

Professor Richard Caplan: UN Peacekeeping now

Transcript

Professor Richard Caplan

Okay, I'd like to start by doffing my metaphorical hat to Liz and the entire Oxpiece team for the conference. The conference, the Oxpiece Conference, has become an institution of its very state at this stage. And it's a very unique institution, I think, because it brings together scholars, researchers, students, as well as members of the public, civil society organizations, faith leaders. And this is really quite unusual, I think. And it makes it, as I said, quite distinct that so long may it continue, is my view. Now, just to lower expectations, I'm going to be probably raising more questions than I'm going to be providing answers. But I'm hoping that Perhaps we can take advantage of the collective wisdom in this room and from our discussion will emerge answers to some of the issues that I'm going to be raising. I'm going to be talking about the current state of UN peacekeeping, one of the most visible instruments of the United Nations efforts to maintain and promote peace and security. But it's obviously not the only instrument, and I'm not pretending that it is an instrument without flaws. We can have a separate discussion about the merits and weaknesses, but I think in general it's fair to say that it has made very significant contributions when I'd be prepared to enumerate what those are to peace and security. But I want to focus less on where peacekeeping is today, although I will talk about that, and more on the reasons for where it is. And I'm mindful of the fact that we have a number of individuals with us today who actually work in the UN Department of Peace Operations. I'm very pleased that Oxford this year launched a very exciting new initiative establishing a peace and security fellowship with the UN Department of Peace Operations, which is seeing 10 members of the department at various levels and across the world with us, staying with us for eight weeks period of research and reflection and therefore enabling us to help bring together scholars and practitioners to enrich the work of practitioners with the scholarship that many of us at this university generate. And I'm hoping this will be the first of many, many such years and that they will go back to breed within knowledge and insights from the time that they've spent here. But mindful of the fact that they're with us today, I'm conscious that every comma and semicolon and what I say will be subject to scrutiny. But I welcome that. But first, to set the scene, so as has been said, the UN is at an inflection point, and UN peacekeeping is certainly at an inflection point. There has been no wholly new UN peacekeeping operation deployed for more than a decade. Last time the UN established a wholly new peacekeeping operation was MUSCA in the Central African Republic in 2014, so that's 12 years ago. Meanwhile, there have been numerous UN mission closures, UN peace operation closures, NUSMA in Mali in 2023, UNAMID in Darfur in 2020, and the new JUF in Haiti in 2019, along with the downsizing of NUSCO in

the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the planned closure of UNIFIL in Lebanon and the proposed closure of UMIC in Kosovo. The all remaining multi-dimensional peacekeeping operations have been asked by the Security Council to initiate or intensify their transition planning, although that does not necessarily mean that all remaining missions are slated for for closure, and this is also being done in the interest of sound planning for the future. But closure is a reality, and it's very much in the air. The numbers of peacekeepers deployed have declined correspondingly. The number of deployed civilians, military, and police personnel in UN peacekeeping operation has fallen by over 40% from a peak of 125,000 in 2015 to around 55,200 total personnel, which include more than 46,000 uniform personnel at present. Here we go. So you can see, excuse my very crude graphic skills, but this depicts As you see, the total number of peacekeepers that are going in the period from, well, 1948 when peacekeeping in effect began until the present. The UN peacekeeping budget has also declined from about 8.5 billion in 2015 to 5.4 billion today, so a reduction of more than 35%. Again, you see that depicted graphically. And that may seem like a lot of money, but just to put things into perspective, New York City spends more than that on its police forces for a year. And we're talking again about all UN peace operations combined. And as we heard just recently, the U.S. Secretary of Defense, or DWARM, as he likes to call himself, Hexeth declared that as of about a week or so ago, the U.S. war on Iran had already cost \$25 billion, so far in excess of what the UN spends on peacekeeping in a year. And that's by almost all accounts a very significant underestimate because that's the cost it would appear for munitions alone. But of course, depending on how one counts these things, the figure is much higher. And again, this has to be seen against a proposed US so-called defense budget next year of 1.5 trillion US dollars. So 8.5 billion, even in 2015, 5.4 billion today is by comparison really quite much, much smaller. But the larger question is, are we witnessing the decline of peacekeeping or a swing of the pendulum. And we don't actually know yet. And we have been here before. So again, this is showing the deployment in the time that I indicated. But there was following a significant post-Cold War expansion of peacekeeping. peacekeeping underwent subsequently a significant contraction following the Rwanda and Srebrenica crises. And if one goes back even further in time to the UN operation in Congo in the first half of the 1960s, following, that was a controversial operation for the UN, and following that, there would be no further UN peace operations in Africa until the end of the Cold War. So quite a few years. But again, whether we will see an uptick in relation to the current moment is anybody's guess. And at the moment, the clouds are gathering, or have gathered, so it isn't a very optimistic future. But that's the current situation. What explains the contraction? That's what I really like to talk about. What explains the contraction of UN peacekeeping? There are several factors, and I think that it is important to take stock of the many different factors to appreciate the complexity of the pressures that are being exerted on peacekeeping now. It is in a sense a perfect storm. a combination of adverse factors that are creating an exceptionally severe outcome. So

