



# Human Security Lab

@HSECURITYLAB BRIEFING NOTE #1

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## A Peacekeeping Mission for Afghanistan?

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UN Security Council continues to remain seized of the situation in Afghanistan, but thus far its resolutions have been muted and the idea of armed conflict prevention through a peacekeeping force has not been explored. The structural conditions for civil war in Afghanistan remain in place: ethnic fractionalization; a young population; recent history of war; climactic pressures; and persistent unemployment and poverty. A peacekeeping mission to create confidence and trust among the conflict parties would protect lives and promote peace, obviating the humanitarian crisis and preventing a worse one. The Taliban has previously suggested it would accept peacekeepers from Muslim majority countries and desires international recognition. A peace process is underway and a threat of civil war is brewing, offering the UN a potential opening to broker / enforce a peace. Numerous impartial Muslim-majority countries routinely contribute peacekeeping troops. Several middle-power countries with a renowned reputation for human security initiatives - Norway, Ireland, Mexico to give only some examples - currently sit on the UN Security Council as does India, who has been an important champion of and contributor to UN peacekeeping. Non-P5 leadership on this issue could shift the narrative away from the perception of great power meddling and toward a renewed, human-security-focused multilateralism. Dozens of research studies show peacekeeping is effective, cheap and seen as more legitimate than great-power-backed nation-building. The United Nations Secretary General should as soon as feasible initiate an emergency assessment mission to determine the feasibility and scope of a UNPKO and consider the possibility of UN peacekeepers or peace observers as part of or complementary to a strengthened UNAMA mandate.

### KEY POINTS:

- Afghanistan may soon face renewed intra-state conflict. Conflict prevention should be a UN priority.
- Unlike COIN or great-power nation-building, research shows UNPKOs have been extremely effective at protecting civilians, reducing civil war and improving human rights.
- Such a mission would be best developed as part of an Inter-Afghan settlement. There are openings for the international community to help broker one.
- The international community has significant leverage over the Taliban to secure consent. The Taliban has an interest in governing rather than reverting to civil war and wants assistance with governance, and international recognition.
- US/NATO should not put troops back in AfG and regional players should not send troops. Troop contributors for an Afghan PKO should be disinterested non-Western countries, ideally Muslim-majority states. Leadership would need to come from impartial countries; all P5 countries have interests in averting wider regional war.
- A multinational force of even 5,000 troops, with even a modest observer mandate, could oversee peace, monitor human rights and/or support an inter-Afghan settlement.
- In Libya and Syria, where no peacekeeping was tried, power vacuums led to bloody civil wars. Consideration should be given to outcome averted by a potential UNPKO.



This policy brief is based on four Meetings of Experts convened at Human Security Lab between August 23 and September 10, 2021.

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**OVERVIEW:** In the wake of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, civilians face not only targeted violence from the Taliban and food insecurity but significant risk of renewed intra-Afghan armed conflict. Leaders from a militarized opposition movement in Panjshir Valley are seeking support from external actors for continued armed resistance. Afghanistan has 14 official ethnic minorities including Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaraz, Turkmen, Baloch, Pashayi; even the Pashuns are not all pro-Taliban. Afghanistan exhibits many other risk factors for forecasting intrastate conflict: mountainous terrain, a youth bulge, persistent poverty, climactic stress, a repressive, non-inclusive government and a recent history of externally-supported civil strife. Afghanistan was the deadliest civil conflict in the world before the withdrawal in direct deaths alone<sup>1</sup>; indirect deaths from disease and

peacekeeping mission to Iraq to facilitate the extraction of American troops in 2011 led to the creation of ISIS, whose bloodshed spread to Syria. A UNPKO in Afghanistan could avoid these dire consequences, allow the US to stay the course on ending the counter-insurgency while adopting a stance of humility and faith in multilateral institutions, providing the international community tools to play a constructive role in mitigating or forestalling renewed civil war, and encouraging a greater role from China. With P-5 support, a UNPKO for Afghanistan offers impartial middle-power countries the chance for leadership - such as Norway (a champion of multilateral missions and human security in the past), Estonia (a leader in technology necessary for peacekeeping) or Tunisia (a moderate Muslim-majority country with a history of supporting UNPKOs). If political will were created, a UN

**“Such a mission is not only in the US and UN’s interest; it is in the Taliban’s interest.”**

peace mission (ideally manned by troops not from China,

hunger also increase during intrastate war as does risk of terrorism. The Taliban, Pakistan, Iran, China and Russia all have security interests in preventing civil war, refugee flows and the growth of jihadist terrorism in and from Afghanistan.

