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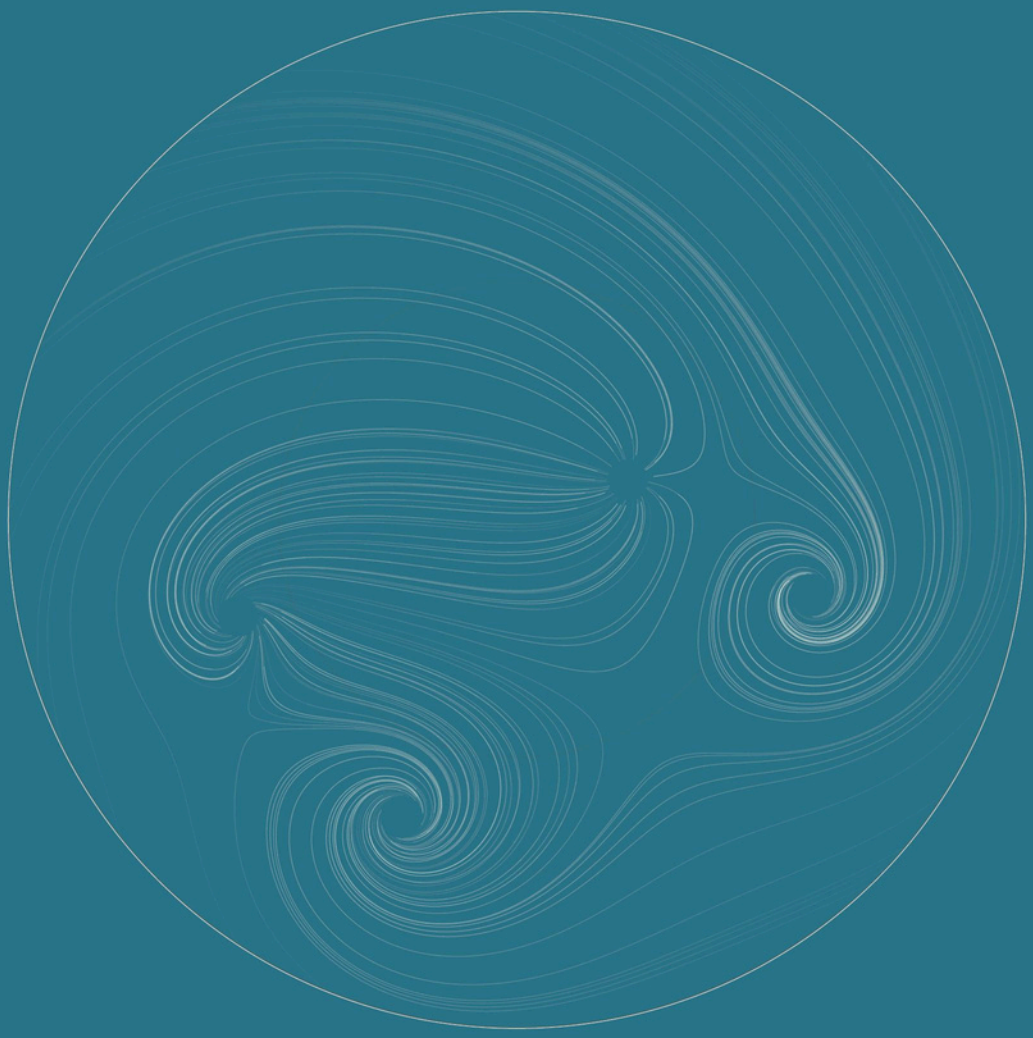

# Collective Security Beyond the Security Council

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# Abstract

If the Security Council cannot consistently perform its core function, what complementary architecture can reinforce rather than replace it? This paper examines how efforts of the Secretary-General, General Assembly mechanisms, regional bodies, and coalitions of willing states might be combined into a workable system. It also develops criteria for authorisation and action in the absence of great-power consensus.

