

Reforming UN Peacekeeping

How Cairo views efforts at reforming United Nations' peacekeeping, especially in the Middle East and Africa.

By Ashraf Swelam



A Congolese girl gestures to peacekeepers from India, serving in the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), as they ride on patrol in the town of Kiwanja, Democratic Republic of Congo, October 19, 2018. *Oleksandr Klymenko/Reuters*

On November 18-19, 2018, the Egyptian government and the [Cairo International Center for Conflict Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Peacebuilding](#) (CCCPA) organized a high-level regional conference called [“Enhancing the Performance of Peacekeeping Operations: From](#)

[Mandate to Exit.](#)” The conference provided a unique opportunity for high-level officials from Africa and the Arab World to interact with their counterparts from the United Nations Security Council, major financial contributors, the United Nations Secretariat, and the African Union on what is turning into an intense global debate about the future of United Nations peacekeeping.

As a top troop- and police-contributing country to UN peacekeeping and a recent non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, Egypt has been an important player in these doctrinal and policy debates. Moreover, as the incoming chair of the African Union, its leadership will be critical to advancing this discussion and translating it into concrete action in the near future.

UN Peacekeeping at Seventy

When, in 1948, the UN deployed its first peacekeeping mission to the Middle East, the UN Truce Supervision Organization was an innovative initiative from the young organization. Ever since, peacekeeping has grown into a complex global undertaking, and one of—if not the most—important parts of the international community’s toolbox for the maintenance of peace and security. Today, with 110,000 peacekeepers deployed to fourteen missions on four continents, peacekeeping is arguably the most visible of the UN’s activities. Indeed, for many around the world, peacekeeping is not just something the UN does; it is the UN.

The core of what peacekeeping does has dramatically changed over the course of the last seventy years. With intrastate conflicts replacing interstate wars as the primary threat to international peace, ceasefire observation missions that characterized early peacekeeping gave way to today’s complex and multidimensional operations with nation and state-building mandates. Moreover, as conflicts grew deadlier, costlier, and more intractable, small and lightly armed operations led to large stabilization missions deployed to places where there is “no peace to keep” with “robust mandates” (that is, authorized to use force) to protect civilians and neutralize spoilers, including terrorist and criminal organizations.

While largely viewed as a necessary adaptation to the ever-evolving nature of conflict, this transformation brought difficult questions to the fore, including the relevance of peacekeeping’s three guiding principles: namely, consent of the parties, impartiality, and non-use of force (except in self-defense and defense of the mandate). Another question around peacekeeping relates to the widening gap of key stakeholders’ expectations, including a growing gulf

between permanent members of the UN Security Council and those of top troop- and police-contributing countries, as well as between the UN headquarters and its missions in the field. With key stakeholders pulling in different directions, the time was ripe for a strategic review of peacekeeping.

Reforming Peacekeeping

Mindful of the above challenges, former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon established the High-Level Independent Panel on UN Peace Operations (HIPPO) in 2014 to conduct the most comprehensive review of UN peacekeeping and special political missions since the landmark 2000 [Brahimi Report](#). The study coincided with other major reviews, including most notably the [review of the UN peacebuilding architecture](#), and the [review of the implementation of UNSC Resolution 1325 \(2000\) on women, peace, and security](#). It also overlapped with the process leading to the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#).

After months of regional consultations, including an Arab consultation in Cairo, organized jointly by the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the CCCPA, the panel presented its [findings and recommendations](#) to the UN Security Council on June 16, 2015. Strategically, it called for four essential shifts to be embraced in the design and delivery of UN peacekeeping operations to make them more fit for purpose, namely, UN peacekeeping must be guided by an overarching political strategy, not be an alternative to one (the primacy of politics); the organization should draw on the full spectrum of peace interventions (conflict prevention and resolution, peacekeeping, peacebuilding, and so on) to deliver context-specific responses; it should pull together in a more integrated fashion, while working with regional partners; and finally, peacekeeping must become more people-centered and field-focused.

From the day they were released, the HIPPO report and the peacebuilding review became the frame of reference for global debates, not only about peacekeeping reform, but also—and more broadly—about the future role of the UN in matters of peace and security. In 2016, the UNGA and the UN Security Council adopted identical Resolutions A/Res/70/262 and S/Res/2282 that recognized “sustaining peace” as a new conceptual framework, an overarching goal and a process which covers “preventing the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of conflict, addressing root causes, assisting parties to conflict to end hostilities, ensuring national reconciliation, and moving toward recovery, reconstruction, and development.”

In many ways, the above comprehensive definition was the first normative translation of the HIPPO's suggested four strategic shifts. However, having come toward the end of Ban's second term, and lacking the support of an intergovernmental process at either the UN Security Council or the UN General Assembly, most of the follow-up by Ban's Secretariat to the HIPPO Report focused on operational adjustments, while its strategic and far-reaching recommendations needed to wait for a new secretary-general.

