Transcript 2: United Nations Peacekeeping Operations

Conversation with Renata Dwan. Recorded 14 February 2024, online.

00:00:00 JE
So, today I have the privilege of speaking to Dr. Renata Dwan, who is a peace and conflict expert with now two decades of experience working for UN peacekeeping operations around the world. Most recently, Renata has been the chief of UN peacekeeping policy and best practices, and she also was the director of the UN Institute for Disarmament Research from 2018 to 2020. Renata is a senior consulting fellow at Chatham House, where she has served as deputy director until 2022. She is, in other words, a leading peacekeeping and development expert with extensive experience from Afghanistan to Mali, about which we're going to talk in a minute. So, hello and welcome to Global Shocks, Renata, it's an honor to have you.

00:00:45 RD
It's great to be with you, Jan, and hello to you.

00:00:50 JE
So just to begin, could you please state your name for the record and very briefly tell us what you do.

00:00:57 RD
My name is Renata Dwan. I spent 15 years at the United Nations, mainly in the area of peacekeeping, peacebuilding, crisis response. My last three years were spent as head of the UN Institute for Disarmament Research, so looking perhaps more at the arms control side of the peace and security equation. You mentioned I was in Chatham House and I am still connected with Chatham House and have been working on development assistance approaches to what I'm calling politically estranged states. But I also continue to do some consulting from India with the United Nations, most recently to the Office for the Special Envoy on Technology, where I'm working on ideas around international technology governance.

00:01:44 JE
So, you've been working on peacekeeping, on how to think about how peacekeeping might need to change, adapting to changes in the world and in world politics. And now you just mentioned that you're recently working on technology, and this is all obviously somehow connected to the broader issue of how bigger changes in the world mean that international organizations need to adapt. They need to somehow track these changes and figure out ways of responding to them. So maybe just very briefly, in your own words, why do you think thinking about these kinds of global shifts and changes, global shocks, why that matters for the organizations that you're familiar with and that you've been working for.

00:02:24 RD
I mean, first I would say that what I felt working in peacekeeping, that was both a reflection of a consensus by a significant number of states and organizations around a

problem and possibly how to respond to that. So therefore, if that instrument of international order, if that instrument of states is going to be effective both in maintaining legitimacy, in reflecting where consensus around ideas are, and in being able to adapt to crises as understood by those that essentially drives the tool, then it needs to be assessing and constantly able to navigate change.

So, there's a legitimacy dimension, there's a representation dimension, and then there's an effective delivery dimension. And so, I think that's why peacekeeping, and I would argue all crisis management instruments, need to have that adaptability. Now, of course, and we'll come on to it, whether you adapt in a long and slow and gradual way, whether you adapt to shocks and to sudden changes, they're obviously different drivers.

00:03:36 JE
So, you've just mentioned crisis management and the need to sort of adapt to different kinds of crises as they emerge, and the question, of course, of whether we're talking about more protracted, complex issues or crises that sort of erupt very, very suddenly and challenge an institution. Let's talk a bit about peacekeeping because, of course, that's your specialism. So, there are currently 12 peacekeeping missions around the world, if I'm not mistaken, the biggest of which being MINUSCA in the Central African Republic, UNMISS in South Sudan, MINUSCO in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and MINUSMA in Mali. You have yourself worked as Chief of Development Coherence for the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and as a team leader for the UN's Integrated Operational Teams for Asia and for Mali.

And during your time working in these posts, thinking about peacekeeping missions around the world, what would you say was the most challenging shock and or more protracted conflict that you had to deal with, that you and your co-workers had to manage? And what were its practical consequences for the mission and for the organization?

00:04:40 RD
Well, if we talk about shocks, why are they important for an institution like international peacekeeping in general and then UN peacekeeping in particular? I think it's the unpredictability and the suddenness, but the potential high impact that they have that makes them a subject, let's say, of attention. You can't sort of close your eyes to their occurrence. I also think they present particular challenges for international organizations because of the slow and generally reactive nature in which international organizations tend to respond.

And again, peacekeeping is a particular form of that. If you look at peacekeeping, the way its budgets, its plans, its mandates are given, they tend to build a lot on precedent. They tend to build a lot on gauging where the Security Council, where troops and police-contributing countries, where financial contributors and where whole states are, what are they willing to accept, what are they willing to support, what's the consensus. So, they tend to be fairly, I would say, progressive and sort of precedent-

building instruments that are not massively agile. So global shocks present particular problems for them.

At the same time, I suppose if you were to use international relations theory, there are also institutions where have a certain display, a certain amount of stickiness. Ways of doing things are well ingrained, budgets are planned in advance, they move relatively slowly. That debate is happening right now, for example, with the request by the Malian authorities, the de facto authorities for the peacekeeping operation to leave the country, there has been agreement to leave, but that's simply, you can't move, you know, over 10,000 troops, people, logistics fast. So that's an example of that stickiness.

So, I think shocks are really important for international crisis managers and peacekeeping because they present particular problems for the United Nations. I mean, I think what's interesting for me, and when I think back on my time in peacekeeping, if I think about what were the big shocks, they might differ, the shocks that were considered real shocks internally for the organization, and by that I mean secretariat and staff and peacekeeping, then what might be the global shock?

So let me give you an example. Let's talk about global shocks. The financial crisis of 2008, for example, that was a shock for the world, its suddenness, its contagion, its relative speed. Its effects on UN peacekeeping were not immediate, however. Why? Because those budgets were planned in advance. The Peacekeeping Support Account works in a two-year cycle, and those systems were in place, those mandates were authorized. So that lag of pressure on financing, pressure on funds, actually started to only be felt, I think, from 2010 on.