# Introduction

The world has entered a period of renewed geopolitical contestation, which is reflected in increasing deadlock within the Security Council. In 2025, the Security Council adopted 44 resolutions, its fewest since 1991. The share adopted unanimously was also low by post-Cold War standards. The number of resolutions has declined for five consecutive years.[1] It is becoming difficult—if not impossible—to bridge the differences in views among the permanent members of the Security Council on the form and function of the United Nations (UN) system and the role of the UN in maintaining international peace and security.[2]

The Security Council has not authorised any new peacekeeping operations since 2014 and many existing missions are drawing down or preparing to close even as the number of ongoing state-based conflicts has reached its highest level since 1946.[3] As an alternative to the UN, a patchwork of collective security arrangements outside the UN has gained in prominence, including missions launched by regional and sub-regional configurations as well as ad hoc coalitions. This shift has been reinforced by the UN embracing a secondary role as a support provider to non-UN forces.[4]

This is not the first time in the history of the UN in which great power competition has driven Security Council paralysis. During the Cold War, the rivalry between the United States and Soviet Union limited the possibility for Security Council action in many conflicts. As a result, other main organs of the UN filled the gap. Successive Secretaries-General developed and expanded the use of their good offices to resolve conflict and the General Assembly established the first armed peacekeeping mission (the UN Emergency Force), created the first interim administration mission (the UN Temporary Executive Authority in West New Guinea), and called for states to impose sanctions on several aggressor states.[5]

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[1] Security Council Report, *In Hindsight: The Security Council in 2025 and the Year Ahead*, 30 December 2025, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2026-01/in-hindsight-the-security-council-in-2025-and-the-year-ahead.php.

[2] John M. Owen, “Why Great Powers Compete to Control International Institutions”, *International Security* 49, no. 3 (2025): 84–121, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00503; Roland Paris, “The Future of UN Peace Operations: Pragmatism, Pluralism or Statism?”, *International Affairs*, 5 August 2024, iiae182, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiae182.

[3] Siri Aas Rustad, *Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946-2025* (Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2026), https://www.prio.org/publications/14802.

[4] John Karlsrud, “‘Pragmatic Peacekeeping’ in Practice: Exit Liberal Peacekeeping, Enter UN Support Missions?”, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 17, no. 3 (2023): 258–72, https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2023.2198285; Eugene Chen, “UN Support Offices and the Primacy of the Military”, *Blue Helmets, Red Tape*, 4 September 2025, https://casquebleu.substack.com/p/un-support-offices-and-the-primacy.

[5] Erica Gaston and Adam Day, *Assembly for Peace* (United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, 2024), https://unu.edu/cpr/report/assembly-peace-digital-handbook-un-general-assemblys-past-practice-peace-and-security.

The demand for proactive creativity by these other main organs subsided after the Cold War, when the Security Council was able to take on the "primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security" granted to it in the Charter.[6] Today, however, the divergent views of the permanent members of the Security Council are once again causing gridlock. The broader membership is clearly dissatisfied with the current state of affairs, as illustrated through developments such as the veto initiative and the clamour for the next Secretary-General to take a more active role in peace and security.[7] The next Secretary-General is uniquely placed to meet the demand for a new approach to collective security through more proactive use of their own good offices and more strategic engagement of existing intergovernmental bodies and multilateral conflict management tools.

## Alternatives to the Security Council for collective security action

This paper focuses on peace operations as the vehicle for collective security action. At the UN, peace operations generally refer to peacekeeping operations, special political missions, and support offices, but the term can be used more broadly to describe any multilateral deployment of capacity—including by other organisations—to prevent, manage, or resolve inter-state and intra-state conflicts. Peace operations can range from large, multidimensional operations to small presences, such as those deployed to monitor agreements or to provide additional political or peace and security expertise to a UN country team in a non-mission setting.

The Security Council is not the only body that can establish a peace operation, but it is the only body with the authority under international law to authorise a peace operation to engage in enforcement action. As such, peace operations established through other means cannot use military force in the same coercive manner, but can be mandated to undertake other prevention, peacebuilding, and peacekeeping activities.

### THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

Outside of situations where a host state or the parties to a conflict specifically request the intervention or engagement of the UN, the Secretary-General is the single actor best placed to initiate a multilateral response to a crisis. This is because the UN has more presence and access in conflict contexts than most member states, and because the impartiality of the UN gives its analysis and recommendations greater credibility than that presented by member states.

