) strategies.[67]

The kind of new activities that were undertaken by multilateral peace operations included:

Supporting local and national institutions in their Covid-19 efforts

Within mandates to strengthen governments, several UN peacekeeping operations helped governments to increase their health capacities. Some reallocated funds for this from quick-impact projects (QIPs) that were cancelled due to Covid-19.[68]

[62] UN official 6 (note 14); United Nations Department for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, Department for Operational Support, Department for Peace Operations (note 6); and *Human Rights in Times of COVID-19: Identified Omissions in Realization of Human Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Banjaluka Center for Human Rights: Banja Luka-Sarajevo, 2020).

[63] Lacroix (note 6); and United Nations, Department of Peace Operations, Strategic Communications Section, 'Community outreach and COVID-19', 22 May 2020.

[64] UN Security Council Resolution 2525 (note 51).

[65] UN Security Council Resolution 2524, 3 June 2020.

[66] UN Security Council Resolution 2532, 1 July 2020.

[67] EEAS official 3 (note 8); and EEAS official 1 (note 3).

[68] de Coning (note 2); United Nations Department for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, Department for Operational Support, Department for Peace Operations (note 6); UN official 8 (note 15); UN official 4 (note 7); and UN official 6 (note 14).

Supporting humanitarian assistance

Multilateral peace operations used their logistical networks to maintain critical supply chains, including the provision of humanitarian and medical support, alongside facilitating and supporting unhindered humanitarian access.[69]

Providing medical support

As missions could not abandon vulnerable communities, most multilateral peace operations provided medical support in some form. This included the provision of food, and hygiene and medical supplies, such as personal protective equipment, medicines and medical testing equipment. In addition, they often opened their own health facilities to the broader public. In August 2021 the UN Mission in Somalia was also requested to support vaccination distribution.[70]

Supporting national police services

Early in the pandemic, UNPOL and EU CSDP missions and operations supported national police services in their efforts to combat the spread of Covid-19. For example, they provided technical advice to security forces, in places such as CAR, on how to enforce curfews and lockdown measures with the minimum use of force. In Haiti and Mali, UN missions advised on the prevention and containment of Covid-19 in prisons as well.[71]

Contributing to sensitization, awareness raising and combatting misinformation

There was a lack of awareness and an abundance of misinformation on Covid-19 in many mission environments, sometimes called an 'infodemic'. Local populations often did not perceive the disease as the most pertinent threat. They faced more concrete security and food challenges, as well as other diseases. They were also less familiar with the risks of Covid-19, and, given limited testing capacity, were not always able to determine whether they had been infected. Most multilateral peace operations, within their mandates, realized the gravity of the situation and that they had a role in countering hate speech.[72]

UN peacekeeping operations supported governments in implementing Covid-19 sensitization campaigns, including in CIMIC activities. UNAMID, for example, initiated public awareness programmes in the internally displaced person (IDP) camps in Darfur.[73] From 18 March to 31 May 2020, MINUSCA, MINUSMA, MONUSCO, UNAMID, UNFICYP, UNMISS, UNIFIL and UNISFA organized or facilitated more than 330 activities to raise awareness. Such activities included training community sensitizers, as well as training local journalists how to cross-check information.[74]

In these sensitization and awareness-raising activities a variety of traditional and modern tools of communication were used, ranging from posters, educational flashcards, billboards, leaflets, events, workshops, and patrols to digital media and messaging platforms, such as WhatsApp groups, to moto-taxis equipped with loudspeakers. UN broadcasting capacities were used to amplify the efforts of local

[69] Lacroix (note 6); United Nation (note 63); EEAS official 3 (note 8); and EEAS official 1 (note 3).

[70] DPO/DPET/PBPS/CAT (note 6); 'International peace and security, and pandemics: Security Council precedents and options', Security Council Report, 5 Apr. 2020; United Nations Department for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, Department for Operational Support, Department for Peace Operations (note 6); UN official 6 (note 14); EEAS official 3 (note 8); EEAS official 1 (note 3); and UN Security Council Resolution 2592, 25 Aug. 2021.

[71] United Nations Department for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, Department for Operational Support, Department for Peace Operations (note 6); United Nations, Security Council (note 12); EEAS official 3 (note 8); and EEAS official 1 (note 3).