And in fact, even you could argue that financial crisis can lead to heightened demand for UN peacekeeping. Troop-contributing countries make money from sending the troops 30% of peacekeeping. Budget goes on salaries to contributing countries for their forces and their equipment. So, you had both a sort of potentially incentive. I'm not saying that incentive alone, but it's a financial income for certain countries. Similarly, countries concerned about crises and the implications of instability and turbulence may have perhaps had attitudes or been willing to consider the deployment of peacekeeping forces. And I'm thinking in particular about that period and the significant activism in places like Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone, or West Africa, peacekeeping at that time.

So, you didn't see an immediate crisis to peacekeeping. And arguably the financial crisis for peacekeeping happened after about 2012, as departments of foreign affairs in the world sort of received from their finance ministries less budget, as the pressures on budgetary spending grew, and the, let's say, financial crisis that the U.N. faced and U.N. peacekeeping was most marked with the arrival of the Trump administration in 2017 and the refusal of the Trump administration to pay its quota or its quoted due of peacekeeping.

The Arab Spring, I would argue, was more of a shock. Again, less to perhaps the UN peacekeeping instrument in the immediate term, perhaps more to the UN development

instruments. Issues around how close were they to whole state authorities, what was the appropriate role of the UN in the face of public protests for change in regimes that were partially or non-democracies, how to respond to those demands from the street. And I think that was more a political and a development and a human rights crisis for the organization than a specific peacekeeping.

However, the long-term lag effect of the Arab Spring became very much felt with the peace operation in Libya, a special political mission, and then particularly the destabilizing impact that it had on the Sahel with the opening of free flow of weapons, the significant increase of weapons, of munitions, of smuggling of all sorts through and across the Sahel, and the implications that it had for Mali in particular. So that's an example of a long time, a long lag. And 9/11 I would say was a similar in reshaping peacekeeping operations towards much more counter-terrorist groups, towards much more tackling threats of extremist movements and, of course, led to the reformulation of the formulation of mandates that were explicitly in support of states and supporting states, including with the capacity to use force under Chapter VII to defeat military threats by armed groups.

But if I just, in conclusion, say that some of the more bigger threats that I felt sort of shook the system to its core were not those, as much you might call, macro shocks, but shocks of perhaps a more micro nature. So, I would say the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq was a political crisis for the UN that really drove significant wedges in the UN, created tension between the UN leadership and the U.S. and then, of course, led to the deployment of a UN political mission and the 2003 canal bombing. That was quite a shock for the UN in terms of understanding itself to be a target, forcing it to rethink issues around its impartiality, its perception of its impartiality, its role, mission protection, et cetera.

A similar crisis was the 2010 Haiti earthquake that not only led to a huge humanitarian crisis, but also led to the collapse of the UN headquarters and the death of peacekeepers, including the mission leadership of that crisis and how to respond to the calls to lead a humanitarian response while you yourself are a victim of that incident. And then third, I would say the Rwanda and the Srebrenica genocides. The impact that that had on UN doctrine and thinking, particularly around peace operations reform that led to the Brahimi Report of 2010 and comprehensive rethinking of the role and purpose of UN peacekeeping, and then particularly, of course, ultimately the R2P, the responsibility to protect doctrine and placing protection of civilians at the heart of operations.

So, I'd be interested in making sure that we distinguish between what I would call shocks that are perceived as shocks within the system, and then perhaps more macro-global shocks that impact, but over a much longer lead time.

00:12:51 JE
Right, so essentially we're making a drawing a distinction between shocks to the operational structures of the UN itself and its deployments, its missions, and how that changes its own thinking, reflections on how to improve those operations. And

then on the other hand, shocks that are sort of generally globally happening and then with a time lag affecting the UN's capabilities and capacities to actually engage. And so you've mentioned the Arab Spring, 9/11, as moments where there was a global shock happening, the financial crisis is another, that had an effect on the operations of the United Nations, needing to rethink perhaps change its engagements to the extent that operations were newly constrained in different ways.

You mentioned budgetary constraints as a result of the financial crisis. Can you maybe think of an example of a sort of concrete moment in your experience, how that actually changed constraints or sort of leeway in operational considerations?

00:13:48 RD
Yeah. So, let's take the financial crisis first of 2008. To some extent, it appeared initially to respond and to confirm the approach that UN peacekeeping, the doctrinal approach UN peacekeeping had been taking about the importance of tackling root causes about issues around preventing conflicts before they happen, about economic deprivation being a long-term cause of instability that could lead to major armed conflict. So, to some extent, I think the UN peacekeeping, and it was right around that time in 2008 that the first attempt to publicly communicate the UN peacekeeping doctrine, the so-called Capstone Project, came out. So, there was almost a sense of, see, we've been telling you these things, that issues around deprivation, issues around significant human need have destabilizing effects, including the threat of conflict. And the UN must respond to that, and also the Security Council member states must respond.

So, to some extent, it was seen as a “we were right” at the moment. As the fallout of the budgets started to impact UN peacekeeping, you started to get much greater scrutiny from about 2012-13 on the part of member states and the part of General Assembly financial and budgetary bodies as to how large peacekeeping operations should be, what should be a component of them. And that had interesting implications around debates around civil affairs activities, issues around how large should a human rights component be, functions that might be considered protection of civilians type functions. Those functions in mandates and in mission plans became much harder to defend. And while you tended, I can recall, for example, defending a budget for the mission in Mali at one point and having a huge expenditure item around infrastructure and projects for accommodation for large troops and significant outsourcing of huge contracts for the construction of camps. That sailed through, I think it was something in the region of over 9 million, without even a look, a second look.