Secretaries-General can do much within their own authority. In many cases, it may be enough for them to use their good offices, appoint personal envoys, or dispatch experts to reinforce existing UN capacity. In more complex situations in which greater political pressure is required, they can dispatch a fact-finding or assessment mission to identify options for UN engagement under an intergovernmental mandate, including through a special envoy or a peace operation led by a special representative. One underappreciated reason for why there have been no new UN peacekeeping missions established in over a decade is the fact that the Secretary-General has not proposed the establishment of any such missions, even when member states requested "a full range of options for the possible role that the United Nations can play".[8]

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[6] United Nations Security Council, *Note by the President of the Security Council* (S/23500) (1992), https://undocs.org/en/s/23500.

[7] Daniel Forti, "Prioritising Peace: What the UN Should Ask of Its Next Secretary-General", *International Crisis Group*, 16 April 2026, https://www.crisisgroup.org/cmt/global/prioritising-peace-what-un-should-ask-its-next-secretary-general.

[8] United Nations Security Council, *Letter Dated 29 November 2024 from the President of the Security Council Addressed to the Secretary-General*, S/2024/868 (2024), https://undocs.org/en/S/2024/868.

## THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

A recommendation from the Secretary-General to deploy a new peace operation need not be directed to the Security Council as the UN Charter also entrusts the General Assembly with responsibilities related to maintenance of international peace and security.[9] This was the legal basis under which the General Assembly established its Cold War-era peacekeeping missions. It is also within the mandate of the Peacebuilding Commission—a subsidiary body of both the General Assembly and the Security Council—to recommend to the General Assembly a peace operation focused on peacebuilding or support to national prevention strategies at the request of a government, though this has never yet been done.

The General Assembly is unable to authorise enforcement action, and as such this option may be less attractive to governments seeking the deployment of peace operations as means of regime protection. This, however, means that Assembly-authorised missions are more likely to focus on supporting a political solution to conflict. The experience of Security Council-authorised stabilisation missions over the past two decades has shown that emphasis on military action can reduce the prospects for negotiated outcomes and can lead to a wide range of unintended consequences, including strengthening authoritarianism in host governments and the undermining of other mandated tasks.[10]

Beyond preserving the impartiality of the UN, there are other potential benefits of having a mission mandated by the Assembly instead of the Council. The General Assembly's more inclusive membership may make a mission it mandates be seen as more legitimate than a mission established by the Security Council. Moreover, a General Assembly-mandated mission may be more acceptable to parties to a conflict given that it would avoid the stigma associated with being on the Security Council agenda. A General Assembly-mandated mission is also immune to being abruptly terminated through the veto (or threat of a veto) by a permanent member of the Security Council.

## OPTIONS OUTSIDE THE UN

Outside of the UN, many international, regional and sub-regional organisations have also deployed peace operations. There have also been several examples of missions undertaken jointly between regional organisations and the UN, including the General Assembly-mandated International Civilian Mission in Haiti (a joint mission of the UN and the Organization of American States).

The absence of new UN peace operations over the past decade has created a vacuum that the African Union and African regional economic communities and regional mechanisms are eager to fill, especially if this can potentially unlock access to UN assessed contributions.[11] Some recent African peace operations, however, have relied heavily on military force, raising concerns that support for host governments can displace mediation and efforts to address underlying causes of conflict.[12][13] Moreover, their ambitions consistently outstrip their capabilities and they have not been able to sustain their operations without external support.

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[9] Mona Ali Khalil, "Tapping the Full Potential of the General Assembly", in *Empowering the UN Security Council*, ed. Mona Ali Khalil and Floriane Lavaud (Oxford University Press, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197780602.003.0008.

[10] Denis M. Tull, "The Limits and Unintended Consequences of UN Peace Enforcement: The Force Intervention Brigade in the DR Congo", *International Peacekeeping* 25, no. 2 (2018): 167–90, https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2017.1360139; Sarah von Billerbeck et al., *United Nations Peacekeeping and the Politics of Authoritarianism* (Oxford University Press, 2025), https://doi.org/10.1093/9780191925474.001.0001.

[11] Katharina P. W. Döring, *African Military Politics in the Sahel: Regional Organizations and International Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009362269; Jonathan Fisher and Nina Wilén, *African Peacekeeping* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108582179; Karlsrud, "'Pragmatic Peacekeeping' in Practice"; Andrew E. Yaw Tchie, "African-Led Peace Support Operations in a Declining Period of New UN Peacekeeping Operations", *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations* 29, no. 2 (2023): 230–44, https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-02902006; United Nations, *Report of the Joint African Union-United Nations Review of Available Mechanisms to Finance and Support African Union Peace Support Operations Authorized by the United Nations Security Council*, A/71/410–S/2016/809 (2016), https://undocs.org/en/A/71/410.