[72] UN official 8 (note 15); and UN official 6 (note 14).

[73] Security Council Report (note 70); UN official 8 (note 15); UN official 4 (note 7); and UN official 6 (note 14).

[74] DPO/DPET/PBPS/CAT (note 6).

partners and provide public information on the pandemic. More than before, missions interacted in local languages in order to gain the trust of local populations.[75]

Supporting socio-economic recovery

In a few cases missions looked further into the future towards socio-economic recovery after the pandemic. The UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) was one of them, which assisted the drafting of a socio-economic recovery framework to tackle the challenges posed by Covid-19 to the social and economic sectors in Iraq.[76] Peace operations, particularly UN peace operations, were able to draw on their experiences combatting Ebola in Liberia (2014) and the DRC (2019).[77]

The Covid-19 pandemic initially diverted attention away from conflict management and peacebuilding activities to these new tasks. Some argued that the death toll of ongoing armed conflict was higher than that of Covid-19 and considered the new tasks to be a counterproductive diversion of attention and resources: a 'healthicization'. Others argued that it boosted trust and cooperation among parts of the population, as missions were seen to be acting where the popular needs were highest: dealing with the health emergency. Moreover, this reorientation involved mainly QIPs, for which the originally planned activities could no longer be implemented, the projects only had a short horizon, and their impact was not long term. However, the impact on and extent of reorientation of programmatic funding is less clear, yet.[78]

[75] United Nations Department for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, Department for Operational Support, Department for Peace Operations (note 6); United Nation (note 63); Lacroix (note 6); DPO/DPET/PBPS/CAT (note 6); and UN official 6 (note 14).

[76] United Nations Department for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, Department for Operational Support, Department for Peace Operations (note 6).

[77] Gowan, R. and Riis Andersen, L., 'Short-term responses and long-term consequences: Peacekeeping in the shadow of COVID-19 era', DIIS Policy Brief, June 2020.

[78] UN official 2 (note 6); UN official 4 (note 7); DPO/DPET/PBPS/CAT (note 6); and Di Razza (note 30).

4. Strategic impacts

In addition to the direct operational and mandate impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, the pandemic may also have indirect and long-term strategic impacts on multilateral peace operations. The Covid-19 pandemic could affect conflicts and multilateralism more broadly, as well as governance and socio-economic affairs in mission areas, which could have consequences for peace operations in the long term. These developments have been described in literature and are discussed in this chapter.[79]

Conflict

On 23 March 2020 UN Secretary-General António Guterres called for a global ceasefire. It was hoped that, following the call, the main positive influence Covid-19 would have for peace operations was a reduction of armed conflict around the world, including in deployment areas.[80] Unfortunately, the call did not have the desired effect. Parties in only 10 out of 43 countries with organized violence welcomed the call and declared unilateral ceasefires, and in only a few cases did this lead to short-lasting agreements. In conflicts where violence fell during 2020, there were generally alternative explanations.[81]

Furthermore, several armed groups seized the opportunity to wear down weakened and distracted state apparatuses further on the battlefield. In Mali, for example, Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) called Covid-19 a 'God-sent soldier'.[82] There is solid evidence that violent extremist groups have tried to use the pandemic to their own advantage, particularly to recruit, fundraise and conduct attacks. At the same time, Covid-19 was an additional obstacle for security institutions' counter-terrorism activities. Nonetheless, it is unclear whether 'terrorist' groups have so far benefitted from the Covid-19 pandemic. Such groups may benefit more in the medium to long term, given the increased pressure on state counterterrorism resources, the reduced non-state (civil society) counterterrorism capacity, and growing underlying grievances.[83]

Multilateralism

Covid-19 hit multilateralism hard, particularly at the start of the pandemic, as countries focused on national security and adopted unilateral solutions, such as border closures. In the medium term, UN Security Council members may be less proactive as they are preoccupied with domestic Covid-19 challenges and their economic consequences. While multilateralism was already under pressure before the Covid-19 pandemic, it intensified these tendencies and in the long term may put multilateral institutions and solutions, such as peace operations, under more political and financial strain after the crisis.[84] For example, police- and troop-contributing countries may

[79] In addition this chapter is informed by a workshop on the impact of Covid-19 on peace operations, co-organized by SIPRI and the UN Department of Peace Operations on 6 Oct. 2021.