But calling for the idea of a driver and one protection of civilians affairs officer with particular focus on child protection became a source of huge contention and almost held up the budget from refusing. So it wasn't even in the scope, but it was the idea of “what can we trim down?” And then, of course, that entered into the whole debate that you saw, that increasing tension between states about concepts of sovereignty versus human rights versus to how invasive, let's say, or intrusive should UN peacekeeping be. So, I think that was an example.

Another example, I would say, that became particularly notable after the arrival of the Trump administration and its decision to not pay its 28 percent stake. That led to a shortfall, obviously, but it also led the Security Council to start to demand a significant review of every peacekeeping operation. So rather than just renew mandates as a sort matter of course, as an annual, the council started to demand significant reviews. And I can remember going to Lebanon in 2017 to review the UN peacekeeping operation there as part of a multidimensional team. And I was trying to understand what were the sources that we were looking at, because there was no particular election hadn't happened. There hadn't been a – we were not sort of at a point of inflection when you review a mission plan and its priorities. The particular source of irritation on the part of the member state concerned, in this case U.S., had been the idea somehow that they'd come to see from seeing literature of the UN mission, just being distributed magazines, that peacekeepers were just spending money on these so-called quick impact projects.

Quick impact projects were small portions of money that were given to troops, contingents, so that they could spend some money in terms of building relationships with the communities. And then, this particular instance, it was pictures of Italian forces making pizzas part of a, engagement with the local community. And this was considered indicative of the wastage and the crisis that UN peacekeeping had. So, I felt that one of the implications of that, practically, were that we all became entirely shrinking down our perspective on micro-details and micro-budgets and micro-activities at a time when a much broader challenge was beginning to happen, which is to what extent are UN peacekeeping operations having effective change? To what extent are they delivering on their mandates? What are these, some broader trends that are happening around them in their regions, in a region like Lebanon, with Syria, with the inflow of refugees, or in the case of Mali, with a much broader regional crisis? It became much harder to address those questions.

And I recall that in 2016 to about 2018, the debate almost centered entirely on sexual exploitations and abuse issues, so issues around the conduct of peacekeepers and issues around the costs of the wastage of UN peacekeeping. And while I don't dispute that those issues aren't important, I felt that we missed an important opportunity to assess, to measure, and to begin a conversation of what was working and what was not. And I think we saw that crisis play out in the last few years in the Sahel particularly, but also in the Congo.

00:19:40 JE
Right. So, you've given us a lot of insight on how different kinds of shocks with some kind of time lag affected the capabilities of UN peacekeeping forces, but also just simply very practical kinds of constraints. Would you say that, I mean, thinking back to the moments you just were telling us about, do you think that there were moments where some of these shocks also presented opportunities for the UN peacekeeping forces precisely to innovate its operations?

00:20:08 RD
Yeah, undoubtedly. Let's take the situation of the Arab Spring. So, I deployed to Syria in 2012 as part of a very short-lived temporary military ceasefire observation mission from

about May to August 2012. I think what I find very interesting about that was it revealed to me a couple of things. First, there was analysis on the ground by UN actors, and in particular by UN development actors and humanitarian actors, about the potential for crisis in that country. And that was coming from about 2010, '11. You saw, for example, UNDP's Human Development Report, WFP warning that the harvest had not been good for a series of years, warnings of food crisis, warnings of the lack of economic opportunities for young people throughout Maghreb, but I'm talking specifically about Syria, and also a trend to watch the significant speed of urbanization in that country and the tensions that was producing between urban and rural, together with the Assad government's economic policies that saw a move away from the subsidies that his father had provided to rural communities in terms of bread, sugar, certain raw basic materials and basic goods.

So, I found that very interesting because that was a real opportunity, we felt, to try to shape the narrative from the debate in the Security Council. So I recall that a lot of our cables and reporting, where we had our mandate to report every two weeks to the Security Council, it was a very contentious operation, where we were trying to draw attention to societal pressures, to longer-term issues, to tensions in and around us specifically, and in particular, governance, social and economic challenges. At the time, however, there was a strong narrative that we were not going to, you know, that this was about internationalized civil tensions. You had Russia and U.S. opposing views. You had the Western tensions around with the Assad regime ever since the assassination of Hariri in Lebanon. And so, as a consequence of sort of not much interest in assessing these.

But one factor that I do think the development that the Arab Spring drove for the UN was really a consideration of, do we have across the system analysis, but we're not bringing it to play collectively together? And it drove quite a bit of thinking about how to get better integration of analysis. And that was led under the centralized in the Executive Office of the Secretary General to start to have much more shared analysis and more thinking so that political responses are informed by these longer-term trends that other parts of the House, and in particular development and humanitarian actors, were spotting. So, it did lead to beginning to think about much more system-wide analysis. It also revealed, and I don't think it's answered this problem, that the way that peace operations are designed and crisis response are designed is not sufficient for the locations in the territory.

So, we observe the territorial boundaries of the countries we're operating in. There's a strong emphasis on national mandate, whole state authority. But some of the problems we were grappling with went over borders and were much more regional in application or even global in application. So, there was a sense that how can we start to have, understand a crisis, a conflict or a crisis, a humanitarian crisis, or usually both, in a broader context, in understanding the regional dynamics, having much more exchange between UN country teams and different adjacent countries, much more perhaps regional pooling of information.

