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Broke, Sidelined, and Under Fire: 5 Surprising Realities of Modern UN Peacekeeping

Introduction: Beyond the Blue Helmet

The image is iconic, almost a cliché: a soldier in a faded blue helmet, a rifle held loosely at their side, standing as a thin line of neutrality on a dusty road. For decades, this has been the world’s symbol for collective security—a simple, powerful idea of a global community stepping in to keep the peace. But today, that image is dangerously out of sync with a far more complex and brutal reality.

Modern peacekeeping is no longer a neutral ground but a contested one. It is becoming an instrument of national interest and a casualty of a fragmenting global order. Stretched thin by unprecedented financial shortfalls, caught in the crossfire of great power rivalries, and tasked with building peace in nations hollowed out by corruption, UN missions are at a breaking point. This article reveals five surprising and impactful truths about the state of UN peacekeeping today, drawn from recent reports and expert analysis that paint a picture of a mission in existential crisis.

1. The Blue Helmets are Facing an Existential Financial Collapse

A severe lack of funds is forcing the United Nations to slash a quarter of its peacekeepers across 11 global operations in the coming months. This is not a strategic drawdown based on mission success, but a desperate, forced retreat. The move will repatriate between 13,000 and 14,000 troops and police, along with their equipment, and affect a large number of civilian staff, fundamentally crippling the UN's ability to operate on the ground.

The source of this cash crisis is a massive funding shortfall from its largest contributor, the United States. Washington, which accounts for over 26% of the peacekeeping budget, currently has an outstanding bill of more than $2.8 billion. This deficit paralyzes the UN's ability to plan and execute its mandates, forcing it into a state of perpetual financial uncertainty.

The crisis signals a deliberate US retreat from its longstanding role as the underwriter of the global security architecture. The Trump administration unilaterally canceled approximately $800 million in future funding, and the White House budget office has proposed eliminating all funding for UN peacekeeping missions by 2026. This financial abandonment threatens the very foundation of global peacekeeping. This financial retreat by traditional powers is creating a vacuum, forcing the UN to consider radical new mission structures for emerging crises.

2. The Next Major Mission Could Be a 60,000-Strong 'Combat-Capable' Force

As traditional peacekeeping models strain under financial and political pressure, a potential new model is emerging from proposals for a security force in Gaza. Military experts have suggested that securing the territory post-conflict would require a "combat-capable force" of up to 60,000 troops—a dramatic departure from the typically lighter footprint of many UN missions.

The proposed composition is just as radical. The force would be made up of professional, well-equipped militaries from Arab and Muslim-majority countries, with potential troop contributions from nations like Egypt, Morocco, and Indonesia, while command functions would be handled by Gulf states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This structure is a fundamental security calculation; it is deliberately designed to be seen as a "non-occupying force," as any visible footprint from Western nations would make them a target.

Experts draw a direct historical parallel for this model: the successful NATO KFOR (Kosovo Force) mission. When KFOR entered Kosovo in 1999, it did so with a "corps size force" of approximately 60,000 personnel. Crucially, KFOR has since managed to keep the peace and demilitarise the ethnic-Albanian Kosovo Liberation Army, providing a powerful template for a robust, large-scale stabilization operation. But even with new models, missions on the ground remain vulnerable to the political agendas of global powers, turning them into proxies for wider geopolitical contests.

3. Peacekeeping is a Stage for 21st-Century Power Plays

Far from being neutral ground, international peacekeeping efforts are increasingly becoming arenas for global geopolitical competition. Mandates, funding, and even the guest lists for related events are now tools used by major powers to signal alliances and exert influence, often at the expense of a mission's stability.

A clear example is India's recent decision to host a high-level conclave of army chiefs from more than 30 UN troop-contributing nations while pointedly excluding Pakistan and China. This was not a minor oversight; despite being the 5th and 8th largest troop contributors to the UN, respectively, their absence underscores India's strained relations with its neighbors and demonstrates how global rivalries are mirrored in the peacekeeping sphere.

A more complex case is the UN mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA). While "generally regarded as a relative success," the mission is being strategically paralyzed, caught in the geopolitical crossfire. It is being whipsawed by contradictory pressures: a recent US "pocket rescission" of peacekeeping funds explicitly asserts that "the Central African Republic mission has become fully aligned with Russia," while China—a Russian ally on the Security Council—is simultaneously calling for the mission to adopt a "transition mindset" and prepare for a drawdown. This paralysis from external pressures is compounded by internal crises, where the battle for peace is often lost not to soldiers, but to a culture of impunity that rots nations from within.

4. The Biggest Battles Aren't Always on the Field, But Against Impunity

In many conflict zones, the most significant obstacle to peace isn't an opposing army but a culture of impunity that fuels endless cycles of violence. The crisis in South Sudan serves as a stark example. According to a UN Commission, the country's escalating conflict is driven by a deep "justice and accountability vacuum," with devastating human consequences. In 2025 alone, an estimated 300,000 South Sudanese fled the country, and the region now hosts more than 2.5 million refugees.

The Commission identifies "grand corruption and systematic diversion of public resources" as a key driver of the conflict, depriving citizens of their basic rights. For years, victims of serious crimes have been promised the establishment of a Hybrid Court—a court combining national and international judges to try the most serious crimes—but that promise remains unfulfilled. This failure to deliver justice has become a primary engine of the humanitarian catastrophe.

The conflict is not an accident of history but a direct result of failed leadership. As Commissioner Yasmin Sooka stated, this reality must be confronted if peace is to have a chance.

"The crisis unfolding in South Sudan is the result of deliberate choices made by its leaders to put their interests above those of their people."

Yet even in these environments of systemic failure, the commitment of individual peacekeepers can create moments of progress and hope.

5. Amid the Crisis, Individuals are Still Making History

Despite the immense systemic challenges, the story of peacekeeping is also one of individual courage and groundbreaking achievement. These personal contributions offer a powerful contrast to the high-level political and financial crises, reminding us of the human commitment at the heart of these missions.

Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP) Alison Raji Atuluk, an officer from the Ghana Police Service serving in MINUSCA, provides an inspiring example. Beyond ceremonial duties, ASP Atuluk is committed to mentoring and empowering others, working with colleagues to mentor the Central African Republic’s policewomen, share her expertise, and build the capacity of local law enforcement.

It was as a visible symbol of this deeper, capacity-building work that she made history by becoming the first female officer to command a UN parade in the Central African Republic. In recognition of her flawless command and leadership, she was awarded a Certificate of Recognition from the United Nations. Her actions underscore the impact of a single dedicated officer.

"Service to humanity knows no borders... I am proud to represent Ghana and contribute to peace in CAR while empowering my fellow women in uniform."

Conclusion: A Mission at a Crossroads

UN peacekeeping is at a critical juncture. It is stretched thin by financial crises that threaten its very existence, complicated by the rivalries of great powers using missions as a geopolitical chessboard, and tasked with solving conflicts rooted in deep-seated impunity and corruption. The traditional model is being tested from all sides, while new, more robust and politically complex frameworks are being considered for future crises.

As the world faces new and escalating conflicts, the iconic Blue Helmet stands at a crossroads. The question is no longer just *can* UN peacekeepers do their job, but in a fractured world, will they even be allowed to try?

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Thank you