Egypt's Role in the Reform

Throughout this process, Egypt played a critical role. A founding member of the UN, the African Union, and the League of Arab States, Egypt has been, and continues to be, a strong supporter of multilateralism. As a top troop- and police-contributing country, the Rapporteur of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations (C34), and a member of the Peacebuilding Commission, Egypt has also been a prominent voice in the ongoing debates concerning peacekeeping and peacebuilding. Two Egyptian contributions, in particular, are worth highlighting. First, since the beginning of the reform process, Egypt has provided a platform for African and Arab countries, especially troop- and police-contributing countries and host nations to substantially contribute to these global debates, including advancing UN–African Union–League of Arab States partnerships. Second, Egypt has also played an instrumental role in connecting the outcome of the three reviews and advancing the implementation of their notable synergies and shared recommendations on a host of vital reforms.

Concerned about the New York-centric nature of many discussions, Egypt provided a platform for African and Arab countries to contribute to the ongoing reform of peacekeeping. In November 2014, Egypt's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the CCCPA hosted an international workshop called "[Regional Aspects of Peacebuilding.](#)" The event was the first in a series of consultative global gatherings that informed the review of the peacebuilding architecture. That was followed up in March 2015 by the Arab consultations of the HIPPO panel. According to members of HIPPO, the views from Africa (home to the biggest UN missions) and the Arab World (home to some of the longest-serving missions), were the most informative for the strategic recommendations of the panel.

As one of three African members and the only Arab member of the UNSC in 2016–17, Egypt used its unique position to advance UN–African Union–League of Arab States partnerships in matters of peace and security. For example, during its presidency of the council in May 2016, the Egyptian

Permanent Mission in New York hosted the annual consultative meetings between the UN Security Council and the African Union's Peace and Security Council (AUPSC), which led to Presidential Statement 2016/8. The statement welcomed the adoption of the [African Peace and Security Architecture Roadmap \(2016–20\)](#), and the enhanced peacekeeping role of the African Union and its sub-regional groups, while calling for further strengthening of UN-African Union collaboration on matters of peace and security. During the same month, the Egyptian mission in New York also facilitated the first meeting ever between the UNSC and the Council of the League of Arab States.

Mindful of the notable synergies emerging from the three global reviews on a host of vital reforms, Egypt played a significant role in setting the stage for the High-Level Thematic Debate, organized by the President of the UNGA in May 2016, on the role of the UN in peace and security. The [recommendations](#) coming out of this event, as well as two preparatory events (an Arab consultation hosted by Egypt in Cairo and an African consultation co-hosted by the CCCPA in Addis Ababa in March 2016), proved crucial for sustaining the momentum of the peacekeeping reform process. Moreover, they highlighted important issues that were not sufficiently addressed in the global reviews, including the need for reforming the UN Security Council, revitalizing the role of the UNGA, and the need for sustainable and predictable financing for peace interventions.

Aware of the crucial role of the new UNSG in advancing the reform, the Egyptian minister of foreign affairs hosted a ministerial event in New York in May 2016, which brought together several of the candidates to the job, foreign ministers, and high-level officials from key member states to translate the recommendations of the global reviews into practice. A term coined during the discussion was that of an integrated “UN peace and security architecture,” whereby the three pillars of the work of the organization—namely, peace and security, development, and humanitarian work— come together in an integrated and mutually reinforcing way. Ever since, Egypt has become a champion of the continuum of response to conflict concept that advances a cross-pillar, non-sequential UN approach to sustaining peace.

Building on the above, and during its second presidency of the UNSC in August 2017, the Egyptian mission in New York organized an open debate on the contribution of peacekeeping to the overarching goal of “sustaining peace.” The debate, addressed by sixty permanent missions, was the first opportunity for member states to explore the means by which the peacekeeping–peacebuilding nexus can be translated into practice, setting the stage for what is probably Egypt's most important contribution to the debate on peacekeeping

reform so far: Presidential Statement 2017/27. In the words of Oscar Fernandez-Taranco, UN Assistant Secretary General for Peacebuilding Support, in an [interview with this author](#), the statement “brought together the different streams of the reform, the thinking and the reviews into one set of operational recommendations.”

From HIPPO to Action for Peace

Upon assuming office on January 1, 2017, the ninth UN Secretary-General António Guterres introduced an ambitious and far-reaching reform agenda. This included a renewed focus on prevention and sustaining peace, reform of the UN development system, restructuring of the peace and security architecture, creation of a new UN Office of Counter-Terrorism, and organization-wide management reform.

In the field of peacekeeping—responding to political and financial pressure from key members of the UNSC to narrow the reform agenda—Guterres initiated a process of reviewing eight UN peacekeeping missions. However, to widen the debate and secure the broad support he needed to advance a more ambitious reform agenda, the secretary-general introduced his Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) initiative on March 28, 2018. The initiative capitalized on the reform momentum created by the global reviews. It suggested focusing peacekeeping reform efforts on achieving three main objectives which are: mandating missions with realistic expectations; making missions stronger and safer; and mobilizing greater support for political solutions and well-structured, well-equipped, and well-trained forces. Guterres also called on member states to join him in developing a set of mutually agreed principles to make peacekeeping operations more fit for purpose.