That has remained very sensitive, and it's very sensitive for peacekeeping, in particular because countries surrounding UN peacekeeping don't want foreign troops on their

territory, are concerned about issues about intelligence, and so that has been very slow to be taken up in peacekeeping, but it did lead inside the system, much more thinking about how do we understand the different parts of the house, how do we pool information, and then how do we think regionally. And then I would say, for example, Mali and the inflow of weapons, the inflow, the smuggling, the drugs across the border from across the Sahel and into Mali and then down in Niger and Burkina Faso, led to a lot of thinking about: to what extent were UN peacekeeping operations blind, blind in their information, lack of intelligence capacity, lack of information gathering, lack of ability to have any sense of what's happening to them? And therefore, how do you undertake your responsibilities, both to keep troops safe, but more even as important, protect civilians, that is part of your mandate, if you don't have any anticipatory capacities?

That led to quite a bit of thinking on experimenting with the development of the first UN peacekeeping intelligence policy. And I worked on that policy, which was trying to build a case that UN peacekeepers had to have the ability to gather information, to even just understand immediate threats. It led to the use of, in some contexts, such as Congo drones, used by the UN, of drones to gather aerial information. And it led to the deployment of specialized assets in the case of Mali from NATO intelligence capacity in the mission and integrated it within MINUSMA. So, I think it had to be navigated primarily through the issue of force protection. The most convincing argument we could [think of] to yield change was really making the case with troop and police contributing states that it's your people that are being killed, it's your forces, less the protection of civilians argument.

But it had important consequences for leading to a much more notion [sic] of what is this much more complex environments we're working in, where you cannot assume boundaries are the conflict ends and how do we think about navigating ourselves to operate in such environments?

00:26:29 JE
Very interesting. So, there's a specific initiative to kind of innovate peacekeeping practices. And you mentioned intelligence gathering is one of the things that you pushed for in particular. I'm curious, since very often when there's reporting on peacekeeping in the news and there's public debates about abuses or performance or how are they doing, is it worth staying in this particular conflict or not, people tend to be quick to draw historical analogies with other peacekeeping missions that may have failed or comparing them to further back moments where some kind of international intervention was sort of not working out well or particular things were working out well, we should learn from them.

Addressing these difficult, protracted questions that you just mentioned and intelligence gathering being sort of one kind of answer in the UN system within these conversations, are historical analogies drawn as well, or is that a background thing?

00:27:18 RD

Well, yes, we're drawing obviously on our experience from the past, but not necessarily explicitly. I think it's short-term history, but lack of long-term history. So, I would say that, and that's a phenomenon all over the world. You play your last game, so they fight the last battle. But there was a terrible tendency, and there still is a struggle, I think, to cookie cut, to design missions, and particularly in the period where there were a significant number of missions. You recall like that whole growth area from about 2005, 7, right up until 2014, where you had the deployment of large, big, multi-dimensional missions with a certain set of units. They all would have this amount, more or less, these types of military capacities, more or less these types of police capacities, more or less these types of civilian capacities. And so, I think that tendency to reproduce in a rather short-termism has not been helpful in all contexts.

And I will give you an example. The MINUSMA mission in Mali, right, in 2013-14. It took over from the ECOWAS mission, from the West African Regional Organization mission. That itself was a historical analogy to Liberia, back to the days of Liberia and Sierra Leone. The idea, the regional organization goes in first because they're fast, and then this more bigger, more capacitated operation follows. But the operations that followed first, it was just simply in many cases a rehatting. You know, you took off your ECOWAS beret and you put on your blue beret.

But a failure to really think about what a much more hostile and much, much more austere mission that was, and much more austere in terms of the scale, the size of the country, the lack of water, the lack of infrastructure, just even just thinking about how troops would work, operate, and engage, did not benefit from historical analogies and modeling on other contexts, perhaps like South Sudan, perhaps like MONUSCO.

On the whole, I've tended to think that some of the historical analogies are not helpful. And so let's take, for example, Libya in 2011-12. There was, I think, by the proponents of protection of civilians, some false conclusions or analogies made with the Kosovo scenario. So we were going to avoid a potential significant threat to protection of civilians by supporting a NATO-led intervention. And that was itself begged questions to the extent, the scale of the threat, certainly at a rhetorical level and in some cases actions Gaddafi did unleash forces at Libyan protesters. But it did build this sort of idea that you could get in fast. You could have a NATO-led, primarily an aerial mission, and it would be quick.

So that's, I think, an example of a historical analogy that might be a bit skewed. And then this idea that the lessons of Rwanda and Srebrenica meant that you had to drive a response quickly when civilians were under imminent threat of danger. I think the problem with that is that it drove this idea of never-ending peace operations, because there was always, or there's quite often, a set of civilians under threat and under imminent threat of violence. And distressing as that is, there's a sort of an infinite perpetuity of UN crisis intervention that there simply isn't the political will, nor even the operational material capacity to respond to at all times.

And in the case, then, of Libya, I was also struck with the historical analogy, one of the analogies, the historical lessons that were drawn, was that Libyans remember the UN positively from its experiences of decolonization in the immediate period after World

War II. Therefore, they will be favorably disposed to the United Nations because there's a sort of a historical mindset appreciation to the UN. And while I don't know enough about Libya to say if that's indeed true or not, I think one always needs to be very careful as an outside actor about how the extent to which any domestic population feels good about any set of actors, regardless of their statements, wills, or dispositions, and I think that's when historical analogies are drawn or badly drawn, and then I … I think maybe sometimes then there's a tendency in the UN to be too short of memory.

So, you look to the last experience. So, in Libya, it was like, we need to move away from these large, heavy, multi-dimensional peacekeeping forces. They're intrusive, they upset the population, and they're difficult to sustain. So, the argument was we're going to go for a light, quick political mission, much more engaging and working with Libyan actors. But there was a case to be made that a significant large-scale presence of military forces could have prevented possibly the scale of arms that moved out of Libya, both the finding of caches, large caches of arms, and their transportation to various parts of Africa. And there was an argument to be made that if there had been a deployment very quickly like in a sort of East Timor context, perhaps under UN leadership, it would have had to have been under UN blue helmets.

