

MILITARY PEACEKEEPING

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1. Core Definition

Military Peacekeeping is defined as a specialized service provided by qualified military, police, and civilian personnel whose primary objective is to maintain a negotiated truce, monitor ceasefires, and facilitate the formation and subsequent maintenance of a diplomatic resolution between previously warring or opposing factions. Historically, peacekeeping operations were conceived as non-enforcement measures deployed only with the consent of the host state and the belligerents, serving chiefly as an impartial buffer and observation force. This initial model emphasized the deployment of soldiers or personnel who were often **unarmed or lightly armed**, operating solely as a mediatory presence to de-escalate tensions and prevent the resumption of large-scale hostilities, thereby creating the necessary space for political dialogue to occur. The scope of modern peacekeeping, however, has significantly broadened from these traditional constraints, evolving into complex, multidimensional missions that encompass security, humanitarian, and institution-building tasks under the auspices of international bodies, most notably the United Nations (UN).

The core function of **military peacekeeping** personnel remains rooted in stabilizing volatile environments following a conflict or during a fragile peace process. Unlike traditional military interventions aimed at decisively defeating an enemy, peacekeeping is inherently non-coercive in its purest form, focusing instead on legitimizing and sustaining peace agreements through presence and monitoring. These missions operate under specific mandates outlining rules of engagement, which traditionally limit the use of force strictly to self-defense or, in contemporary robust missions, to protect civilians and the mandate itself. The success of any peacekeeping mission rests heavily on the credibility of the international community supporting it, the cooperation of the local factions, and the ability of the forces to maintain strict neutrality and impartiality, distinguishing their role fundamentally from that of coalition forces engaged in warfighting or counter-insurgency operations. The deployment is fundamentally an extension of diplomatic efforts, operationalized through uniformed personnel.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The concept of **military peacekeeping** arose directly from the failures of the international community to prevent global conflicts in the first half of the 20th century, leading to the establishment of the United Nations in 1945, which was tasked with maintaining international peace and security. While early UN actions involved military observers, the seminal moment

establishing peacekeeping as a distinct international mechanism occurred during the Suez Crisis of 1956. Facing a diplomatic deadlock involving the UK, France, Israel, and Egypt, Canadian diplomat Lester B. Pearson proposed deploying the first large-scale, armed international force, the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF I), to separate the belligerents. This deployment, although armed, strictly followed the principles of consent, impartiality, and non-use of force except in self-defense, establishing the 'First Generation' or traditional model of peacekeeping deployed under Chapter VI of the UN Charter, focusing primarily on inter-state conflicts.

For the duration of the Cold War, peacekeeping missions were relatively few and largely confined to monitoring border disputes (e.g., Kashmir, Cyprus) or armistice lines, reflecting the paralysis within the Security Council caused by ideological rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States. This era solidified the traditional peacekeeping model: slow deployment, reliance on lightly armed troops from neutral nations, and the absolute necessity of consent from all principal warring parties. This restrained approach ensured that peacekeeping remained a neutral instrument, preventing the UN from being dragged into the superpower proxy conflicts. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, however, the geopolitical landscape changed dramatically, unlocking the Security Council and allowing for a massive expansion in the scale and complexity of UN mandates.

The post-Cold War era ushered in the 'Second Generation' of peacekeeping, characterized by complex, multidimensional missions aimed at resolving intra-state conflicts and civil wars, often involving humanitarian crises and state collapse (e.g., Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda). These missions frequently included non-military components such as civilian police, judicial experts, and electoral monitors, tasked not merely with separating forces but with rebuilding civil infrastructure and state institutions. The tragic failures in the early 1990s, where peacekeepers were unable to prevent mass atrocities due to restrictive mandates and insufficient resources, highlighted the limitations of the traditional model in non-permissive environments, paving the way for the eventual adoption of more robust mandates.

3. Key Characteristics and Principles

The effectiveness and legitimacy of **military peacekeeping** operations historically hinge on adherence to three core principles, although these have been modified in recent robust missions. The first and most fundamental principle is **Consent of the Parties**. A peacekeeping operation must be deployed and operate with the full consent and cooperation of the main parties to the conflict. The absence of this consent transforms the mission into an enforcement action, fundamentally altering its nature and impartiality. Consent is not merely permission to enter but a continued commitment to the political process being supported by the mission, thereby ensuring the safety and operational viability of the peacekeepers.

The second foundational principle is **Impartiality**. Peacekeepers must maintain strict neutrality in their dealings with the parties to the conflict, regardless of which side might be perceived as the aggressor or the victim. Impartiality, however, is not equated with passive neutrality; it means applying the peacekeeping mandate equally to all parties. If one party violates a ceasefire or agreement, the peacekeepers must report and respond equally, ensuring that their actions are always aligned with the agreed-upon mandate and the principles of international law. The perception of bias can swiftly undermine the mission's legitimacy and compromise its ability to mediate effectively.