[80] 'COVID-19: UN chief calls for global ceasefire to focus on "the true fight of our lives"', *UN News*, 23 Mar. 2020.

[81] Miller, A., 'Call unanswered: A review of responses to the UN appeal for a global ceasefire', Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 13 May 2020.

[82] Kishi, R., 'How the coronavirus crisis is silencing dissent and sparkling repression', *Foreign Policy*, 21 July 2020.

[83] European Institute for Counter Terrorism and Conflict Prevention, 'Key determinants of transnational terrorism in the era of Covid-19 and beyond: Trajectory, disruption and the way forward', EICTP Vienna Research Papers on Transnational Terrorism and Counter-terrorism, vol. II, Mar. 2021; and UN Security Council, Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), 'The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on terrorism, counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism', Dec. 2021.

[84] Hosli, M., 'The United Nations and challenges to multilateralism', eds M. Hosli et al., *The Future of Multilateralism: Global Cooperation and International Organizations* (Rowman and Littlefield: Lanham, 2021), pp. 10–12; Gowan, R.,

come under domestic pressure to reduce their contributions for financial or health reasons.

With a global economic crisis looming following the Covid-19 health crisis, analysts had expected development assistance to drop and finance-contributing countries to the UN peacekeeping budget to tighten their purse strings further, which in turn would have decreased their global ability to manage conflicts.[85] In 2020, however, official development assistance (ODA) from Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries rose over 3.5 per cent in real terms compared to 2019, partly due to support for Covid-19 crisis recovery. ODA levels are more uncertain for the coming years, but many donors have indicated they will maintain or increase their aid budgets.[86]

The UN peacekeeping budget has remained relatively stable, increasing slightly in 2020–21 and decreasing a little in 2021–22.[87] For the moment, it seems that the UN peacekeeping budget is primarily determined by factors such as the general financial pressure exhorted by administrations of the main financial contributors to peace operations, for example, in the United States, the Donald J. Trump versus Joe Biden administrations. This is indicated by the USA reducing its arrears of assessed contributions for UN peacekeeping operations, which went down during the Covid-19 crisis from US$2378 million in 2019 to $1388 million in 2020.[88]

In addition, while some analysts argue that the Covid-19 pandemic has not had a transformative effect on international politics, others perceive it to have affected cooperation in the UN Security Council and multilateralism in general, including on the modification of peace operation mandates or the establishment of new missions.[89] The latter argue that confrontations between China and the USA over the outbreak of Covid-19 and China's initial response to the outbreak have fed into already increasing tensions resulting from the changing global power balance. This has consequently intensified China–USA global political competition and polarization. Another claim is that the pandemic has sped up the rise of China and the shift of the balance of power away from the EU and the USA—the West—to China.[90] Some of those analysts claiming that Covid-19 has changed the balance of power, argue that as a consequence the multilateral system now lacks leadership. Even if the USA were to emerge weaker from Covid-19, China is facing formidable challenges of its own and is not in a position to take over the USA's leading role. Other potential leaders such as Brazil, the EU, India, Russia or South Africa are even further removed from taking up such a role.[91] At the same time, some analysts have stressed that the pandemic is an opportunity

'Learning to live with a limited Security Council', International Crisis Group, Commentary, 29 July 2021; and Kahl, C. and Wright, T., *Aftershocks: Pandemic Politics and the End of the Old International Order* (St. Martin's Press: New York, 2021).

[85] de Coning (note 14); and Gowan and Riis Andersen (note 77).

[86] OECD, 'COVID-19 spending helped to lift foreign aid to an all-time high in 2020 but more effort needed', 13 Apr. 2021.

[87] United Nations, General Assembly, 'Approved resources for peacekeeping operations for the period from 1 July 2019 to 30 June 2020', A/C.5/73/21, 3 July 2019; United Nations, General Assembly, 'Approved resources for peacekeeping operations for the period from 1 July 2020 to 30 June 2021', A/C.5/73/21, 24 June 2020; and United Nations, General Assembly, 'Approved resources for peacekeeping operations for the period from 1 July 2021 to 30 June 2022', 29 June 2021.