But could that have done a better job to sort of navigate the profusion of weapons that were freely passing? Perhaps not. But I think that's an example that I would make of a tendency to look at the immediate past, but perhaps not a tendency to look at a longer past. And when we think about the Congo and the failures of the mission in the 1960s, I often think about when people say, oh, this new phase of stabilization missions, you think, yes, but the historic analogy goes right back to the 1960s.

So, historical analogies, on the whole, tend not to be drawn too much. They tend to be quite short-term. And I'm not sure they're always effective because they're very externally focused and based on how we understood the issue as opposed to a deep reading and analysis of the country or the conflict in question.

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So, it sounds like what you're saying is there are two kinds of ways in which analogies play a role in this context. On the one hand, we've got within the United Nations system conversations where analogies are being drawn in the sense of short-term comparisons, and you're saying many of them are too short-term and don't really go back far enough in order to actually draw more complex lessons maybe.

On the other hand, we've got public conversations where historical analogies are sort of used every now and then and sometimes very spontaneously and maybe not with too much detail. And there you're saying that some of those historical analogies tend to sort of break down particular past conflicts to single lessons or maybe just one or two lessons and then plugged into a recommendation for this is how UN peacekeeping should be run if we want to avoid another Rwanda or Srebrenica, and that can be reductive as well in a different way.

00:34:23 RD

I think that's true. I mean, often they're a confirmation of bias.

00:34:26 JE
Right, yeah.

00:34:27 RD
But in fairness, I think you also have to recognize the nature of the decision-making around a UN peacekeeping operation is quite constrained. So, you have a Security Council deciding to take the matter up an agenda, usually instructing the Secretary General to come back with options. That's often quite time-limited, that phase of fact-finding, let's say, that can take place. And then you have the attempt to try to get a mandate agreed.

And as you know, well, as a scholar of IR, that's as much a reflection of understanding where the powers on the council are in terms of what understanding they have of the crisis in question, what are they prepared to accept, what do they care less about. And so, there's a real pressure, including and in particular in the council, to use the standard language from Chapter VII, to use the standard language for protection of civilians, because that's just easier to negotiate. You can appeal to precedent, as opposed to [inaudible] nuance. That led in [sic] the 2015 report, the High-Level Independent Panel for Peace Operations for reform of peace operations, tried to talk about a two-phase, or tried to propose a two-phase planning phase that recognized that because of a crisis, the Security Council needs to act relatively quickly, and a mission may have to deploy. But could the mission build some time, could it deploy with a relatively rudimentary mandate, and then come back after a period of time on the ground, two, three months, with more comprehensive reports and having studied the situation, having spoken with lots of interlocutors on the ground, this is where we think we need to put the bulk of our effort resources.

A similar debate is underway at the moment on development assistance in crisis, whether you can sort of do a two-phase approach. So you acknowledge the emergency, but you recognize that any big, long, significant planning assumptions that you might make could be flawed and need to be tested. And could you do therefore a quick and dirty followed by a more comprehensive review?

00:36:23 JE
Let's go back to Mali for just a second. Since we're talking about lessons being drawn, what's the bottom line of a particular operation, of a particular mission? How do we learn from that in order to deploy missions more effectively in the future? Of course, in the case of Mali, what's on the horizon is withdrawal despite ongoing tensions. We know that in 2013-14, the UN launched its MINUSMA mission. Since then, however, more Malians have joined insurgent groups. Fatalities have increased. Over 300 MINUSMA personnel have been killed. And I think only UNIFIL in Lebanon has been more fatal to peacekeepers. And the mandate has run out. The UK and Sweden have already pulled out early. France suspended its own counter-terrorism operations.

So, it looks like another case of withdrawal despite ongoing tensions. And perhaps there are signs of change or signs of the UN learning from this. But I'm wondering what your perspective on that is. Are lessons already being drawn? How does this work? Is there an ongoing conversation trying to sort of already evaluate Mali? Are there signs that ... that the UN is trying to reform based on that kind of experience?

00:37:29 RD
Well, I can't say speak to what are the current debates in UN peace scheme because [of] not being there. But let me say just a couple of things. I think Mali was a chronicle of a death foretold for many in the UN. It was one of the most contentious missions to set up. It was highly divisive inside the UN system. And the debates were, at the time, exactly around the issues that have continued to plague the operation and plague the situation, which is, is there a peace to keep? Are the peacekeeping operations there for a purpose of facilitating, enabling, and supporting an agreement between warring parties? Or are we there to assist a legitimately elected state, defeat militarily threat?

There were many who felt that even if the latter was the case, that the Malian state faced an existential threat, and you must remember, of course, in 2012, it really was a crisis situation in Timbuktu with significant human impact. The sense was that the instrument to apply was not a peacekeeping operation, but rather a special political mission, a political effort to try to explore what the scope for some sort of politically negotiated solution was possible. And of course, you had a long, long-standing tension between the Tuareg communities and populations in the North. You had an ethnic tension. You had groups of people feeling that the central state had failed them and wanting alternatives to a Bamako-led regime and system of governance.

That debate was really bitter inside the UN. And some of it was inter-bureaucratic concerns, was which department leads political missions and which department leads peacekeeping. But I think it really stemmed from a fundamental concern that UN peacekeepers were being deployed in a context and to an environment for which the instrument was not designed. As a consequence of that tension, it never amassed, I would say, the full support of perhaps the full all hands joining together of the mission.