[12] Charles T. Hunt and David Curran, "Stabilization at the Expense of Peacebuilding in UN Peacekeeping Operations: More Than Just a Phase?", *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations* 26, no. 1 (2020): 46–68, https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-02601001; John Karlsrud, "From Liberal Peacebuilding to Stabilization and Counterterrorism", *International Peacekeeping* 26, no. 1 (2019): 1–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2018.1502040.

[13] David Lewis et al., "Illiberal Peace? Authoritarian Modes of Conflict Management", *Cooperation and Conflict* 53, no. 4 (2018): 486–506, https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836718765902.

Forces assembled by ad hoc coalitions are another option; these are generally flexible and task-specific, made up of like-minded countries, and can be established much quicker than missions established by the UN or a regional organisation.[14] At the same time, they face many practical challenges that need to be overcome, including the lack of legal personality and the need to build structures and policies for planning, deployment, management, and financing from scratch. Coalition personnel do not enjoy the protections of United Nations privileges and immunities while participating in an ad hoc force, and their status under international humanitarian law depends on whether the force is a party to the conflict and if individuals are actively engaged in hostilities.[15]

# Taking this forward

There is no standard template or one-size-fits-all approach to responding to peace and security challenges. The specific process pursued and the form of response taken need to be tailored to the specific conflict context and reflect the full range of international, regional, and bilateral actors present on the ground or otherwise engaged.

In all situations, however, the UN must maintain the capability to monitor a conflict and engage in effective integrated assessment and planning to be able to generate options for UN engagement. And to maintain the unique credibility and role of the UN to support political solutions, any UN response—whether pursued within the authority of the Secretary-General or under an intergovernmental mandate—should adhere to the principles of impartiality, consent of the parties, and non-use of force except in self-defence or defence of the mandate. The UN should not pursue militarised responses that close down avenues for dialogue and addressing root causes.

### MANDATING

Broadly speaking, there are three pathways for pursuing collective security at the UN in the absence of a Security Council mandate.

The first option is for the Secretary-General to initiate action. Secretaries-General can act under their own authority or dispatch fact-finding or assessment missions to generate options for intergovernmental action, as outlined above. Member states have consistently renewed the extraordinary and unforeseen expenses mechanism that allows the Secretary-General the ability to pursue such initiatives even if they have not been budgeted.[16] In situations where additional political pressure from an intergovernmental mandate may be warranted, the Secretary-General can choose to take proposals directly to the General Assembly.

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[14] Malte Brosig and John Karlsrud, “How Ad Hoc Coalitions Deinstitutionalize International Institutions”, *International Affairs* 100, no. 2 (2024): 771–89, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiae009; John Karlsrud and Yf Reykers, “Integrating Ad Hoc Coalitions in International Conflict Management”, *International Affairs* 101, no. 6 (2025): 2085–101, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaf147; Andrea Prah, “Ad-Hoc Security Initiatives in Africa: A New Type of Security Community?”, *Journal of International Peacekeeping* 26, no. 4 (2023): 313–29, https://doi.org/10.1163/18754112-26040003; Yf Reykers et al., “Ad Hoc Coalitions in Global Governance: Short-Notice, Task- and Time-Specific Cooperation”, *International Affairs* 99, no. 2 (2023): 727–45, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiac319.

[15] United Nations, Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations (1946), arts V–VI, https://legal.un.org/avl/ha/cpiun-cpisa/cpiun-cpisa.html; International Committee of the Red Cross, “FAQ: Rules of War”, https://www.icrc.org/en/document/FAQ-rules-of-war-ihl.

[16] United Nations General Assembly, “Resolution 80/245. Unforeseen and Extraordinary Expenses for 2026”, 30 December 2025, https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/80/245.

A second option is for the Assembly to take up the issue when the Security Council is unable to act. A veto, for example, could prompt member states to use the General Assembly debate required under the veto initiative to propose further action. Even without a veto, the Uniting for Peace resolution allows for General Assembly action when the Security Council fails to act "because of lack of unanimity of the permanent members."