[88] UN official 6 (note 14); and United Nations, 'Financial situation of the United Nations: Statement by Catherine Pollard, Under-Secretary-General, Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance', Fifth Committee of the General Assembly at its 75th session, 8 Oct. 2020.

[89] Drezner, D., 'The song remains the same: International relations after COVID-19', *International Organization*, vol. 74, no. S1 (Dec. 2020); and Gowan and Riis Andersen (note 77).

[90] Bhusal, M. K., 'The world after COVID-19: An opportunity for a new beginning', *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, vol. 10, no. 5 (May 2020); Cimmino, J., Kroenig, M. and Pavel, B., 'Taking stock: Where are geopolitics headed in the COVID-19 era?', Atlantic Council, June 2020; and Heisbourg, F., 'From Wuhan to the world: How the pandemic will reshape geopolitics', *Survival*, vol. 62, no. 3 (2020).

[91] Bahi, R., 'The geopolitics of COVID-19: US–China rivalry and the imminent Kindleberger trap', *Review of Economics and Political Science*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2021).

to revitalize multilateralism, as national policies have not provided a way out of the Covid-19 pandemic.[92]

It is difficult to prove the extent to which the pandemic has affected the UN Security Council's diligence on the deployment or closure of peace operations. The appetite for large-scale peacekeeping operations has already decreased over the past few years following challenging missions, such as in Darfur and Mali, and may also be more affected by the outcome of the efforts in Afghanistan and the Taliban coming to power.[93]

Governance

The Covid-19 pandemic may have affected the strength of state institutions, good governance and the implementation of peace agreements, and as such may have reversed the efforts of peace operations. The pandemic exerted great demands on governance institutions, such as health systems, law enforcement and border control, while their personnel capacity was weakened due to infection. Furthermore, the urgent need for specific scarce resources created opportunities for corruption. This combination of factors, particularly in countries with weaker institutions, was compounded by often already low trust in government institutions and leadership.[94]

The pandemic affected governance effectiveness. In many places, this was in the short term as lockdowns meant government institutions were unable to perform their non-essential tasks. In the long term, government effectiveness is likely to be constrained by the economic impact of Covid-19, although this may be territorially differentiated. In countries, centres have been sometimes hit harder in terms of fatalities, but have generally been more adaptive than peripheries to the long-term economic, fiscal and governance impacts. Moreover, government capacities to provide basic services were strained, particularly in low-income areas. Consequently, in many places while police officers faced increasing unrest and discontent about the government's inability to deliver, organized crime groups took the opportunity to protect and provide socio-economic welfare, and as such gain legitimacy.[95]

While some analysists argue that the Covid-19 pandemic may have had a temporary rally-around-the-flag effect, in general it decreased the trust of individuals in government institutions and leadership.[96] There was a greater loss of trust in places when governance structures were already weak. In Africa, where trust in governments was frequently already low, populations were often fairly content with the Covid-19 response, but had concerns about government abuse and corruption. In Colombia, initially there appeared to be popular support for the government's technocratic approach to handling the pandemic. However, a tax reform sparked social unrest and mass protests, as frustration and distrust in President Iván Duque Márquez built up during lockdowns and as a result of the economic and health effects of the pandemic. Similarly, while distrust in government had always been high in Lebanon, a cascade

[92] E.g. Sachs, J., 'COVID-19 and multilateralism', *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, no. 16 (2020); and Kozul-Wright, R., 'Recovering better from COVID-19 will need a rethink of multilateralism', *Development*, vol. 63 (2020).

[93] Smit and Van der Lijn (note 28).

[94] Gowan and Riis Andersen (note 77); and Brown, F. Z., Brechenmacher, S. and Carothers, T., 'How will the coronavirus reshape democracy and governance globally?', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Commentary, 6 Apr. 2020.

[95] African Union Commission and United Nations Development Programme, *The Impact of the COVID-19 Outbreak on Governance, Peace and Security in the Horn of Africa* (AU Commision/UNDP: Addis Ababa, 2020); Allain-Dupré, D. et al., *The Territorial Impact of COVID-19: Managing the Crisis and Recovery across Levels of Government* (OECD: Paris, 10 May 2021); and Sampaio, A., 'Pandemic protests and police: Urban governance in crisis', Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 25 Sep. 2020.

