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Bouncing Back from Rock Bottom: A New Era for the UN Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations?

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OCTOBER 2020

Executive Summary

The 2020 report of the UN Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations (C-34) marked the culmination of nearly a decade of efforts to improve the committee's working methods and deliver a more relevant report. Because the report was restructured around the eight thematic priorities of the Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) initiative, it also helped translate the initiative's Declaration of Shared Commitments into practice.

But the report's adoption was not just significant due to its restructuring. Reaching agreement on a new substantive report was a noteworthy achievement after 2019, when the committee had failed to reach consensus on a report for the second time in a decade. In the words of many delegates, the committee had "hit rock bottom." Yet this may have been one of the reasons delegations were so open to reform. Failure to reach consensus on a new substantive report in 2019 had diminished the committee's relevance, which was already in question due to its unwieldy working methods and lengthy reports, as well as the growing number of processes informing peacekeeping policy. Delegations were therefore open and willing to discuss reform as a way to reassert the committee's relevance.

Many of the lessons from this reform are specific to the unique characteristics and situation of the C-34 in 2019 and 2020. Yet at the same time, it offers some lessons and principles for other UN reform initiatives. Timing and circumstances matter, there must be an appetite for reform, those leading the reform process must listen and be impartial arbiters, and delegations must be patient and have realistic expectations. The reform of the C-34 did not happen in a year—it took close to a decade of steady engagement by consecutive chairs of the Working Group of the Whole, the Bureau, and member states.

The reforms have not led to desirable outcomes for member states on all of their priority issues. Moreover, not all aspects of the A4P reform agenda were addressed equally and substantively across the report. The bigger challenges for the committee moving forward are likely to be around how to ensure mutual accountability and direct requests at member states, the Secretariat, and other stakeholders. Such changes in approach would further increase the relevance of the C-34 going forward. Nonetheless, by providing clearer and more relevant direction to peacekeeping stakeholders, the C-34's 2020 report is a step in the right direction.

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The views expressed in this publication represent those of the author and not necessarily those of the International Peace Institute. IPI welcomes consideration of a wide range of perspectives in the pursuit of a well-informed debate on critical policies and issues in international affairs.

The author would like to warmly thank the UN officials and member-state representatives to the UN's Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations (C-34) for sharing their insights as part of this project, as well as those individuals who provided feedback on earlier drafts of this report. The author is particularly thankful to the Permanent Mission of Canada to the United Nations in New York, as well as to Jake Sherman from IPI, for their support of the project, as well as to Albert Trithart and Meredith Harris for their exceptional editing skills.

IPI would like to acknowledge its generous donors, whose support makes publications such as this possible. IPI is grateful to the government of Canada for funding this project.

Introduction

On March 12, 2020, the UN General Assembly's Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations (C-34) concluded its annual substantive session, adopting a new report by consensus.¹ The adoption of that report marked a departure from previous years for several reasons. For one, the negotiations concluded a day earlier than scheduled, a rare occurrence in multilateral settings. This rushed timeframe was driven by concern that the negotiations would lose their momentum if the UN closed its headquarters due to the spread of COVID-19 in New York. But perhaps more significantly, the report was notable due to its format and substance: it was both shorter and more clearly structured than previous reports. This marked the culmination of nearly a decade of efforts by the committee to improve its working methods. It also revitalized interest in the work of the committee and its capacity to offer recommendations on peacekeeping policy to the UN Secretariat.

The C-34's 2020 report was a milestone. It was both shorter and more clearly structured than previous reports.

The 2020 report was a milestone, especially when considering that the C-34 had failed to agree on a substantive report in 2019.² There had been expectations among member states moving into the 2019 substantive session that the committee would complement peacekeeping reforms that were underway as part of the Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) initiative. This initiative, which Secretary-General António Guterres launched in March 2018, called on peacekeeping stakeholders to collectively renew their engagement in UN peacekeeping and support efforts to reform it. Following months of consultations with member states, the

secretary-general shared a Declaration of Shared Commitments in August 2018. While there was widespread support for the declaration, which has since been endorsed by more than 150 member states and regional organizations, some member states expressed concern that intergovernmental processes, including those of the C-34, were not driving the A4P process.³ The C-34's 2019 substantive session presented an opportunity to engage the committee in this process. But despite progress in discussions on support to the A4P initiative, a divide over language on support to the African Union (AU) Peace Fund could not be bridged, and the committee adopted a procedural report instead.⁴

