FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 25.04.2025 | Patrick Rosenow & Kirsten Hartmann

Time to match words with deeds

As global conflicts rise, UN peace missions struggle. Germany must step up its role in international security

For the first time ever in its history, the United Nations Peacekeeping Ministerial (PKM) will take place in Berlin from 13 to 14 May. The aim of the meeting is to discuss the future of UN peace missions. These biennial meetings serve as a gauge of the continuing political support for such missions, which are, of course, just *one* of the tools in the UN's comprehensive 'toolkit' for handling conflict — alongside general conflict prevention, mediation missions and peacebuilding measures. But the need for reform is clear: the planning, execution and successful completion of peace missions are beset with challenges.

The last major UN peacekeeping mission to be initiated was MINUSCA in the Central African Republic in 2014. Although existing missions are regularly extended, other players are increasingly gaining in importance, particularly regional and sub-regional organisations. The success of UN missions continues to be limited, while the number of conflicts worldwide is on the increase. Changes in conflict dynamics, for example as a result of new threats such as disinformation, provide additional complications for their work. Nevertheless, UN peacekeeping missions are regarded as one of the most cost-efficient and effective instruments in international conflict management. They are proven to reduce direct violence against civilian populations and therefore continue to be irreplaceable.

In light of the increasing challenges, the upcoming PKM in Berlin will discuss new, more flexible models for future peacekeeping. In the Pact for the Future in September 2024, the UN Member States had already tasked Secretary-General António Guterres with developing suggestions to reform UN peacekeeping. Such missions are therefore currently a hot topic. And it is worth taking a look at Germany's role in all this.

A crucial role

The first National Security Strategy (NSS), published in 2023, emphasised Germany's wish to assume responsibility for international

crisis management. In practice, however, its commitment continues to be limited, especially when it comes to personnel. Russia's attack on Ukraine has shifted security policy priorities towards defending the country and the alliance. The lack of a substantive German commitment to UN peacekeeping would, however, be fatal. The country's participation is crucial for several reasons — not only because of the need for well-trained staff and for logistics, transport and high-value skills and competencies, but also for political credibility.

Those who want to influence and have a say in the future of peace missions also need to take responsibility on the ground. The Final Report by the Afghanistan Commission of Inquiry calls for the UN system to be strengthened by better crisis management, more financial resources and realistic, prioritised mandates. This can only succeed if 'peace missions receive relevant support from Germany, in terms of both materials and people'. To date, however, personnel on the ground has been in short supply. Until its withdrawal in 2023, the UN mission in Mali was Germany's last substantial – albeit selective – peacekeeping engagement. Currently, Germany's contribution is largely limited to the maritime components of the UNIFIL Mission in Lebanon.

Although Germany is traditionally a reliable participant in the financing of UN deployments, its field presence was always limited — with its political influence suffering as a result. On many occasions, the participation of German troops has paradoxically even declined when Germany was represented for two years on the UN Security Council. There has therefore been a gap between ambition and reality for a long time now. This contradiction is also evident in the National Security Strategy. On the one hand, it claims: 'The army's core mission is to defend the country and the alliance; all tasks are subordinate to this mission.' On the other hand, it declares that 'we will strive to ensure that United Nations peacekeeping missions are endowed with a clear political mandate and the necessary resources.' As it is, the foreign policy message remains ambivalent — and points to a continuing need for clarification in the political decision-making process.

Three key challenges

Overall, three key challenges are hindering Germany's commitment to the UN.

Firstly, the German public remains fundamentally sceptical about Germany playing a more significant role in international crisis operations. Despite the mantra-like declaration of wanting to take more responsibility, the new government needs to provide more convincing

arguments to justify such deployments. As so many of these missions take place far away from the reality of people's lives at home, there is a real need for open, clear communication on the importance of multilateral action — without ignoring critical voices. At all times, German participation must, of course, be carefully assessed and the chances of success evaluated together with national and international partners.

Secondly, the army continues to be underfunded despite the so-called '*Zeitenwende*' (or turning point) and constitutional change. Any sustainable improvement requires stable financing commitments and structural reforms — also when it comes to personnel. For this to happen, the defence budget needs to grow in the long term and structures need to be adapted — also in view of the suspension of compulsory military service. The new government should therefore do one thing without abandoning the other: the defence of the country and of the alliance needs to be considered in tandem with deployments in trouble spots. Ultimately, the NSS emphasises that German security '[is] linked to the security and stability of other regions of the world'.

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Thirdly, the civil sector lacks the political will and suitable structures to play a more forceful role. Although the 2021 Coalition treaty promised that crisis prevention and civil crisis management would be strengthened, this aspiration has, in practice, remained largely unfulfilled. For example, in March only 12 German police officers were deployed in UN peace missions — despite long-standing targets for growth in this area. Alongside diverging interests between the federal and state governments, career incentives for international deployments are also in short supply. As a comparison, more than 280 German police officers are currently deployed with Frontex — a clear sign of the political priorities.

Given the global changes in UN peacekeeping, Germany should participate fully in the upcoming reform discussions, contribute its own ideas and, in particular, provide concrete resources. The Peacekeeping Ministerial in May offers an important opportunity to lend visibility to Germany's political engagement, to help shape the future of UN peacekeeping and to pledge binding contributions. Ultimately, Germany must prove that it is serious about UN peacekeeping if it is to again apply in 2026 for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council for 2027/2028 — and emphasise strengthening UN peacekeeping in its

candidacy.

Yet, sustainable support may not be limited to ministerial or Security Council meetings. Germany should systematically push ahead with its commitment to peace and security within the whole UN architecture, for example in its current role as chair of the Peacebuilding Commission or in the General Assembly, whose presidency the country will assume in September. Germany should generally continue to drive forward the closer integration of peace consolidation and peacekeeping — politically, structurally and operationally. The ministries involved should therefore define the goals of Germany's participation in UN-led peace operations — with binding schedules and personnel and financial commitments. These goals should also be coordinated with NATO and EU strategic processes to ensure international coherence and division of labour. Such voluntary commitments can also be included in the revised crisis guidelines (originally from 2017).

The new government needs to act urgently — not only on account of crises in peace operations but also because of the increase in cross-border security threats. In a period of multiple crises, Germany cannot afford to take a backseat when it comes to security policy. The impact of the current conflicts will be felt here sooner or later.



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