The third traditional principle concerns the **Non-Use of Force Except in Self-Defense and Defense of the Mandate**. Traditional peacekeepers were not deployed to engage in combat operations against organized military forces. Their military presence was symbolic and observational. While personnel were typically allowed to carry light weapons for the protection of their lives and mission facilities, force was generally forbidden for compelling parties to comply with the mandate. However, the rise of intra-state conflicts and threats against civilians led to the introduction of Chapter VII mandates (known as 'robust peacekeeping') in the 1990s and 2000s, which allow peacekeepers to use force proactively for objectives like the Protection of Civilians (POC), marking a significant evolution from the original concept.

4. Operational Components and Roles

Modern **military peacekeeping** missions are highly complex and typically integrate three distinct components to address the multidimensional nature of contemporary conflicts: the military component, the police component, and the civilian component. The **military component** remains the backbone, responsible for maintaining security, monitoring borders and buffer zones, conducting patrols, verifying disarmament processes, and providing logistical support across the theatre of operations. Their critical task is security sector reform, often involving the cantonment, demobilization, and subsequent reintegration (DDR) of former combatants, which requires significant operational and diplomatic dexterity.

The **police component** (UNPOL) plays an increasingly vital role, particularly in post-conflict states where the rule of law has collapsed. UN Police officers are deployed to mentor and train local police forces, rebuild judicial institutions, and ensure adherence to international human rights standards during policing activities. They focus on maintaining public order, investigating crimes, and helping the host state establish accountability mechanisms, bridging the gap between immediate military stabilization and long-term civilian governance. Their work is essential for transitioning from military control to sustainable civilian authority, particularly concerning civil disorder and organized crime.

The **civilian component** includes specialists in fields ranging from humanitarian aid and human

rights monitoring to political affairs, public information, and electoral support. These personnel are instrumental in implementing the non-security elements of the mandate, such as facilitating political dialogue, managing electoral processes, coordinating international humanitarian assistance, and supporting local capacity building. The coordinated effort between these three components--military stability, police professionalism, and civilian institutional development--defines the comprehensive approach necessary for successful modern peacekeeping, moving far beyond the simple truce-monitoring role established in 1956.

5. Significance and Impact

The significance of **military peacekeeping** operations lies in their unique ability to stabilize post-conflict environments and transform ceasefires into durable peace settlements, thereby contributing directly to global security. Peacekeeping provides a recognized, international mechanism that legitimizes foreign intervention for stabilization purposes without the political ramifications of unilateral military action. By physically separating combatants, providing security assurances, and monitoring compliance, peacekeepers reduce the security dilemma that often drives relapse into conflict, offering a vital security umbrella under which fragile political negotiations can progress. Studies have consistently shown that the presence of peacekeeping operations, especially those with robust mandates and sufficient resources, significantly lowers the probability of a conflict recurring.

Furthermore, peacekeeping missions have become crucial instruments of international development and human rights protection. Modern mandates often include explicit provisions for the **Protection of Civilians** (POC), obliging forces to intervene to prevent threats of physical violence against non-combatants, a commitment formalized after the tragedies of the early 1990s. Beyond security, peacekeepers facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid, help repatriate refugees, support the restoration of essential services like healthcare and education, and lay the groundwork for democratic institution-building, making them central actors in post-conflict recovery and state reconstruction efforts worldwide. The impact extends beyond the immediate conflict zone, reinforcing the principles of collective security enshrined in the UN Charter.

6. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its vital role, **military peacekeeping** faces substantial criticisms and operates amidst complex debates regarding its effectiveness, resource allocation, and ethical boundaries. One major criticism revolves around **mandate creep**, where initial, limited observation missions are gradually expanded to include complex tasks such as state-building, counter-insurgency (in practice, if not in name), and comprehensive protection, often without commensurate increases in funding, troop numbers, or appropriate training. This disparity between ambitious mandates and limited capacity frequently leads to operational failures and accusations of mission inadequacy,

particularly when peacekeepers are unable to prevent large-scale violence (e.g., Sudan, DRC).

Another significant area of debate concerns the tension between the traditional principles of consent and impartiality and the robust nature of Chapter VII mandates. When peacekeepers are authorized to use force proactively to protect civilians, they inevitably risk losing their perceived neutrality and become parties to the conflict, placing them at increased risk. The political debate surrounding the use of military force is compounded by frequent structural challenges, including slow deployment speeds, insufficient equipment provided by contributing nations, and severe logistical limitations. Furthermore, the credibility of peacekeeping has been severely damaged by allegations of misconduct, including sexual exploitation and abuse, perpetrated by small numbers of personnel in various missions, necessitating rigorous reforms and accountability measures within the contributing nations and the managing bodies like the UN Department of Peace Operations.

Further Reading

[United Nations Peacekeeping Official Website](#)

[Encyclopaedia Britannica: Peacekeeping Operations](#)

[Wikipedia: Suez Crisis \(1956\)](#)

[Wikipedia: Brahimi Report \(2000\)](#)