I think there were some humanitarian entities that had some concerns about how close they wanted to be to the UN peacekeepers. The UN peacekeeping operation was a vehicle for human rights presence and office and engagement, but that human rights tension often came into conflict with the military and police sort of perception of themselves trying to help a state under threat from various armed groups, independence-seeking and/or with more criminal agendas. And the blurring of those agendas was very difficult. So, I would say that Mali was an example of a place where there was a lot of “I told you so, I told you so,” all the time.

And we found it extremely difficult, I say that as leading a headquarters team, an integrated team, military, police, civilian, just to really sort of get that sense of buy-in and support across the house at various points, including amongst the member states, as well as different departments. It was also formidably challenging in terms of a terrain. And it does raise something that people have written about, which is can

peacekeeping deploy to large countries? And it's something that even not just UN peacekeepers, but large US or country-led coalitions have had to consider as well.

So, you had just even the austerity of the environment and the scale of distance really a challenge. So, I would say the lessons are being learned, but the nature of UN peacekeeping is it's quite good at micro lessons as it goes along. So, there's a lot of lesson learning of particular instances – how did this use of intelligence, how does this, … – a lot of work done to try to do force protection, to provide training to troops, to help them to do demining. There's a lot of sort of lessons of these that can be applied in many peacekeeping perhaps, but perhaps the bigger question, which is: should peacekeeping operations be deployed in support of a whole state with an effort to militarily defeat its enemies? Is that an appropriate use of the UN peacekeeping instrument? Can it do that effectively? And if not, what is the role for UN peacekeeping in conflicts such as that in Mali? I think is the macro questions that are harder to engage.

There's a little bit of a tendency in the organization sometimes to sort of take comfort or solace from the fact, well, this is about the lack of political will amongst the member states, and specifically the P5, and were they to be united, as we have all these cases of success, let's say Liberia, when united, when engaged. But I think that's a slight bit facile and superficial an explanation right now, because arguably, up until the coup in Mali, there was relative consensus on the part of the Security Council. And as states who are quite protective of state sovereignty and protective of territory and found common cause in counterterrorism for many, many years after 9/11, it represented a relative area of agreement where the tension was what was the expectations of the mission vis-a-vis holding the state accountable for its behavior.

So, the tensions that happened on the Security Council and the tensions that happened on the ground were very much centered around human rights allegations of abuses by Malian forces, by issues around governance challenge. I remember how difficult it was for launching governance discussions in the Security Council. This, after two decades of discussions of root causes, governance being so critical to a conflict, that came much more belatedly onto the agenda on Mali.

00:43:32 JE
Right. So, talking about effectiveness and how to evaluate how effective a peace operation is, obviously gets us to this question of – if we want to know how effective the solution is, we also need to make sure that we understand the problem as well as possible. And you've already mentioned intelligence is one way of doing that, getting as close to what's really going on the ground as possible in order to tailor responses to that. And we've talked about your experience and how UN peace operations deal with emergencies on the ground, how that's changed over time.

I'd be keen to zoom out a little bit and hear from your side what you think about how the perception of crises works in the context of UN peace operations. Is there a stage where there is an opportunity to make sure we're really fully understanding what the root problem is, we can really tailor our response to that? Or is there a

cookie cutter response of something as a crisis: here are a couple of standard responses that we're going to pursue and then see whether they were effective?

00:44:27 RD
I think I worked for in 2018 in the preparation of the first UN-World Bank joint study on conflict prevention. It was called Pathways to Peace. The Bank, being an institution full of PhDs and economists, brought a rigor that was very helpful and not as common, let's say, in the UN, to the analysis of: is the problem an information one? Is it an information and analysis gap? Is that what we have? And I think they confirmed something that I've always been struck by, which is, we tend to have a lot of information, and we tend to have good analysis, and especially these efforts that I think have progressed significantly in the UN to try to bring together the various pictures from the political, the humanitarian development actors, aided by significant failures, for example, in Sri Lanka that led to much more of a thinking about how do you identify risks early, how do you get early warning.

But it's come up against two problems. One is a political problem, and one is perhaps more of a kind of structural problem. The political problem is that member states remain enormously cautious and reticent around early warning. And that's as much about feeling that it could be misused against them, but it sort of ties the hands of actors in the secretariat to think about conflict threats, both in longer term as well as in medium term. And so that lack of political willingness, not just in the Security Council, but also amongst regional partners, and then also even amongst national actors, has made it very difficult for the U.N., even if there was a concerted effort, to really tackle analysis issues, and specifically how to get early warning up the chain, understood, assessed, analyzed, and out. So that's the political concern, and that's not new, and that will only get worse, I think, as a consequence of what's happening, you know, in terms of Security Council tensions and paralysis more broadly.

The structural challenge, and this really came through in the World Bank UN study, which is one can be very good at listing all the factors that could lead to instability, but it's very hard to identify any specific trigger. You had all of the factors that you acknowledged in the Arab Spring, but the immolation by one man in protest of a fruit seller in Tunisia was not anticipated. I find that there is the structural challenge of you list all the sort of challenge, you have a fairly good insight, but it's still very hard to predict crises and particularly hard to predict response. And that, I think, remains a structural problem that we haven't really come to terms with. And the difficulty about that is you're then always reacting to the trigger point when it happens. And depending where the trigger point happens, that leads to a different set of political discussions with member states, a different set of negotiations and bargaining in terms of how you respond and what is required. And I think that remains a significant problem.

