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4 Surprising Truths About Global Conflict and Peacemaking You Won't See on the News

Introduction: Beyond the Blue Helmets

The common image of international peacemaking is one of quiet diplomacy, high-stakes Security Council votes, and columns of UN peacekeepers—the "blue helmets"—patrolling a tense but stable buffer zone. It’s an image of order imposed on chaos. But behind the headlines and the televised press briefings, the realities of global conflict and the machinery of peace are far more complex, contradictory, and fragile than they appear.

Conventional wisdom often fails to capture the intricate dynamics at play. The end of a peacekeeping mission can be more destabilizing than its flawed presence. A new mission might be granted unprecedented force, signaling a major shift in intervention strategy. And sometimes, the greatest threats to peacekeepers aren't bullets, but fuel shortages, poor sanitation, and political obstruction. This post reveals four surprising and impactful truths from recent global events that challenge what we think we know about how peace is made, kept, or lost.

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1. A 50-Year Peacekeeping Mission is Ending—And Everyone is Worried

After nearly half a century, the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) is being wound down. The Security Council has voted to extend its mission only until the end of 2026, after which its approximately 10,000 peacekeepers will begin a year-long withdrawal, set to be complete by the end of 2027. On the ground, this means the end of an era for a region defined by tension. Today, southern Lebanon is a landscape of ruins where UN convoys thread their way through cratered roads, past collapsed homes flying the yellow flags of Hezbollah.

Originally established in 1978, UNIFIL’s purpose was to serve as a buffer between Israel and the Iranian-backed militia. Its limited mandate—it could only monitor violations and act in self-defense—drew sharp criticism from all sides. Israel regarded the force as "toothless" for failing to prevent Hezbollah's military buildup, while Hezbollah supporters viewed it as sympathetic to Israel.

Given this history, one might expect its departure to be met with relief. Instead, a deep-seated anxiety is taking hold. While Israel's foreign ministry officially hailed the "orderly and gradual withdrawal," the fear of what comes next is palpable. The concern is not the planned exit itself, but the risk of a precipitous collapse. As Paul Salem of the Middle East Institute cautioned, "a sudden withdrawal would leave a dangerous vacuum." This paradox reveals a crucial truth: a mission widely seen as ineffective can still become a vital component of regional stability. Soldiers return from patrols in shattered villages to bases where the dissonance is stark, with gyms, pizzerias, and bars creating a veneer of normality. Its very presence, however flawed, is now seen as a stabilizing force, and its impending absence is a source of profound unease.

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2. While One Mission Ends, Another Begins with Unprecedented Force

As the long-standing UNIFIL mission prepares to exit Lebanon, the UN Security Council has approved a fundamentally different kind of intervention in Haiti. A new "Gang Suppression Force" has been authorized, signaling a potential evolution in international security operations.

The mandate of this new force is unusually aggressive. It is tasked with working alongside local authorities to "neutralise, isolate, and deter" the powerful gangs that control much of the capital, Port-au-Prince. To achieve this, the approved personnel ceiling has been more than doubled from the previous mission's 2,500 to 5,550.

The vote passed 12-0, but the abstentions from Russia and China were notable. The Russian envoy criticized the resolution for granting a "virtually unrestricted mandate to use force." This powerful mandate is being deployed in a country with a "controversial history when it comes to foreign intervention." Past peacekeeping forces have been linked to rampant sexual abuses and a devastating cholera outbreak that killed approximately 10,000 people. Adding to the mission's inherent fragility, its funding model exposes a critical vulnerability: like its predecessor, the new force will mostly rely on often unpredictable voluntary contributions from UN members. This quiet logistical detail may prove as decisive as any tactical engagement. The Haiti mission stands in stark contrast to the traditional model of UNIFIL, reflecting a shift away from passive buffer zones between states toward more direct, forceful mandates designed to confront non-state actors who have crippled a nation's stability.

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3. The Biggest Threats to Peacekeepers Aren't Always Bullets

The effectiveness of a multibillion-dollar peacekeeping operation can be crippled by factors that never make the evening news. While armed conflict poses an obvious danger, a mission's success often hinges on overcoming logistical, financial, and political obstacles that are just as potent as any military threat. These unseen vulnerabilities form the fragile underpinnings of global stability.

A severe liquidity crisis across the entire UN system, for example, brought the mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) to the brink of collapse. The mission "came dangerously close to depleting its local fuel reserves," forcing contingency plans for a "drastic reduction of the Mission’s personnel and capabilities" that would have paralyzed its operations. This shows how a financial shortfall in New York can ground helicopters and patrols in a conflict zone thousands of miles away.

Similarly, basic infrastructure can become a decisive operational barrier. In South Sudan, the UN mission (UNMISS) found that poor accommodation and sanitation facilities in remote bases "disproportionately affected uniformed women peacekeepers," limiting their ability to deploy and contribute effectively. The problem was so acute that the Elsie Initiative Fund launched a project specifically to deploy "relocatable ablution facilities," a direct acknowledgment that something as fundamental as a proper bathroom can determine a mission's composition and reach. Meanwhile, in Yemen, the threat is political obstruction. The Houthi de facto authorities have arbitrarily detained 53 UN personnel since 2021, directly hindering the UN's ability to operate. These examples reveal that fuel logistics, sanitation, and the political will of local actors can be as decisive as military strategy in the complex machinery of peacemaking.

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4. A Nation's Foreign Policy Can Be a Masterclass in Contradiction

The intricate world of geopolitics often forces nations into positions that appear deeply contradictory, balancing stated principles against strategic alliances and domestic politics. New Zealand's recent policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict serves as a powerful case study in this ambiguity.

The core contradiction is that New Zealand's government has not joined 157 other countries in recognizing a Palestinian state. The official rationale, articulated by its foreign minister, is that there is no viable Palestinian state to recognize "while Hamas remains the de facto government of Gaza and ‘with a war raging’".

This stance, however, is juxtaposed with a series of actions and statements that signal profound disapproval of Israeli policy. The government has:

• Called for a lasting ceasefire and officially supported a two-state solution.

• Seen its Prime Minister, Christopher Luxon, declare Israel’s military assault on Gaza City was “utterly unacceptable” and state that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had “lost the plot.”

• Imposed sanctions on two far-right Israeli government ministers for “inciting extremist violence” against Palestinians.

• Simultaneously, provided military support to a US-led coalition in the Red Sea, directly aligning with the same power that was actively using its Security Council veto to block a ceasefire in Gaza.

This policy has drawn sharp criticism from within the country. Helen Clark, a former prime minister, delivered a powerful rebuke of the government's stance:

"New Zealand has placed itself very much on the wrong side of history." — Helen Clark, former Labour prime minister

This situation exemplifies the complex balancing act many nations perform. Caught between stated moral principles, the official logic of statecraft, and perceived strategic interests, a country’s foreign policy can become a testament to the powerful, and often contradictory, forces shaping the international order.

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Conclusion: The Unseen Machinery of Global Stability

The work of international peacemaking is not a simple story of heroes and villains. It is a complex, fragile ecosystem where success and failure are determined by a vast array of seen and unseen forces. The stability of a region can depend as much on the continued presence of a flawed peacekeeping mission as it does on a powerful military intervention. A mission's ability to function can be decided by fuel logistics and proper sanitation, and a nation's global standing can be defined by its ability—or inability—to navigate the contradictions of its own foreign policy.

These truths remind us that behind every diplomatic breakthrough or tragic failure lies a complex machinery of competing interests, logistical challenges, and human realities. As global challenges grow more complex, the critical question remains: can our international institutions adapt their tools—and their thinking—fast enough to maintain a fragile peace?