Pakistan or other interested regional parties but rather from impartial Muslim-majority states with reasonably good human rights records) could empower Afghan civil society, stemming the worst outcomes of a Taliban takeover.

This situation presents an opportunity for the international community to shift its narrative and approach. Little consideration has been given to replacing a great-power occupation with a multilateral human security-focused UN peace-building / peacekeeping mission.<sup>2</sup> The absence of confidence-building measures and an intra-Afghan peace deal in the run-up to the withdrawal has arguably contributed to the current humanitarian situation. The emergence of an anti-Taliban opposition in the Panjshir Valley and the Taliban’s risk of internal fracture presents opportunities for the UN to position itself to broker a more stable, inclusive peace among disparate groups.

**OPERATIONAL CONCERNS:** UNPKOs vary widely in size, mandate and composition; one advantage is that they can be tailored to the specific context.

**SIZE:** In this case, a smaller, lightly-armed, observer mission, concentrated in the main cities is most sensible and realistic.<sup>6</sup> Given Taliban reprisals against Afghans who worked with the international community and Afghan National Army, PKO monitoring in cities would be

### PEACEKEEPING EFFECTIVENESS:

Research shows third-party confidence-building measures are vital for ending civil wars.<sup>3</sup> Dozens of robust studies document the advantages of UN peacekeeping over other forms of military intervention, counterinsurgency, or great-power occupations, and that when UN peacekeepers are present, armed actors are less likely to attack civilians and more likely to put down their weapons; conflict is less likely to spread when UN peacekeepers are watching.<sup>4</sup> Of the 16 complex UN peacekeeping missions completed since the end of the Cold War, 11 ended in successful implementation of the mandate and none have returned to civil war.<sup>5</sup>

By contrast, failing to use peacekeeping has had disastrous consequences. Lack of a post-intervention mission in Libya and Iraq both sparked and fueled civil and regional conflicts. The implosion of Libya sent weapons and extremists across the region, fueling fighting in Mali, Chad, Nigeria, Sudan, and the Central African Republic. Failing to plan for the aftermath of regime change in Iraq in 2003-04 led directly to civil war. Failing to plan and deploy a UN

**Table 1: Credible Afghanistan peacekeeping options overview**

PRO Factors	OPT 1 “Broad”	OPT 2 “Medium”	OPT 3 “Narrow”
ESTIMATED SIZE	25,000	12,000	5,000
ESTIMATED ANNUAL COST	\$2 billion*	\$1 billion*	\$500 million*
MONITORING CAPABILITY	High	Moderate	Low
VERIFICATION CAPABILITY	High	Moderate	Low
AFGHANISTAN POPULATION COVERAGE	30-40%**	22.4%	17%
RISK TO PKO	High	Low	Low
PKO LOGICAL BURDEN	High	Moderate	Moderate
SHARED FACTORS	Traditional PKO with lightly armed forces, authorized to use force in self-defense, focused on settlement monitoring and verification.		

\* See endnote 63. Further financial analysis is required.

\*\* Depends on ultimate composition and disposition of company-sized PKO units.

Adapted from Ryan van Wie, “A Peacekeeping Mission for Afghanistan: Pipedream or Path to Stability?” in *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, November 2020. These numbers are based on existing missions, however; due to the logistical burden of Afghanistan’s unique terrain, costs could be slightly higher.

<sup>1</sup> UCDP Bulletin #5, “Afghanistan: The Deadliest Conflict in the World,” December 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Lise Howard, “Peacekeeping is Not Counterinsurgency,” *International Peacekeeping*, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Walter, “Bargaining Failures and Civil War,” *American Review of Political Science*, June 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara F Walter, Lise Morje Howard, V Page Fortna, “The Extraordinary Relationship Between Peacekeeping and Peace,” *British Journal of International Studies*, 2019; H Fjelde, L Hultman, and D Nilsson, “Protection Through Presence: UN Peacekeeping and the Costs of Targeting Civilians,” *International Organization*, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Lise Howard, *Power in Peacekeeping*, Cambridge University Press, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Ryan van Wie, “A Peacekeeping Mission in Afghanistan,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, 2020.