[96] 'Pandemic politics: Incumbent governments voting intention', Armarium Interreta, 31 May 2021.

of crises—financial collapse, economic collapse, the August 2020 port explosion combined with the impact of the pandemic—caused a complete breakdown of trust in Lebanese governance.[97]

At times, non-state actors benefitted from the situation, particularly in places where state governance was already weak. The Taliban and Hezbollah worked to contain the pandemic including through public awareness campaigns, while in other places gangs and criminal organizations enforced curfews. Al-Shabab set up a Covid-19 treatment centre in Somalia. In Colombia, armed groups and criminal organizations imposed Covid-19 regulations, including curfews and quarantines. When successful, these alternative forms of governance foster the legitimacy of these organizations.[98]

The Covid-19 pandemic also impacted good governance. In addition to impacts on social and economic rights, the pandemic affected individual and human rights situations, which peace operations often aim to improve. School closures affected educational rights, prisoners were often left unprotected, and sexual and gender-based violence increased during lockdowns. Government responses at times relied on increasing surveillance and technological means that impacted privacy. In several cases freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly were severely curtailed. The space for civil society shrank, although civil society organizations also found new ways of communicating with their constituencies and set up more vibrant forms of civic engagement. In some cases security forces used violence against critics, carried out arbitrary arrests, censored critics, restricted access to public health information, and banned protests and public gatherings. However such cases were relatively limited in countries hosting peace operations.[99]

The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted democratization and the electoral mandates of peace operations. The health crisis has been used by a variety of authoritarian regimes and host governments to expand executive power and legitimize shrinking political space. The pandemic meant elections were temporarily postponed in places such as Libya, Niger and Somalia, but it may also have a more lasting effect on electoral processes and on democratic governance in general. For example, where the military temporarily received civilian tasks, it may result in decreased civilian control over the military. As such the health crisis has added to the already ongoing crisis of democracy and may strengthen authoritarian consolidation. The handling of the pandemic has also triggered a discussion on the effectiveness of autocracy versus democracy, as authoritarian countries appeared to do better than democratic countries

[97] Eichengreen, B., Saka, O. and Aksoy, C. G., 'The political scar of epidemics', National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Papers, no. 27401, Apr. 2021; Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 'COVID-19 in Africa—One year on: Impact and prospects', 2021; Rettberg, A., 'From old battles to new challenges in Colombia', eds T. Carothers and A. E. Feldmann, *Divisive Politics and Democratic Dangers in Latin America* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Washington, DC, 17 Feb. 2021); International Crisis Group, *The Pandemic Strikes: Responding to Colombia's Mass Protests*, Latin America and Caribbean Report no. 90 (International Crisis Group: Bogotá/New York/Brussels, 2 July 2021); and Todman, W., 'Navigating collapse in Lebanon's Covid-19 response', Center for Strategic and International Studies, 13 Apr. 2021.

[98] 'Somalia's Islamist group al Shabaab says sets up COVID-19 treatment centre', Reuters, 12 June 2020; Sampaio (note 95); and Brown, Brechenmacher and Carothers (note 94).

[99] Human Rights Watch, 'Future choices: Charting an equitable exit from the Covid-19 pandemic', 4 Mar. 2021; United Nations, Security Council, 'Situation in South Sudan', Report of the Secretary-General, S/2020/890, 8 Sep. 2020; Repucci, S. and Slipowitz, A., *Democracy under Lockdown: The Impact of COVID-19 on the Global Struggle for Freedom* (Freedom House: Washington, DC, Oct. 2020); Repucci, S. and Slipowitz, A., *Freedom in the World 2021: Democracy under Siege* (Freedom House: Washington, DC, 2021); International IDEA, 'Global overview of COVID-19: Impact on elections', 31 Aug. 2021; Smith, J. and Cheeseman, N., 'Authoritarians are exploiting the coronavirus: Democracies must not follow suit', *Foreign Policy*, 28 Apr. 2020; Kennedy, A. and Resnick, D., 'Governing a crisis and crises of governance: The political dimensions of COVID-19', International Food Policy Research Institute, Mar. 2021; Brown, Brechenmacher and Carothers (note 94); 'Covid-19 triggers wave of free speech abuse: Scores of countries target media, activists, medics, political opponents', Human Rights Watch, 11 Feb. 2021; and Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report 2020/21: The State of the World's Human Rights* (Amnesty International: London, 2021).

in dealing with the pandemic.[100] What this eventually will mean for the priority of democratization in peace operation mandates remains to be seen.

