Let's expand, not reduce, Canadian peacekeeping

For many reasons, DND's plan to remove Canadian peacekeepers is short-sighted and counterproductive. In the current political climate, now is the time to expand UN peacekeeping globally and Canada should champion that resurgence.

Walter Dorn & Robin Collins

Opinion

Canada's announced withdrawal from almost all United Nations peacekeeping operations is receiving much deserved criticism because the justification is flawed. The Department of National Defence's declared reason is to improve focus on "personnel and capabilities where they have the greatest impact," maintain "readiness for emerging challenges," and to enhance effectiveness with "allies and partners."

This looks like a drift towards a "NATO-and-allies-only" commitment, and a repudiation of Canada's long-standing contribution of UN blue berets. But is peacekeeping really no longer effective or impactful?

Admittedly, peacekeepers do not determine whether peace will prevail. The conflicting parties themselves ultimately must decide to end their violence. But peacekeepers significantly help enable and sustain the peace process. Nearly all missions have improved lives, even if they were not fully successful in bringing peace. Today, missions are complex, but that does not make them any less indispensable. Their mandates include ceasefire monitoring, separating combatants, protecting civilians, national and local capacity-building, and fostering inclusive peace processes that may include national elections and disarmament of ex-combatants.

Independent research shows the positive impact of peacekeeping. Michael Gilligan of New York University and Ernest Sergenti of the World Bank found an 85-percent success rate in establishing a post-conflict peace, even if wars were not shortened. Using very strict success criteria (specifically, an end to war, no significant residual violence, undivided sovereignty, and avoidance of extreme authoritarianism), Columbia University's Michael Doyle and Yale University's Nicholas Sambanis found a 50-percent success result.

But the most comprehensive collection of UN peacekeeping studies to date is the *Oxford Handbook of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations*. Our appraisal of all the chapter conclusions covering 65 years of missions indicates at least two-thirds of missions were successes or mixed successes. Perhaps a quarter could be labelled strategic failures, but only half of those—only an eighth overall—are unambiguous failures. Even the "failed" UN assistance mission for Rwanda between 1993 and 1994—the mission led by Canadian general Roméo Dallaire—was able to save over 20,000 lives during the genocide with only 300 peacekeepers on the ground.

Peacekeeping makes a positive difference in our world.

So, instead of leaving the peacekeeping field, Canada should work to give the UN the resources and tools to more quickly deploy professionally trained civilians, troops, and police. There is an urgent need to create multinational standby brigades and eventually a standing UN-hired emergency peace service. These will help avoid having UN peace operations arrive too late to pinch off conflicts before they escalate. Rapid deployment is certainly something Canada can champion, as it has in the past.

How about the "return on investment"? The United States government's own audits find that deploying the international peacekeeping community is far cheaper than U.S. military operations. This notion of prevention through financial investment is bolstered by a 2019 study, "Evaluating the conflict-reducing effect of UN peacekeeping operations," in the *Journal of Politics* that found ambitious peacekeeping operations "can reduce the risk of major conflict by about two-thirds." And development gains achieved by doubling UN peacekeeping budgets would significantly reduce infant deaths and save hundreds of thousands of lives through provision of potable water and food.

Peacekeeping missions—even where they are complex as in South Sudan and Democratic Republic of Congo—are not "enemy-centric" offensive intervention projects. They instead rely on a trinity of alternative principles: consent of main conflicting parties, impartiality, and the defensive use of force, which is why they work better, particularly if they are deployed early. This ensures that the missions are not confused with counter-insurgency operations, which have a much less successful record.

For many reasons, DND's plan to remove Canadian peacekeepers is short-sighted and counterproductive. Fortunately, Canada can reverse the decision in coming months to uphold a long-standing reputation. In the current political climate, now is exactly the time to expand UN peacekeeping globally and Canada should champion that resurgence.

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