

Crisis amplifier? – US elections and UN peace operations

Kirsten Hartmann is a Research Assistant at the Bundeskanzler-Helmut-Schmidt-Stiftung (BKHS)

The 2024 US election will intensify the crisis of UN peace operations. Under both administrations, European policymakers should no longer rely on the US in UN missions, but develop a more strategic approach to strengthen peace operations. If Trump wins, political disengagement and funding cuts will undermine existing missions and weaken UN peace operations in the future. If Harris wins, her constructive approach will be jeopardised by congressional opposition which will feed into the gradual decline of US leadership on UN missions.

Irrespective of the outcome, the 2024 US presidential election will have global repercussions. It will crucially affect the UN as the central multilateral forum as well as its most visible tool: peace operations (UN peacekeeping operations and special political missions). US engagement in UN missions is wide-ranging: it is the largest financial contributor to UN peacekeeping with a budget share of 26.94 per cent, has political influence as a permanent UN Security Council (UNSC) member and provides support to missions as well as training and equipment to troop and police contributing countries (T/PCCs). UN peace operations are currently in crisis and face several challenges, including liquidity shortfalls, a grid-locked UNSC and a changing conflict and security actor landscape. In the face of increasing conflicts worldwide, they must adapt to a shifting environment. Given the major role of the US in UN missions, the election will significantly shape their development.

This policy brief introduces two scenarios of how the next US administration under Republican Donald Trump or Democrat Kamala Harris will affect the trajectory of UN peace operations and offers recommendations for European and US policymakers. It builds on extensive literature research and 24 qualitative research interviews and background conversations with a diverse range of international stakeholders that took place between June and September 2024.

Trump 2.0: “Unmitigated disaster” (INT-08)?

During his first term, Trump pushed for budget reductions of UN peace operations and withheld approved funds. Since 2017, after years of waivers, Congress has enforced the 25 per cent cap on UN peacekeeping funding, resulting in over \$1.1 billion in arrears that hamper missions’ work (Blanchfield 2024; Williams 2018). This contributes to a vicious cycle weakening missions’ relevance: less funding leads to less effective operations, which backs the argument that they are overall less effective and should be downsized or withdrawn (INT-11). European states have failed to call out the US for its underpayment or to counter the questioning of missions’ effectiveness aimed at cutting their budgets during the Trump administration. The strong rhetorical support for UN peace operations among UN member states does not translate into implementing necessary reforms and providing sufficient resources. Since Trump’s last term, the Russian war against Ukraine and the war in the Middle East have increased UNSC tensions and have led to more non-unanimous mandate renewals, which jeopardise mandate implementation (INT-06).

Under a Trump 2.0 scenario, his anti-multilateral “America First” policy will undermine UN peace operations financially and politically. Alongside rising Republican anti-UN sentiment, he will call for cutting (or even eliminating) funding to UN peacekeeping and related US measures (INT-11; INT-21). His close relationship with Putin and decreasing Ukraine support could (setting aside the severe effects for Ukraine) improve US-Russian Council relations (Gowan 2024). Yet, his Middle East policy and aggressive stance against China could increase UNSC tensions that prevent agreement on existing or new missions. Costly and longstanding missions will face growing pressure, for instance to reduce expensive items like aviation, and the US will prevent any increases of the peacekeeping budget (INT-19; INT-20). Yet, a pragmatic Trump administration would not veto existing missions, as they are low on the agenda,

relatively cost-effective and contribute to US global standing (INT-18; INT-21). But increasing efforts to streamline missions could lead to rapid downsizing or transitions. While overinflated missions do exist, withdrawal procedures need to be in place to not risk undoing the successes of previous measures (INT-11). Tasks that are cut in missions would also be shifted to parts of the UN system that mainly depend on voluntary funding. A lack of US political backing for missions under Trump 2.0 could jeopardise mandate implementation. Rhetorical attacks on human rights and gender would strengthen China's and Russia's pushback on these topics and result in watered-down language in mandates (INT-21; INT-22).

US (dis-)engagement on UN missions under Trump 2.0 is determined by people in key positions (INT-21). He will rely on loyalists to avoid building up someone like Nikki Haley who ended up running against him for the Republican presidential nomination (INT-11). UN peace operations will not be of interest for Trumpists installed in the National Security Council, the State Department and as UN ambassador, which could lead to US political disengagement from existing missions and reform efforts. The US will work less closely with partners and be more isolated in mandate discussions.

With the declining relevance of UN missions, UN partnerships with (sub-)regional actors have become more important, particularly on the African continent. African states claim more national and regional ownership in peace and security issues. US support to implement Resolution 2719 – adopted in 2023 after long US opposition to financing African Union (AU)-led peace support operations with UN money – will diminish as Trump is unwilling to fund the UN, “let alone give money to the UN to give to somebody else” (INT-08). As congressional approval is necessary for each case the Resolution applies to, Congress could delay (or even halt) the process (INT-15). This would damage US relations with African UNSC members and weaken the UN-AU peace and security partnership. In sum, Trump 2.0 would undermine existing UN peace operations and weaken the tool in the future.

Harris 1.0: Continued support despite internal backlash?

