

# Strategic Summary

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Overviews of international engagement in conflict-affected states typically focus on military peacekeeping and the economics of post-conflict peacebuilding. This excludes an array of primarily civilian missions deployed by the United Nations (UN) as well as other multilateral institutions in countries and regions that are at risk of, experiencing or emerging from violence. The hallmark of these missions is *political* engagement with governments, parties and civil society aimed at averting, mitigating or stopping conflict.

There is not even a satisfactory collective term for these mechanisms. This volume's title nods to the phrase "Special Political Missions" used by the UN, but this is a budgetary category. It also covers the "field presences" of the Organization of the Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and a variety of "offices" and "centers" launched by other organizations. Such titles give very little idea of what these missions really *do*.

Yet, as this volume shows, they are doing a great deal. Over fifty active missions (and some that have closed in the last one to two years) are described in the pages that follow.

They include the UN's assistance missions in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as a variety of OSCE and European Union (EU) presences in the Balkans, but are spread as far apart as Belize and Nepal. They range in size from a handful of staff to operations involving hundreds of international and locally-employed personnel. Some have clear mandates to guide and sustain mediation processes (such as the UN's long-running efforts to make peace in Somalia). Others are tasked with *indirectly* contributing to stable and sustainable politics such as promoting good governance, justice or security sector reform.

The majority of missions we cover focus on individual countries, although there are a small number of regional offices and representatives (discussed in the next section). Multilateral political missions dealing primarily with bilateral conflicts are very rare, reflecting the general trend by international organizations to focus on internal conflicts.

Most current political missions are in states that have experienced serious conflict (like Bosnia and Herzegovina) or narrowly avoided it (like the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Kenya). Some are in countries experiencing ongoing combat (such as Iraq) or going through escalations in violence (from Afghanistan to the Central African Republic and Kyrgyzstan). Few missions play a purely preventive role, but many are

### Drawing parameters

In spite using a broad definition of "political missions," we have still had to exclude some potential candidates from the volume. These include some small OSCE offices, including those in Zagreb, Minsk and the Ukraine; a significant number of EU delegations (previously European Commission delegations) involved in conflict management; and UN envoys not supported through the Special Political Missions budget. There would have been arguments for including all of these, but we concluded that most of these examples resembled "normal" diplomatic or development presences rather than political missions in our sense. We have also excluded election observer missions and human rights monitoring missions, in spite of their political significance.

involved in efforts to prevent escalations to violence or returns to war after peace deals.<sup>1</sup>

Many political missions exist in a grey area between humanitarian action, human rights monitoring, development work, peacebuilding and traditional diplomacy. Rather than attempt to define its subject-matter narrowly, this volume casts its net broadly. It includes, for example the EU's Special Representatives, envoys who often have very limited staffs – or are even based in Brussels rather than the countries that they deal with.

Does it make sense to treat these operations as a coherent category? As the next section of this summary underlines, clusters of missions have tended to emerge in certain regions for historically specific reasons, such as the web of OSCE presences in the Balkans launched in the later 1990s. Many missions are descended from, or accompaniments to, large peacekeeping operations or military deployments (as in Iraq and Afghanistan).

Yet, for all their differences, the mechanisms this book groups under the headline of political missions do have certain characteristics in common. Ian Johnstone argues that it is even possible to discern the basis for an emerging doctrine for such operations. For the purposes of this overview, however, it is possible to identify three central factors.

- **Political origins:** these missions derive authority from multilateral decision-making in political forums such as the Security Council, the EU Council and OSCE Permanent Council. This distinguishes them from, for example, parallel field presences governed by the UN Development Programme board.
- **Political means:** while many of the missions addressed here conduct humanitarian, economic and other tasks – with associated leverage – they rely on political persuasion as a primary means of achieving their goals. These missions' credibility rests on their relationships with domestic political actors.
- **Political goals:** in spite of the multiplicity of tasks they undertake, the missions share the aim of launching and supporting political processes. This does not preclude focusing on other priorities such as justice and development. But these other goals are pursued in the context of fostering sustainable political settlements.

These are rough criteria, and raise further complications. What, for example, do we mean by a political process? Does it necessarily imply the high-level implementation of a peace agreement, as in the UN operation in Nepal? Or can it also embrace long-term efforts to include minorities in municipal politics, a focus for the OSCE in the Balkans?

Ultimately, this volume does not try to resolve these terminological issues. Instead, it aims to map a variety of missions and learn from their actual activities on the ground. A number of common problems and patterns emerge from this mapping. These suggest that, although hard to define, political missions are a distinct form of multilateral activity – and that they play a greater role in international security than is commonly recognized.