Socio-economic affairs

Many peace operations are deployed in low-income countries, which were hit hardest by the global economic downturn. The pandemic has pushed fragile host states and economies towards or over the edge. Their economies may not be able catch up to pre-pandemic expectations until far beyond 2022. Their governments were unable to cushion the effects of lockdowns, and due to limited vaccine availability will also face the impact of the pandemic longer than high-income countries. Although ODA levels may have remained relatively stable so far, other external finance flows such as remittances, trade and foreign direct investments fell during 2020.[101]

The pandemic and resulting economic downturn have intensified existing challenges, including child labour, poverty, national polarization and income inequality. Fractures around ethnic groups, gender, majority and minority, poor and rich, centre and periphery, urban and rural increased. Those who were already vulnerable—such as women, migrants, minorities and low-income groups—have been disproportionately hit, which increases inequality and potential grievances. Youth, as a particularly vulnerable group, has been hit hard. Youth unemployment worsened due to the pandemic. In combination with already existing grievances, this has provided more recruitment opportunities for extremist and criminal groups.[102]

Income inequality increased particularly in low-income countries.[103] During 2020, some 97 million people globally entered extreme poverty due to Covid-19, and while global growth resumed in 2021, in low-income countries and countries in sub-Saharan Africa a further increase in poverty is expected in the 2021 figures.[104] Countries hosting peace operations, such as the DRC and Mali, are among the 10 countries with the highest increase in extreme poverty during 2020.[105] The 10 countries where the long-term impact of Covid-19 on extreme poverty is expected to be highest in 2030 includes two additional hosts of peace operations, South Sudan and Yemen.[106]

The Covid-19 pandemic has at times sharpened intergroup tensions and partisan perspectives on the appropriate government response. Ideology and background were key to how individuals and groups perceived, discussed and responded to the pandemic. The resulting political polarization contributed to a further breakdown in the fabric of society. Common patterns of 'othering'—the practice of one group of people treating another group 'as though there is something wrong with them' and blaming them—were often followed. As such the pandemic played into already

[100] Repucci and Slipowitz, *Democracy under Lockdown* (note 99); Repucci and Slipowitz, *Democracy under Siege* (note 99); International IDEA (note 99); Smith and Cheeseman (note 99); Kennedy and Resnick (note 99); Greitens, S., 'Surveillance, security, and liberal democracy in the post-COVID world', *International Organization*, vol. 74, no. S1 (Dec. 2020); Brown, Brechenmacher and Carothers (note 94); and Stasavage, D., 'Democracy, autocracy, and emergency threats: Lessons for COVID-19 from the last thousand years', *International Organization*, vol. 74, no. S1 (2020).

[101] International Monetary Fund (IMF), *World Economic Outlook Update: Policy Support and Vaccines Expected to Lift Activity* (IMF: Washington, DC, Jan. 2021); International Monetary Fund (IMF), *World Economic Outlook Update: Fault Lines Widen in the Global Recovery* (IMF: Washington, DC, July 2021); Ghani, T., 'The sting in COVID-19's tail: For poor countries, what comes next could be worse', *Foreign Affairs*, 26 Jan. 2021; and OECD (note 86).

[102] Segun, M., 'Human rights abuses escalate in Africa during the pandemic: Governments on the continent should co-operate fully with the International Criminal Court', Business Day, 18 Jan. 2021; Nassif-Pires, L. et al., 'Pandemic of inequality', Levy Economics Institute of Bard College, Public Policy Brief, no. 149 (2020); Allain-Dupré (note 95); and Mo Ibrahim Foundation (note 97).

[103] IMF, *World Economic Outlook Update* (note 101); and International Monetary Fund (IMF), *Macroeconomic Developments and Prospects in Low-Income Countries—2021* (IMF: Washington, DC, 2021).

[104] Mahler, D. G. et al., 'Updated estimates of the impact of COVID-19 on global poverty: Turning the corner on the pandemic in 2021?', World Bank blog, 24 June 2021.

[105] Kharas, H., 'The impact of COVID-19 on global extreme poverty', Brookings Institution, 21 Oct. 2020.