While her multilateral priorities are still unclear, Harris built up her foreign policy profile during her vice presidency and expressed support for multilateralism, including at multiple Munich Security Conferences. A Harris 1.0 scenario will largely mean a continuation of Biden's approach to UN missions. She will propose to fully finance them and pay back US arrears. However, if Congress withholds money – particularly when under Republican control but also possibly under Democratic control –, the US will fail to meet its peacekeeping obligations (INT-21). Given her focus on domestic priorities, Harris will be unable to push through the money and continued US underpayments will undermine missions' work.

Harris will continue Biden's non-engagement-policy with Russia (Bazail-Eimil et al. 2024). While publicly pursuing a hard stance against China, Harris could pursue a “nuanced and sophisticated approach” on the working level and seek consensus with China on certain missions (INT-21; INT-22). The US will continue to support the multidimensional mission model despite increasing pushback. The Harris administration will act as a constructive partner in, but not lead, discussions on future UN missions. Harris will build on Biden's outreach to Africa to counter Russian and Chinese influence and seek stronger alliances with African UNSC members (also to receive their support in mandate negotiations). She will support Resolution 2719 politically, but Congress could delay its implementation. Harris's foreign policy advisors and the new UN ambassador could shift the US focus from an African emphasis in UN peace operations under the current ambassador to other regions, such as the Middle East. This would weaken US relations to African UNSC members and the AU. In sum, Harris's constructive approach could be jeopardised by Congress, which adds to the gradual decline of US leadership on UN peace operations.

Continuity in US-UN policy

Some elements are similar in each scenario. US underpayment to peacekeeping will remain. While Trump and Harris will differ in rhetoric, both will push for more cost-effective missions. This feeds into overall shifts from large multidimensional peacekeeping operations to smaller, cheaper missions, including special political missions. Their approach to missions in contexts that are less geopolitically contested or less important for US security interests, such as Cyprus, will be similar. While countering growing Chinese influence in peacekeeping – China is the P5's largest troop contributor and second largest donor – unites both parties, the “need for consensus with China will grow” (INT-22) for any future US president.

How to prepare for US disengagement?

In both scenarios, European policymakers must prepare for (different levels of) US disengagement from UN peace operations and develop a more strategic approach to support the tool. As US underpayment continues, European states must pay their full dues on time and intensify public and diplomatic pressure on the US to do the same. They must identify ways to better balance mission funding, explore accountability measures for underpayment and revive previous efforts to reform the financing of peace operations, including in the C34 Committee. European policymakers must critically reflect on their role and responsibility in UN peace operations. Most peacekeepers are currently deployed by states from the Global South (and partly lack adequate equipment and training) (UN Peacekeeping 2024). European states like Germany should deploy more personnel, provide more needed material contributions (e.g. technological) to missions and equipment to other T/PCCs, and ensure that trainings provide relevant capacities (INT-08; Boutellis and Beary 2020). European policymakers need to walk the talk on their rhetorical commitments to UN missions. They must shift their approach from offering background support to proactively shaping the future of UN peace operations. More effective UN missions are in Europe's self-interest: national and regional security in Europe is connected with security and stability abroad.

European policymakers should fill the gap left by declining US political leadership on UN missions. If Trump wins, European permanent and elected council members must push for the implementation of Resolution 2719 – ensuring African agency and addressing existing pitfalls. Diplomats should avoid making the resolution palatable to Trump by “pitching” militarised AU operations as a counterterrorism tool “to reduce the US burden in Africa” (INT-15). European policymakers should support the capacity-building of (sub-)regional actors in the field of peace operations at the UN and bilateral level. They must increase confidence in UN missions, including through communicating current successes. Improving the political and public perception of missions is also important at home to legitimise increased support while the focus shifts to national and territorial defence. Ahead of the 2025 Peacekeeping Ministerial organised by Germany, European policymakers must facilitate consensus across broad North-South alliances on the role of UN peace operations and provide new impetus for feasible mission models and reform implementation – with US support under Harris and without it under Trump. They could also promote a stronger role for the General Assembly in peace and security issues.

To counter increased Republican pushes to defund the UN, US policymakers need to underscore UN missions' importance and the costs of disengagement for US national security interests. American funding of UN missions is a relatively small sum compared to total US defence spending and it is cost-effective: financing UN missions is eight times cheaper for American taxpayers than deploying US forces (Better World Campaign 2024; US GAO 2018). US withdrawal from UN peace operations reduces its influence and encourages other powers, particularly China, to fill the vacuum. Yet, rather than escalating UNSC tensions, US diplomats should seek constructive discussions with China on future UN missions – there is simply “no way around China” (INT-21). They should not confuse simply cheaper with more efficient and effective missions and ensure that context-specific needs determine the UN's response to conflicts. US policymakers must support African agency in peace operations in the UNSC

and by strengthening the relevant capacities of (sub-)regional organisations. In the context of the highest number of active conflicts since the Second World War, European and US policymakers must strengthen UN missions to prevent their further loss of relevance.

Note: The respective author is responsible for the content of the article. The contributions do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Bundeskanzler-Helmut-Schmidt-Stiftung and the Europa-Kolleg Hamburg.

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