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## MAPPING THE FIELD

However they are defined, political missions are not new. In the post-Cold War period, international organizations have initiated a series of waves of civilian missions in response to evolving political challenges. In the early 1990s, the CSCE (the OSCE's forerunner) deployed a variety of political missions and envoys to post-Soviet states from Estonia to the Ukraine. This generation of operations successfully assisted these countries' transitions from Communism. Having succeeded, they are largely forgotten.

Studying the global map at the beginning of this volume, it is very easy to identify six main clusters of current political missions. It is striking that there are only a few political missions – such as the UN Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) – that fall outside these groupings:

- **The European cluster:** the single largest cluster of political missions remains in the West Balkans and the Black Sea region (including Moldova and the Caucasus). The OSCE still has missions across most of the former Yugoslavia. International civilian offices play an active role in the political development of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo – the heads of these serve as the EU's Special Representatives, as the EU has taken primary responsibility in the area.

- **The Middle Eastern cluster:** the UN maintains political missions in Lebanon and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) is gaining new prominence as US forces gradually leave the country.
- **The Central Asian cluster:** while the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) is among the most widely-known UN operations of any type, there is also a web of smaller political missions across Central Asia. These include a UN regional center and OSCE offices in national capitals. This year's Kyrgyz crisis has brought the difficulties of operating in the wider region into focus.
- **The Central and East African cluster:** the UN has a long-standing political mission dealing with the Somali conflict and missions in the Central African Republic and Burundi. There is a small office in Kenya supporting the African Union-mandated process to resolve the tensions revealed by the 2007 elections.
- **The West African cluster:** in addition to a regional political office based in Senegal, the UN has peacebuilding offices in Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau, while ECOWAS has a network of early warning offices and envoys across the region.
- **The Latin American cluster:** the Organization of American States has sent missions to Colombia, Ecuador, Haiti, and the Guatemala-Belize border.

Reviewing these clusters, certain patterns emerge. The first is the distinction between those regions in which the UN has a primary role in deploying missions (including Africa, Central Asia and the Middle East) and those in which other organizations take the lead (Europe and Latin America). In the African case, it is striking that the African Union has yet to develop sizeable political missions, in contrast to its peacekeeping role.

A second pattern is that, while political missions may be distinct from peacekeeping operations and other military deployments, the two tend to be found alongside each other.

Of the UN political missions covered in this volume, almost two-thirds were deployed to a country at the same time as a peacekeeping or other military operation or to replace one. While fewer

than half of the OSCE's missions deployed in similar circumstances, its larger missions in the Balkans have usually worked alongside peacekeepers.

This degree of overlap matters because, as Ian Johnstone notes in his contribution to this volume, there is an ongoing debate as to whether political missions act as alternatives or adjuncts to large-scale peace operations. The data suggests that in most regions (with the exception of Latin America and Central Asia beyond Afghanistan) military operations still tend to set the strategic framework for political missions. However, this does not have to be the case, as Ian Martin's discussion of the deployment of UNMIN shows.

Martin focuses on the UN Mission in Nepal (UNMIN), which he devised and led. This involved an arms monitoring component but was not a traditional peace operation – its primary identity and purpose was political. In such contexts, political missions can offer an alternative to peacekeeping – similarly, fewer than ten OSCE observers keep watch on large military forces in Nagorno-Karabakh as an alternative to a separation force.

It has been argued that political missions could deploy at earlier notice to avert conflicts altogether, removing the need for peacekeeping. However, examples of effective preventive civilian deployments deployed to countries at risk of conflict remain rare.

It thus seems probable that global trends in the deployment of political missions will continue to be affected by peacekeeping and military trends. The main “growth areas” for political missions appear to be Central and West Africa, in part because of the drawdown of peacekeeping forces there. The withdrawal of Western troops from Iraq and, in time, Afghanistan may well lead to an expansion of the UN's role in both places.

The UN is likely to come under competing pressures to sustain and expand its missions in Africa and the Middle East at the same time, stretching its personnel and resources.

In the meantime, it is probable that the long-running political missions of the European cluster are likely to shrink in the years ahead. Yet caution is required here: as our review of the Balkans notes, past predictions of these missions' demise have proved incorrect. The OSCE still has 2,000 personnel in the field. Two thirds of these are in the Balkans.

The fact that political missions – and, by definition, the problems they address – come in geographical clusters raises the question of whether *regional* political missions might not address the problems more effectively. The UN has experimented with this approach in West Africa and Central Asia, and will soon do so in Central Africa. The OSCE does not have regional missions, but its presences in Central Asia and the Balkans undertake cross-border issues. The EU has appointed a number of regional special representatives.