to begin with, and I'll mention 7 factors, Security Council gridlock. Great power tensions have increased sharply since 2014, especially between Russia and the P3, that is Britain, France, and the US, over what to do in Syria and Crimea. between Russia and China on the one hand and the P3 on the other over Ukraine, and even between the UK and France versus the United States over Ukraine and Gaza. Great power tensions or differences have not, however, prevented the renewal of peacekeeping operations, but mandate renewals have become more non-unanimous. So whereas in 2011, Fewer than 5% of such renewals were not unanimous. In 2022, non-unanimous renewals made-up 33% of the total. So that is also further evidence of declining consensus.

Second factor, budget constraints and mission fatigue. Peacekeeping is thought by many member states to be expensive and not value for money. And they've pushed to limit cost, some more aggressively than others. Putting their money where their mouth is, so to speak, member states, the US in particular, have been unwitting or unable to pay their contributions, their annual contributions, to the UN's regular and peacekeeping budgets in full and on time, including unpaid, if you include unpaid dues from previous years, the US is \$1.5 billion in arrears on just its peacekeeping dues. And unpaid dues have created a genuine, genuine, not hypothetical, genuine liquidity crisis that's hindered the operational capacity and effectiveness of UN peace operations. So as a consequence, UN peace operations were forced this year to implement contingency measures, including a 15% cut in expenditures and the repatriation of 25% of uniformed personnel. And that's a very, very significant proportion of their activity.

There's also been concern about missions of long duration. So this slide shows the average duration of UN peacekeeping operations, and it's the average age of all active peacekeeping missions in any given year. You can see they have on average increased duration has increased quite significantly. And if you go back to the first Trump administration when Nikki Haley was the US ambassador to the UN, she circulated a concept paper that raised this concern about missions of long duration and whether we should be thinking about closing them and also then raising alarms about launching new operations. And hers was not entirely minority voice. The paper was well received on the Security Council. And as a consequence, the appetite for launching new large-scale missions is low, even if there's arguably a need and opportunity for new missions. And Jane just showed us the number of active conflicts there are drawn from the Institute for Economics and Peace. Now, that's not to say that every conflict lends itself to peacekeeping. That's a separate issue. But certainly, I think all of us could identify opportunities where peacekeeping could be effective and where that opportunity is not being seen. So 1/3 related factor is the shift toward lighter or non-peacekeeping missions. Instead of traditional peacekeeping, which have large troop deployments, the UN has increasingly used what are called special political missions, SPMs, special envoys, regional offices, political offices, and other field missions, for instance in Libya, Afghanistan, Yemen. SPMs can encompass a range of goals, including the support and facilitation of peace processes, protection of civilians, enhancement of the rule of law,