crucial. Although there would be disadvantages in a smaller PKO (in particular limiting its protective presence and exacerbating the wide gaps in security between urban and rural areas), it could be supplemented with unarmed ISR platforms, extending the mission's monitoring capabilities beyond cities.<sup>7</sup> This smaller footprint PKO is also ideal for resupply and force protection requirements. As is evident with Kabul's ongoing evacuation, Afghanistan's rugged geography creates large risks for external forces' mobility and ability to resupply and evacuate casualties. It is relatively easy to isolate and cut off disparate PKO units by controlling key chokepoints such as highways and airports, posing large risk to units based away from major cities. **Recommendation:** The largest possible mission acceptable to the conflict actors is recommended; even a small, 5,000-troop mission could provide confidence-building measures and minimize civil war recidivism.

**MANDATE:** The Working Group disagreed as to whether such a mission should begin with a robust mandate or be sold to the warring parties as an observer mission only. Observer missions have had considerable success, including in Cambodia and Ukraine. However they are most useful in situations where a peace process is already underway with buy-in by all parties: such a process in Afghanistan is likely to include some spoilers.<sup>8</sup> In other situations where spoilers sank a peace process, or violence against civilians remained endemic or re-emerged (Bosnia, Rwanda) lack of a PKO mandate to protect civilians became a problem. In situations where civilians face ongoing threats from both warring parties it is often robust mandates that lead to greater mission effectiveness.<sup>9</sup> However these mandates also rely on consent of the parties themselves, and are not always feasible. A peacekeeping mission must be designed with a view to minimizing the risk of enabling autocracy and incentivizing power-sharing among conflict parties for maximum success.<sup>10</sup> **Recommendation:** An observer mission could be better than nothing, so long as diplomats and civilian aid agencies on the ground do not oversell what it can do.

**CONSENT:** Both the Taliban and some elements of its opposition (the former Afghan government, the National Resistance Front, possibly others) would need to agree to a peace deal and a peace mission. Perceiving themselves as victors currently, the Taliban are likeliest to do so if faced with a credible, renewed conflict and or significant international pressure. This situation could and likely will change rapidly. In addition, there may be a trade-off between Taliban consent and size/mission effectiveness: the Taliban are likelier to consent to help the more dire the security situation gets (in which case a larger mission would be needed) and yet likeliest to agree to a



smaller mission with a less robust mandate. However, the Taliban's reliance on external support provides the international community with key leverage, including recognition, aid and expertise, factors that often motivate consent for peacekeeping missions.<sup>11</sup> While a larger PKO is ideal, in terms of effective monitoring, verification, and peace-keeper force protection, widespread intra-Afghan consent mitigates the risks inherent with a smaller mission.

**Recommendation:** The UN should condition any recognition of the Taliban on consent to at least a small mission and UN involvement in peace talks to establish more inclusive governance.

**COMPOSITION:** Intra-Afghan consent will likely be conditioned on the PKO's composition. In addition to mandate, two considerations are key: the nationality of PKO troops, and gender composition of the mission. First, the Taliban have previously indicated they would accept (and not attack) a PKO composed of Muslim troops. Many TCCs outside the region are Muslim-majority nations including Tunisia, Morocco, Malaysia, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Jordan, Egypt and others. This could allay the perception that the mission was another imperial intervention. Despite worries that TCCs will balk at a risky mission,

research shows the main determinants of speedy troop deployments are not the degree of risk but rather whether TCCs are dependent on UN reimbursements and exposure to negative externalities from a conflict such as refugee flows.<sup>12</sup> Particularly if incentives are provided, it should be possible to man such a mission.

Second, much research shows that a critical mass of female peacekeeping troops enhances mission effectiveness and reduces gender-based violence by troops and by conflict actors against civilians in conflict zones.<sup>13</sup> This is likely to be a delicate issue in Afghanistan. The possibility that foreign female peacekeepers could be more acceptable to the Taliban than foreign male peacekeepers, for interacting with female civilians, could be explored in negotiations of consent for such a mission. With the establishment of a peacekeeping culture, and perhaps more importantly an appropriately gender-sensitive approach regardless of personnel composition, Taliban social norms can be navigated creatively in ways that catalyze support for the rights of men, women and other gender minorities.<sup>14</sup> **Recommendation:** Involve non-Western Muslim countries in diplomacy for a PKO and involve prominent non-Western Muslim male peacekeeping experts with a background in gender issues - such as Prince Zeid Ra'ad Zeid al-Husseini - in championing a culturally appropriate approach.