A third option is for member states to seek UN support for their prevention and peacebuilding priorities through the Peacebuilding Commission. Although the Peacebuilding Commission was established twenty years ago as a subsidiary body of both the General Assembly and the Security Council, it has focused on providing recommendations to the latter while neglecting the former. In line with the mandate of the Commission "to bring together all relevant actors to marshal resources and to advise on and propose integrated strategies for post-conflict peacebuilding and recovery" and "to provide recommendations and information to improve the coordination of all relevant actors within and outside the United Nations",[17] the Peacebuilding Commission can recommend General Assembly authorisation for the deployment of the requisite capacities and expertise from the Secretariat to complement the efforts of the country team in support of national prevention and peacebuilding strategies.

General Assembly-mandated responses need not take the form of standalone peace operations; they could also be bespoke capacities attached to resident coordinators' offices. This reflects—and builds upon—the growing de facto political role of resident coordinators beyond their work coordinating prevention and peacebuilding efforts. A General Assembly mandate can provide resident coordinators with specialised Secretariat capacities and expertise that is not otherwise available to country teams.

## OPERATIONALISATION

Any new peace operation deployed by the UN needs to be planned and deployed so as to avoid the problems and pitfalls of many of the large multidimensional operations deployed since 9/11. As recommended by the high-level independent panel on peace operations, the UN needs to move past templated approaches to mandate design and embrace the full spectrum of peace operations to design tailored responses to context-specific requirements.[18]

The UN cannot control whether other international organisations, regional or ad hoc coalitions, or non-government organisations engage in a particular context, but the overall landscape of actors present should inform the form and function of the UN presence. In situations where the funds and programmes or non-UN partners are present and enjoy the comparative advantage for the implementation of certain mandated activities, those activities could be delegated to those partners, with any associated allocation from assessed mission budgets subject to General Assembly approval, as part of a networked approach to mandate implementation overseen by and accountable to the special representative of the Secretary-General.[19] Where a regional organisation, subregional configuration, or ad hoc coalition has deployed or is preparing to deploy a military force, the UN should seek to incorporate the activities of the non-UN force into the broader political strategy coordinated by the UN.

The UN should avoid establishing standalone support offices to prop up militarised non-UN forces given that these arrangements diminish the political role of the UN and undermine broader peacebuilding efforts.[20] Instead, any logistical support that is required by non-UN forces should be delivered by a UN peace operation with responsibility over the overall political strategy. Any support to non-UN security forces must comply with the human rights due diligence policy and be conditioned on the activities it enables reinforcing, rather than undermining, the broader political strategy.

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[17] United Nations General Assembly, "Resolution 60/180. The Peacebuilding Commission", 20 December 2005, https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/60/180.

[18] United Nations, *Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on Uniting Our Strengths for Peace: Politics, Partnership and People* (A/70/95–S/2015/446) (2015), https://undocs.org/en/a/70/95.

[19] United Nations, *Review on the Future of All Forms of United Nations Peace Operations: Report of the Secretary-General*, A/80/798-S/2026/600 (2026), https://undocs.org/en/A/80/798.

[20] Cedric de Coning, "How Not to Do UN Peacekeeping: Avoid the Stabilization Dilemma with Principled and Adaptive Mandating and Leadership", *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations* 29, no. 2 (2023): 152–67, https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-02902008.

# Conclusion

The post-Cold War unipolar moment is over, and a return to the aspirational rules-based international order is unlikely.[21] As the world enters another period of geopolitical contestation and great-power rivalry, Security Council paralysis is likely to be the norm, rather than the exception. But this doesn't mean the UN is no longer relevant. Despite the diminishment of the stature of the UN over the past decade, the UN still presents the most effective platform for multilateral responses to threats to international peace and security. This is not only because of its unique mandate under international law and the legitimacy of its broad membership, but also because of the structures, policies, and processes in place for the planning, deployment, and sustainment of peace operations. Many of these capacities need not depend on a new Security Council mandate to function effectively. Collective security beyond the Security Council is possible and it does not require new tools or arrangements. It simply requires making full use of the leadership of the Secretary-General, the neglected responsibilities of the General Assembly, the untapped potential of the Peacebuilding Commission, and the comparative advantages of other partners as part of a new, networked approach to the planning and design of peace operations.

[21] John J. Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order", *International Security* 43, no. 4 (2019): 7–50, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00342.

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