00:47:38 JE
If we think about better prediction and the need for really understanding a crisis across its different dimensions, we've already talked a little bit about how crisis management can be very reduced to a particular domain, a particular issue – or it can be very comprehensive. And there's, of course, a scale depending on what exactly the conflict at hand is about and so on. There are calls for a more

comprehensive approach to crisis management across different sectors. And of course, it's a question of whether we've really advanced in that direction or whether that's an ongoing debate. But my question is, how have UN peacekeeping operations in practice depended on coordinating with other actors, other organizations? And might that be sort of one way of thinking about better understanding crises?

00:48:24 RD
I'd just caution us, Jan, from thinking that the challenges that peacekeeping faces is simply an information problem. I mean, the assumption is that if we had a true understanding of what's really driving a conflict in country X or Y or region Z, we could then design the tools to come back with that. And I don't think that's the case. And I don't think that's the case for lots of reasons, including what are the dominant ideas at any one time around which there's consensus by major powers. That, I think, is the crisis that we should talk about a little bit.

But you are seeing a proliferation of crisis management actors. And that has been taking place effectively since the end of the Cold War. And if you think about the EU and the early days in the Balkans, and then, of course, the decision to take on crisis management and military and civilian perspectives. You have the African Union in 2005, you have obviously ECOWAS, you have many sub-regional organizations, and then of course you have private mediation entities happening.

In some respects, the plurality is good because it potentially gives you a more range of options, right? It gives actors on the ground, it gives host authorities, or it gives warning parties options to engage with, with a range of actors, and that is potentially very good. The problem is understanding and coordinating the plurality of initiatives. And I think, for example, if you see today in the case of Sudan, or if you look at Ukraine, or even if you think about Libya, where you have a plurality of mediation initiatives, you have different people coming in and out of town, all of them declaring that they're bringing with them a peace proposal.

And that inability to work together, that multiplicity, that can allow warring parties to trade, to bargain, to negotiate a little bit, play them off each other. It can also result in a dispersal of effort and resources. And it certainly leads warring parties to feel that the pressure imposed by external actors on them bringing their conflict to an end, and thinking here about Libya. The jury is out, but so far I'm thinking that if you look at the case of mediation, if you think that take the Horn of Africa, if you take Libya, and to some extent if you take Ukraine even, the plurality of mediating offers, initiatives, and actors has not helped any of those conflicts in the resolution. If anything, it's just led to reinforcement of the protracting sides.

And if you think about Syria, you're effectively no longer talking about civil conflicts, you're talking about internationalized civil conflicts that to all extent and purpose services look like interstate war with via proxies. And I think that's a factor that has been done. The second dimension is even when you have agreement, and you've had various instances of this in UNMISS in the South Sudan, in West Africa where you have a hierarchy and where a UN special envoy works quite closely with a regional

organization, the envoy. There was an attempt for that in the Balkans too. You saw that in Syria when you had the UN and the League of Arab States working together.

That coordination is challenging, sometimes because the same party, the same government state will take different positions in each organization. So, in Libya, again, we saw even the African Union taking a different stand than the League of Arab States, of which many of the state party's members were the same. So, I think it can lead to quite difficult coordination and a huge amount of effort gets spent on coordination. And if I think about my time in Afghanistan, I think a huge part of that fault was we spent so much time negotiating with all the international actors on the ground there that there was very little time spent talking and thinking and engaging with Afghans and some of the forces and actors. So, I think there is that.

Then there's an issue, I think, of the lessons of regional organizations. So, we have a multiplicity of partners on the ground and getting involved in crisis management. But I do think there's been a sobering experience in the last 10 years for regional organizations in crisis management, where some of the assumptions and I worked in the EU for the planning of its first EU mission in Bosnia. And there, there was a lot of confidence that we're going to do better than the UN because we're European and we know this country and we're organized and we have resources and training, et cetera.

Well, the EU found itself facing many of the same issues in Bosnia and other questions, questions about whole state engagement, questions about impartiality, questions about how to affect change, questions about how to build trust between parties. And I think the AU has grappled also in Somalia. You've seen some of those tensions, ECOWAS. And if you look at the mini-lateral initiative in the Sahel, the G5, have really struggled to equip themselves financing.

So, I think there's been a sobering moment of truth for the idea that it's not an either-or. And we're seeing the debate move less around division of labor, here's where regional organizations are better placed, here's where the UN [is]. So, some broader, I think, questioning of, are we using the right tools? Are the crisis management solutions that we're proposing the right ones and the effective ones for these sorts of protracted complex conflicts based on the liberal institutional model that was that peacekeeping dominated and that it in turn has shaped doctrines of regional organizations?

So, I see that this plurality of organizations in crisis management today, both a reflection of competing ideas, but also a reflection of that there's a wider missing answer, right? That there's no one actor. And so you're seeing now more mini-lateral initiatives, which may be based on more interest-based, more limited, and a return to more minimal concept of containing a conflict, containing the worst of its regional spillover, the worst of its humanitarian impacts, rather than thinking about a comprehensive vision for resolution and long-term stabilization and peacebuilding that perhaps we had in the period after the Cold War.

00:54:38 JE
We're nearing the end of our time, so I want to just zoom out a little bit further. And you've mentioned geopolitical tangents already, power politics playing obviously a

role in terms of decisions about what missions are actually going to be carried out, which missions aren't, what is possible. And of course, what we're seeing right now is a whole lot of geopolitical tangents, especially among the great powers sitting on the Security Council. And all of this making matters more difficult, as it seems, for most international organizations.

And we've had at the General Assembly in September 2023, Secretary General Guterres warning that the world is becoming "unhinged" while global governance is no longer "fit for purpose". How are UN peacekeeping operations practically affected by these kinds of great power shifts? Would you say that's a sort of an uncertain constraint that UN peacekeeping has to live with? Or can peacekeeping operations change in order to adapt to that more easily? Is that a possibility?