security sector reform, and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of armed forces, DDR. So these are many of the same functions that peacekeeping operations perform under Chapter 6 of the UN Charter. specific measures and not under Chapter 7, which allowed for the use of force. So thus without UN peacekeepers or UN police. And depending on how you define an SPN, there have been roughly 15 to 20 such missions established since 2014. So this is an area of expansion, arguably, in the same period that we're examining. SPNs are cheaper and less ambitious, so for some, they have become a more attractive alternative. And again, it's also important to bear in mind, therefore, that while there has been this contraction of UN peacekeeping, UN activity in this area does continue, but in less visible ways, and again, not in the form of new peacekeeping operations. Fourthly, there's also been a shift towards the regionalization of peace operations. In the 12 years since the UN last deployed, a whole new peacekeeping mission, regional organizations and coalitions of states have launched close to 20 such missions, which you can see here, if my calculations are correct. This may actually be an underestimate because SICRI recently released figures which would suggest that regional and subregional peace operations are even more numerous than those that I have clicked with here. Another reason for contraction is host country resistance. Now you would think host countries, because they are host countries, welcome peacekeeping operations, but they're actually also a factor contributing to the contraction of UN peace operations and also to the contraction of the mandates of peace operation. So some host-state governments are increasingly skeptical about the long-term presence of the UN. Some are unhappy with the liberal content of peacekeeping, for instance, with regard to human rights promotion. And they get support for that skepticism, as, again, we saw with Joan's previous presentation. from a number of countries, including those on the three parts of China, Russia in particular. And some are frustrated with mission performance. So examples would include Minertanth, which ended in December 2010 after Chad requested its withdrawal. Minusma, which ended in December 2023 after Mali pushed for its withdrawal. And there have been similar tensions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic and elsewhere. Some governments have favored alternative approaches. For instance, the Russian Wagner troops were invited in both Mali and the Central African Republic, although it's not to say that they are necessarily happy with the performance of these forces either. but countries are considering alternatives. Sixth is a more difficult conflict environment than that with which the UN has had to deal historically. And this is limited opportunities for new peace operations. So classic peacekeeping depends on a ceasefire, consent of the parties for the conflict, and a clear peace process. But recent conflicts have not lent themselves easily or at all peacekeeping. In Syria, Yemen, Sudan, there have been often multiple factions, ongoing high-intensity warfare, and weak or no peace agreements at all, among other obstacles. Now, this has partly been due to third-party intervention in conflicts that have helped to sustain the fighting So for instance, Russia's support for the Assad

government during the Syrian civil war, Iran's support for the Hukis in Yemen, and Uganda and Rwanda's engagement in the Eastern Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where UN peacekeepers are deployed. And you can see here, this is very familiar to some of you who study conflict, a chart that's developed annually, produced annually, by the UPSA Conflict Data Program, the UCDP, which shows the nature and frequency of conflict over time since the end of the Second World War, using their measure of conflict, 25 million battle-related deaths, But without going into detail about what you're seeing, I just want to focus on the yellow and the significant increase in what that represents, which is internationalized conflicts. So civil wars where third parties are involved. And that is, as I said, both helping to sustain the conflict itself, but also militates against opportunities for the UN to intervene in its own way of peacekeeping because without a peace to keep, peacekeeping isn't vulnerable. And finally, and this is maybe a little bit more controversial, but it's questionable whether the UN leadership has been sufficiently supportive of peacekeeping. The current Secretary General has been characterized by some as himself, a peacekeeping skeptic, concerned about managing risk and containing costs in the current environment. I think we see that reflected in sort of the rear guard, if you will, efforts that the Secretary General has taken to, if you will, head off the U.S. unsuccessfully, of course, because funding cuts have come nonetheless. But as two leading scholars of UN peace speaking have written, UN peace speaking is suffering from a profound, multifaceted internal crisis of confidence, internal crisis of confidence, which underlies much of the peacekeeping budget cuts and mission drawdowns over the past decade. So what does all this add up to? If nothing else, we can expect to see vigorous debates on the future of UN peace operations, indeed, The UN Secretary General will very soon release his much-anticipated comprehensive review of UN peace operations, which he has conducted at the request of UN member states. However, I do not expect that review to be transformative, and I think we'll remain where we are with the challenge of UN peacekeeping. The challenge of UN peacekeeping is facing is perhaps more daunting than any it has faced before. So thank you for that. And I'm hoping that perhaps, again, as I alluded to the presence of members of UN Department of Peace Operations, maybe they will counter the room, but also identify ways forward out of the challenge that we're facing. But I hope the audience also will have suggestions. So thank you for your attention.