<sup>7</sup> Studies show larger missions are more effective at protecting civilians. See Lisa Hultman, Jacob Kathman, Megan Shannon, "UN Peacekeeping and Civilian Protection in Civil War," *American Journal of Political Science*, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Stedman, "Spoiler Problems In Peace Processes," *International Security*, 1997.

<sup>9</sup> Kofi Pepra-Nsia, "Robust Peacekeeping? Panacea for Human Rights Violations," *Peace and Conflict Studies*, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Sarah von Billerbeck and Oisín Tansey, "Enabling Autocracy? Peacebuilding and Post-Conflict Authoritarianism in the DRC." *European Journal of International Relations*, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Anjali Dayal, *Incredible Commitments*, Cambridge University Press, Forthcoming.

<sup>12</sup> Gary Uzony, *Finding Soldiers for Peace*, Georgetown University Press, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Sabrina Karim and Kyle Beardsley, *Equal Opportunity Peacekeeping*, Oxford University Press, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Nagel, Kate Fin, Julia Maenza, *Gendered Impacts on Operational Effectiveness of UN Peace Operations*, Georgetown University, Women Peace and Security Institute 2021.

**REGIONAL & GLOBAL ACTORS:** Pakistan, Russia, Iran, India and China all have significant security interests in containing the refugee crisis / avoiding civil war / stemming jihadist terrorism. Pakistan is perhaps likeliest to want to peace-make/peace-keep in region, but least likely to be seen as an effective interlocutor by non-Pashtun Afghans. The UN Security Council has been more restrained and less assertive in recent years.<sup>15</sup> There is some sense in Washington that turning things over to the UN would be “a bad look” for the US, but it could also help the US project humility and faith in multilateral institutions. There are indications from China it would consider a PKO: it would likely support if asked / given opportunity to portray itself as agent of world order, but is unlikely to take leadership as penholder. A slightly more removed, non P5 country may need to take initiative. Near-term, stakeholders are focused on the humanitarian evacuation; there are possibilities for issue linkages here, with peacekeepers providing security perhaps for humanitarian corridors. Some stakeholders are skeptical of whether political will exists and/or the context is suitable to an effective mission: jihadist terrorism is real and there is some peacekeeping fatigue after Mali, South Sudan and DRC. **Recommendation:** US/NATO countries should contribute money / support but not troops; impartial Muslim-majority nations should contribute troops; China and impartial middle-power states should consider leadership roles in UN circles and diplomatic support and should commit not to backing any sides in a renewed civil war, in return for a peace deal and a peace mission consented to by all parties.

**CONCLUSION:** Research suggests that PKOs help more often than they do not, and the least successful do more good than meets the eye.<sup>16</sup> Compared to other forms of intervention or civil war termination, peacekeeping is cheap and comes with significant positive externalities. A UNPKO, or at minimum an observer mission, should be an option that should be firmly on the table as the UN weighs its role in Afghanistan. Although UNPKOs are not the best option for every conditionality—for example, should a large-scale genocide against Hazara be imminent necessitating a more forceful Chapter VII intervention to protect civilians—they can often forestall such conflict spirals or be a useful tool in the aftermath of anticipated conflict. The UNSC should consider this an important tool in its belt. To determine whether it could be a useful one, it is advised that the UN Secretary General undertake an assessment mission to Afghanistan as soon as politically feasible with a view to potentially standing up a Rapid Deployment Level mission in the next months or year should circumstances warrant. Such a mission itself can signal to the Taliban international resolve and commitment to peace, stability and human rights within the country. An expanded UNAMA will also be far more successful in the country if complemented by a peacekeeping or observer mission.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Gowan, “Learning to Live with a Limited Security Council,” *International Crisis Group Commentary*, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> See William Nomikos, “Peacekeeping and the Enforcement of Intergroup Cooperation in Mali,” in *Journal of Politics*, 2021, for how peacekeeping makes a difference even in complex emergencies beset by jihadist threats.

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