00:55:36 RD
What I would say is, first, that the tensions you see in the Security Council since 2022 and the full-scale invasion by Russia of Ukraine, those tensions were obvious since 2011 in Libya and the reaction of Russia and China and other states to what they saw as protection of civilians mission becoming a regime change operation. And that has played out in Syria. It's played out in all the other missions. It's played out in issues about pushback on human rights. So, I think peacekeeping has been grappling with this reality for 10 years. And it is not new for peacekeeping. Peacekeeping doesn't find itself in a global crisis since, I think, 2020 and COVID and the turbulence of that area. I think peacekeepers have been grappling with this eroding consensus since at least 2011.

Now, what does that mean and how has peacekeeping responded to that? I think you've seen, therefore, you've seen no new peacekeeping operations since 2014, no new peacekeeping operations. The operations that you see that are being launched are political missions. And in the case of Haiti just these past recent days, you've seen the deployment of a Kenyan-led police force in support of the government of the state of Haiti to navigate the challenge, the violent challenge of gangs, of armed gangs. You've seen the Security Council recognize that – Kenya demanded that, even if it wasn't fully necessary. But you are not even working through the UN, nor are you working through a significant coalition force.

So, we're going to be in this period of retrenchment for quite some time. We have MINUSMA closing, calls for MONUSCO to close down. So, things aren't looking great, and I think we will have this period of retrenchment. You've seen peacekeeping try to respond to that political tension by focusing a lot on what I talked about before, the performance issues, equipment issues, the management issues, the navigation of abuse and accountability strengthening. So, I see that trend continuing for quite some time. And I don't see it only about the P5 and the consensus between Russia, the United States, China, and others. I really see that as also that bigger debate about sovereignty versus a more intrusive and inclusive sense of what type of model of states and human rights and order that we have, that pushback is happening as much from states in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere as it is on the council.

So, you've seen, for example, Ethiopia and the Tigray conflict, just seeing how difficult it was to even bring that on to the Security Council, despite the fact that 700,000 people

died in that conflict in 18 months. So, I think peacekeeping is going to try to do what it did during the Cold War, which is to lay low, have a narrower agenda, be relatively effective at seeking what it is. Where I think it might also wish to look is looking at much more modular type activities. Can a UN peacekeeping, can the UN secretary provide specific areas of assistance in conflict scenarios, whether it might be specific bespoke security sector reform support, whether it might be specific election management support at request or agreement of parties, that it might need to look at a more agile ability to come in rather than the large multi-dimensional mission or the single military ceasefire observation. There's got to be some of the models between those two. Can it demonstrate that, I think, will be a big question.

And then the other aspect is perhaps that's actually going to drive more emphasis on partnership and working with regional actors to build that legitimacy in that sense that that global governance framework still has relevance and value and added benefit for regional actors to do things, maybe bring capacities to support strengthening of their own initiatives and structures that without which they couldn't manage.

00:59:47 JE
How can peacekeeping operations learn from past experiences, past shocks, past crises, to improve preparedness for the future?

00:59:56 RD
I would encourage thinking about waves and trends. I think it would be good to have a reflection on the impact of the shock of 9/11 on international crisis management, because it inexorably moved the debate on international crisis management away from what had been a focus on inter-ethnic tensions, or hopeful on civil conflicts, on emerging protection of civilians, to the idea of threats from armed groups, threats from extremism, and an attempt to try to look at stabilization and a model.

We're in a post-counterterrorist moment in international crisis management, but we haven't yet figured out what moment we're in. And I think that would be quite interesting, so that the assumption isn't, well, this is what the peacekeeping model is, but maybe a reflection on what we were doing, why we intervened, how we intervened, and where we intervened, rethink that a bit or unpack that from that counter-terrorism lens, I think could be helpful.

The other area is that it's not just a crisis for UN peacekeeping, Jan. There is a broader crisis for crisis management. I refer to it with regional organizations having had also their own sort of difficult experiences learning with crisis management response. But the shock, too, of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan and the fall of Afghanistan in August 2021 is also a shock that needs some reflection on. Because what I think it showed us is that even the most powerful states, even the most resourced interventions, even the most consensus-based, at least in the initial years, of Afghanistan, as opposed to Iraq, failed to sow the seeds of some form of what you might call stable democratic accountable order.

And I think that would lead to more significant rethinking of the liberal institutional project. What are the states we're trying to build? Are we trying to build states? What's

the requisite of state functionality and legitimacy that we're trying to support as outside actors, I think is one that we really need to look at. And then the final point I would say is, I think collectively we need to have a response to crisis management where the drivers are not necessarily a political agenda. And here I'm thinking, how do most people die today outside of significant large wars like Ethiopia recently, Ukraine today, most of people die in countries like Mexico and in Venezuela, if you look at violent deaths, I'm talking about violent deaths now, and they're in non-wars scenarios, but scenarios that look and feel a lot like war in terms of violence and in terms of threats to civilians. We have very little tools to even think about that, very little tools to even think about addressing it.

So it gets back to the question of how do we understand, and even in Mali or Central African Republic, how do we understand when the assumptions we've been making about peacemaking and peacebuilding have centered around political agendas and power sharing, where that may not even be the agenda, where the agenda might be a difference about economics, about greed. We've had the greed and grievance debate for many years. It would behoove us, I think, to think a little bit about some of the instruments that we might need to think about responding to why conflicts are quite as protracted as they are today.

01:03:24 JE
Well, lots to reflect on. I've certainly learned a great deal in our conversation. Thank you so much. You've been very generous with your time, and it's been a wonderful conversation. Thank you.

01:03:34 RD
Thank you, Jan.