The [Declaration of Shared Commitments on Peacekeeping Operations](#) was widely supported by member states. It outlined the commitments of various stakeholders in seven key areas of peacekeeping reform, which stressed enhancing the political impact of peacekeeping, strengthening the protection provided by operations, improving the safety and security of peacekeepers, supporting effective performance and accountability, strengthening the impact of peacekeeping on sustaining peace, improving partnerships, and strengthening the conduct of operations and personnel.

Missing, however, was a vehicle to turn those commitments into a practical, balanced, coordinated, and mutually reinforcing implementation framework. On its side, the UN Secretariat has prepared a brief implementation plan to translate the Shared Commitments into actionable goals, while building on

existing workstreams, such as the Strategic Force Generation process, the [Santos Cruz Report on Improving the Security of UN Peacekeepers](#), and the [Voluntary Compact on Preventing and Addressing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#) in peacekeeping operations. The plan has identified forty-five shared commitments, thirteen of which are Secretariat-led, seven member-states commitments, and twenty-five collective commitments.

While commendable, the implementation plan suffers from some major shortcomings. On one hand, it shies away from elaborating on member states-led commitments with regards to some critical issues. A prime example is the need for a complete revamping of the mandating process, something that was highlighted by the HIPPO report. Aside from the Secretariat committing itself to developing a proposal for the consideration of the UN Security Council on sequencing and prioritization of peacekeeping mandates and commissioning a study on the gap between mandates and resources—both critically needed inputs for the reform process—the Secretariat plan merely encourages member states to adopt mandates that are meaningfully sequenced and prioritized, without elaborating on how they should do so. On the other hand, and equally critical, is the plan’s inability to provide a practical way for ensuring that the implementation of the shared commitments is integrated and mutually reinforcing.

To achieve this, reform must be led by member states themselves, in coordination with the UN Secretariat, and shared—as needed—with other key stakeholders, most notably regional organizations. It is with this in mind that the government of Egypt and CCCPA, supported by international and regional partners, including Japan, Norway and Canada, UNDP and UN Women, organized the high-level regional conference on November 18–19, 2018, in Cairo, titled “Enhancing the Performance of Peacekeeping Operations: From Mandate to Exit.”

The conference was the first member state-led initiative to advance a substantive conversation between all key stakeholders on the implementation of the A4P and the Shared Commitments. Discussions addressed the various dimensions of enhancing the effectiveness of peacekeeping operations throughout the missions’ life-cycles, resulting in a draft roadmap, “The Cairo Roadmap,” of concrete recommendations and action points for the implementation of the Shared Commitments. The roadmap is intended as a substantive contribution to a number of critical meetings on the global calendar of the peacekeeping reform, most notably the C34 meetings in February/March 2019 and the Ministerial Meeting on Peacekeeping to be hosted by the UNSG in New York in March 2019.

Egypt's Chairmanship of the AU

As it assumes the chairmanship of the African Union in February, Egypt has already made it clear that issues of peace and security on the continent will be at the top of its agenda. For example, Egypt has already signaled its intention to exert a concerted effort toward the operationalization and revitalization of the AU Policy on Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development. The initiative follows on the recent decision to accept Egypt's offer to host the AU Center for Post-conflict Reconstruction and Development (AUC-PCRD) in Cairo, expected to become operational during Egypt's chairmanship. This is a timely initiative. Devised in 2006, but hardly operationalized, a revamped and activated African Union Post Conflict Reconstruction and Development Policy can be critical for efforts of preventing relapse to conflict and sustaining peace.

To complement these efforts, Egypt should continue to spearhead Africa's contribution to the ongoing reform of UN peacekeeping. One channel for doing so would be to facilitate the development of a Common African Position on the implementation of the A4P and the Shared Commitments. Africa has the largest and most expensive UN peacekeeping missions, as well as half the list of top troop- and police-contributing countries. As such, its position can greatly inform future reform efforts, including most notably the implementation of the shared commitments.

Egypt should also continue advancing the AU–UN partnership. A new area of focus should be the operationalization of the AU body of policies and guidelines. Egypt can also make a substantial contribution to meeting the training and capacity building needs of the relevant bodies of the AU and the departments of its commission, as relates to the mandating, deployment, managing and the exit of AU peace support operations.

Separately, but related, Egypt can build on the ongoing AU reform efforts through the African peace and security architecture, with a view to advancing Ghanaian economist George Ayittey's vision of "African Solutions to African Problems." This should most importantly include updating the doctrine and the modalities of the deployment of the African Standby Force (ASF), resolving the tension between the ASF and the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crisis, and advancing the conversation between the AU and its subregional groupings.

The views presented here are the author's own and do not necessarily represent the views of the Cairo International Center for Conflict Resolution, Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding or the Egyptian government.