[106] Kharas (note 105).

existing structural conditions and historical legacies. Extremist and nationalist political entrepreneurs profited from the crisis. Populists, especially, resisted external interference, the delegation of national sovereignty, and policies that favoured elites, particularly when these were coupled with questions of nationalism.[107] While at the start of the pandemic the number of social protests decreased due to curfews and other measures, after a few months these resurged to pre-pandemic levels. In fact, due to the pandemic and its socio-economic and political impacts, previously held grievances and conflict potential in many deployment areas and beyond, increased.[108]

As a symptom of socio-economic challenges, crime followed similar patterns. Although street crime generally reduced in places due to lockdowns, organized crime at times benefitted. In illegal markets and trafficking, such as drugs and wildlife, the refocus of police efforts towards Covid-19 restrictions enforcement and the reduced police capacity due to illness gave criminal organizations a window of opportunity to expand. Other criminal organizations innovated and expanded into cybercrime. At the same time, due to the weakness of licit economies, criminal organizations were able to tighten their grip on the regular economy, while their recruitment benefitted from the increased socio-economic challenges. These impacts are expected to be long lasting.[109]

[107] Eichengreen, B., 'Individualism, polarization and recovery from the COVID-19 crisis', *Intereconomics*, vol. 55, no. 6 (2000); Crimson, C. and Salvanathan, H. P., 'Societal polarization and COVID-19: Excerpt from "Together Apart"', Social Science Space, 27 Aug. 2020; Dionne, K. Y. and Turkmen, F. F., 'The politics of pandemic othering: Putting COVID-19 in global and historical context', *International Organization*, vol. 74, no. S1 (2020); Peters, B. G., 'Governing in a time of global crises: The good, the bad, and the merely normal', *Global Public Policy and Governance*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2021); and Pevehouse, J. C. W., 'The COVID-19 pandemic, international cooperation, and populism', *International Organization*, vol. 74, no. S1 (2020).

[108] Kishi, R., 'A year of COVID-19: The pandemic's impact on global conflict and demonstration trends', The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), Apr. 2021.

[109] Bird, L. et.al., 'Crime and contagion: The impact of a pandemic on organized crime', Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, Mar. 2020; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 'The impact of COVID-19 on organized crime', Research Brief, July 2021; and EEAS official 2 (note 4).

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Direct operational impacts and mandate implementation

The Covid-19 pandemic brought direct operational challenges, and opportunities, to multilateral UN and non-UN peace operations. Personnel rotations were initially paused and later affected by quarantines, which reduced the effective time of personnel in the field. Operations needed to be socially distanced and activities moved partly online. Operations prioritized duty of care and the health of personnel. The online environment impeded training and assessment of personnel and units, with potential long-term impacts. Operational integration was both stimulated as well as complicated by the Covid-19 measures. Although there is no clear relationship between the pandemic and women's participation in peace operations, the increase of women in leadership may have been negatively affected. People-centred approaches were restrained by the lack of physical presence of operations in the field and by the restrictive measures hampering community engagement activities. This in turn affected the popular trust in and credibility of peace operations. Particularly at the start of the pandemic missions were vulnerable to misinformation by conflict parties, particularly when relationships had already been tense. On a number of issues, however, the Covid-19 pandemic created the momentum to deal with already existing challenges that were amplified by the pandemic, ranging from duty of care, operational integration and strategic communication to secure communications including for civilian components. Consequently, multilateral peace operations are currently better prepared for the next pandemic than before.

These direct operational impacts of the Covid-19 crisis meant that initially only critical tasks continued to be implemented, and that strategies to continue implementing mandated tasks needed to be revamped to balance Covid-19 measures. By summer–early fall 2020 most activities in most multilateral peace operations had resumed albeit with adjustments. The impacts on mandate implementation were largely mission and time specific, and differed per mandate task. Mostly, peace operations have succeeded in holding on to the achievements they had made before and have prevented regressions, but little progress was made.