Regional approaches bring problems – it is hard to draw up mandates that ensure the head of a regional office has all the access he or she needs on a country-by-country basis. However, our reviews suggest that regional approaches may also allow organizations to address cross-border security issues, from trafficking to border security. They may also reduce the financial and managerial pressures of deploying country-specific operations.

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## OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES

Sustaining, financing and managing political missions is a growing challenge for the UN and other organizations. The UN faces particular difficulties staffing its missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, which involve nearly 3000 staff combined or roughly three-quarters of the personnel deployed in UN political missions worldwide (see mission reviews). These two missions account for over half the Special Political Missions budget. However, managerial problems also affect smaller missions and recruitment is a problem for other organizations – 30% of staff posts in EU civilian mission are unfilled. Most OSCE staff come on secondment from member-states, and the organization has found it increasingly difficult to get all the types of personnel it needs in recent years.

Staffing problems are complicated by the fact that the political missions' diverse range of tasks requires staff with a complex variety of skill-sets. While UN political missions employed 166 political affairs officers as of March this year, they also involved 208 personnel with other substantive portfolios (human rights, rule of law, humanitarian affairs and so on) in addition to 646 international support staff and 2,866 nationally employed staff. Of the international support staff, 215 were security

personnel, underlining the expensive challenges of running civilian missions in insecure contexts.

The large numbers of support and security staff underlines the managerial difficulties involved in running these operations – difficulties that also raise questions about oversight and relations with headquarters. This is a particular challenge to the UN, which does not maintain a “support account” for back-stopping political missions as it does for peace operations. This means that the number of headquarters personnel devoted to overseeing the missions is relatively low, potentially reducing the quality of oversight.

In this regard, the OSCE is at an advantage as civilian field presences are its stock-in-trade, and its headquarters better adapted to meeting their needs. However, covering the range of political activities remains a challenge – the OSCE Secretariat is only now developing a mediation capacity, well after the UN set up a Mediation Support Unit. The EU's relations with its Special Representatives are undergoing a more fundamental overhaul in the context of the creation of the new European External Action Service.

A final operational challenge for all organizations deploying political missions is that they rarely operate in isolation from other international agencies. The UN has prioritized integrating its overall presence in countries like Sierra Leone and Burundi under the authority of the heads of the political missions there (see individual mission reviews). This remains a work in progress. Other organizations like the EU and OSCE mandate their representatives and missions to cooperate closely with actors like the World Bank – nonetheless, the case studies in this volume show that the results vary considerably.

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## POLITICAL CHALLENGES

While hampered by operational obstacles, political missions also face a series of political challenges that affect or undercut their core mandates. Although these are country specific, a number of generic problems recur in the case-studies in this volume:

- **Winning consent:** because political missions typically rely on their powers of persuasion to make an impact, they depend very heavily on the consent of host nations. This often

complicates efforts to discuss human rights, even where this part of a mission's explicit mandate, as it risks alienating a government. In some cases, as in Iraq, we note that mission leaders have gained political trust in recent years – in others, such as Burundi, there is frequent friction with the government.

- **Mitigating fundamental political differences:** in many cases, political missions are able to address symptoms of deep political differences, offering frameworks for parties to a conflict to pursue dialogue or implement peace deals. Nonetheless, international missions are rarely able to resolve core political disputes unless there is a pre-existing desire for this to take place. In Kosovo, for example, the status of the former Yugoslav province is unlikely to be resolved by direct action by any of the missions on the ground. For many political missions, therefore, success can be defined in functional terms – creating frameworks for successful political processes – rather than the final goal of sustainable peace.

- **Knowing when to leave:** many of the missions covered in this volume are over a decade old, especially those in Europe. Because political processes are by definition open-ended processes, it is often difficult to close down missions. There is thus a risk that operations will continue beyond their useful lifetime.

In light of these political and operational obstacles, it would be a mistake to over-sell what political missions can achieve – they remain one of the tools available to the international community in addressing conflicts, not a panacea for conflict management.

Nonetheless, this volume shows that they are a diverse tool, and that demand for them is likely to increase. As Ian Martin argues in the opening essay, an awareness that *all* peace operations are political is essential to addressing and ending civil wars. A clearer understanding of what non-military international options can achieve should allow policy-makers to develop more effective responses in future. By mapping current political missions, we hope to inform future planning on crisis prevention and response.

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## NOTES

- 1 A “purely preventive” role involves a mission working to avoid conflict in a country that has experienced little or no actual violence.