Despite the challenges, most military operations continued, although some activities were delayed, or not as effective and efficient. The overall impact of Covid-19 on the protection of civilians was limited although as a consequence at times protection of civilians activities were affected. The Covid-19 measures clearly obstructed capacity building, training and mentoring activities of missions, as virtual and socially distanced activities are less effective, yet the long-term consequences cannot yet be assessed. Similarly, while in the short run peace operations could build on their existing networks for early warning, in the long term activities may have been compromised. Mediation and community engagement continued in adjusted forms, but supporting local activities and particularly including marginalized voices was more difficult. Democratization, human rights monitoring and ensuring humanitarian access were particularly hit initially, by postponement of elections, lockdowns and border closures. At the same time, peace operations took on a variety of new Covid-19 related activities. As such, without a doubt Covid-19 has had a large operational impact on missions, however, it is too early to tell how large the overall long-term impact will be.

Strategic level and long-term impacts

Although, strategically the Covid-19 pandemic may not have significantly changed the short-term global conflict map, either in terms of number or in intensity of conflicts and terrorism, its negative impact on international tensions, as well as on governance and socio-economic challenges, may in the long term have a negative effect on global security. This in turn may increase the demand for peace operations. However, these long-term strategic impacts are in many ways still potential or thus far substantiated with limited evidence.

The Covid-19 pandemic has primarily intensified or reinforced underlying factors and grievances that in the long term lead to conflict. Many of these developments had already started before the pandemic. It has weakened governance particularly in places where governance was already weak and under stress. It seems to have accelerated trends towards questioning the effectiveness and relevance of human rights and democracy, focusing national and international attention more on strengthening the central state. It has also intensified socio-economic challenges, such as increasing poverty, inequality and as such grievances and intergroup tensions, which provide fertile ground for organized crime, violent extremism, terrorism and conflict.

The Covid-19 pandemic may even be another 'indirect' nail in the coffin of many peace operations, as among other things it appears to have focused governments on their own internal affairs and to have intensified polarization and competition between the great powers, reducing their ability and willingness to collaborate in the UN Security Council on conflict management and peace operations. This entered the mix with an already negative sentiment towards peace operations both among many scholars and in the Security Council, based primarily on the failures of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq: the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban being yet another blow and the conclusion could be to divest in peace operations. However, this would not be a fair and correct conclusion, as such nation building operations are very different from most multilateral peace operations, including UN peace operations. In fact, based on the many increasing underlying factors leading to conflicts, the need for peace operations in the future is only likely to increase.

Recommendations

1. Invest in multilateral peace operations

It is likely that a long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is an increased need for conflict management. Rising inequality, intergroup tensions, grievances, less attention on democracy and human rights, and increased poverty create fertile ground for organized crime, terrorist and violent extremist groups and conflict parties to recruit. This may lead to more conflict, which multilateral peace operations have proven to be effective tool in bringing an end to. Concretely peace operations may be required to invest more in capacity building for countering disinformation; re-establishing civil rights and rule of law; and countering organized and other forms of crimes that increased during the pandemic in many countries.

2. Invest in being on the ground instead of virtual alternatives

The Covid-19 pandemic has shown that many of the activities implemented by peace operations cannot be done effectively and efficiently online. In-person contact is essential for mediation and community outreach to gain trust of partners, and in capacity building, training and mentoring to exercise and to assess trainees. In addition,

although online working allows some support functions to be carried out outside the mission area, overall moving online has not proven to be more cost-effective.

3. Invest in strategic communication

The Covid-19 pandemic has clearly shown the importance of winning the hearts and minds of local populations. Peace operations are vulnerable to disinformation and therefore require sufficient attention and capacity for strategic communication, not only for safety and security of personnel, but also to be effective. In addition, if strategic communication receives enough attention, missions can be a force for good by supporting awareness-raising and sensitization campaigns.

4. Invest in local partner networks

Local partners have proven to be very effective in maintaining situational awareness and early warning capacity in the absence of physical presence on the ground, as was the case during the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic. Establishing local partner networks in turn requires building trust amongst potential and current sources and strengthening the capacity of local actors to operate in a digital environment.

5. Invest in psychological health of peace operations personnel

The main capital of multilateral peace operations is their personnel. While members of personnel are often already deployed under difficult and at times stressful conditions, the Covid-19 pandemic and the related restrictions intensified the need to ensure the psychological health of personnel. It is important to ensure adequate counselling, among other options, is available to all members of personnel, not only within the context of duty of care, but also as its absence will have knock-on effects on the home front.

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