It was not the first time the committee has failed to reach consensus. For over a decade, it had been struggling to undertake its work, raising questions about its relevance. Its reports had grown in length, complexity, and opaqueness, and the Secretariat struggled to interpret its recommendations. In the procedural report adopted in 2019, the committee “decided that the Chair would convene an open-ended intersessional Group of Friends of the Chair to consider working methods.”⁵ The Canadian chair of the Working Group of the Whole embarked on several rounds of consultations throughout 2019, with the support of the committee's Bureau, to determine a way past that year's impasse.

This paper sets out to explore the process of reforming the C-34 in 2019 and 2020 to draw lessons for future C-34 sessions and other UN reform processes. First, it examines previous efforts

1 UN General Assembly, *Report of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations, 2020 Substantive Session*, UN Doc. A/74/19, March 20, 2020.

2 The C-34 reached agreement on a procedural report, noting the meetings that had taken place and the election of officers for the Bureau. However, there was no agreement on the report's “proposals, recommendations and conclusions.” See: UN General Assembly, *Report of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations, 2019 Substantive Session*, UN Doc. A/73/19, April 4, 2019.

3 Russia refrained from endorsing certain provisions of the A4P Declaration of Shared Commitments, noting “the key role in defining the parameters of peacekeeping belongs to United Nations intergovernmental bodies, such as the General Assembly, its Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations and the Security Council.” See: *United Nations, Letter Dated 31 August 2018 from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations Addressed to the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. A/72/110–S/2018/815, September 10, 2018. Morocco, in its 2019 statement to the opening session of the C-34 on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) noted, in relation to the A4P initiative, “we strongly call for a C-34 driven process, duly incorporating the existing mechanisms within the Secretariat, in order to avoid any duplication of efforts.” See: Permanent Mission of Morocco to the UN, “Statement on Behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement at the Opening of the 2018 Session of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations,” New York, February 11, 2019.

4 The NAM sought a substantive reference to the AU Peace Fund, which supports the AU's activities on peace and security, including peace support operations. The AU has been seeking the use of UN-assessed funding to support Security Council-authorized AU-led missions, which is opposed by several top financial contributors, particularly the United States.

5 UN General Assembly, *Report of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations, 2019 Substantive Session*, UN Doc. A/73/19, April 4, 2019, para. 14.

to reform the C-34. Second, it explores the process of reaching an agreement to reform the working methods and report structure in 2019. Finally, it assesses the contribution of the report's revised structure and substance to ongoing efforts to support and advance peacekeeping reform. It draws on UN documents, including previous C-34 reports, and virtual interviews with member-state representatives who took part in the 2020 reform process and negotiations, as well as UN officials in the Secretariat.

Outcome versus Process: The Role of the C-34

Intergovernmental processes within the UN system are integral both to the peacekeeping partnership and to the formulation of peacekeeping policy. While the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations (C-34) is one of many intergovernmental bodies involved in peacekeeping policymaking, several member states—including many major troop- and police-contributing countries (T/PCCs)—argue it is the most important. That is because it is the only body that regularly and consistently provides these states the opportunity to engage in and shape peacekeeping policy. Nonetheless, the committee's work is complemented by other intergovernmental bodies in the UN system that have even more influence over the direction and shape of UN peacekeeping, including the UN Security Council and other committees in the General Assembly.

The Security Council meets regularly to consider countries on its agenda in briefings or consulta-

tions, to draft new or revise existing peacekeeping mandates, and occasionally to adopt resolutions and presidential statements on thematic peacekeeping issues.⁶ Subsidiary bodies in the council such as the Military Staff Committee and the Working Group on Peacekeeping Operations, as well as groups of experts on thematic issues, can also influence the council's consideration of these issues to a limited extent.⁷

In the General Assembly, most of the work on peacekeeping takes place in the Fourth and Fifth Committees, though the assembly has also engaged substantively on peacekeeping in plenary sessions on an ad hoc basis.⁸ The Fifth Committee meets formally three times a year. Its second resumed session in May and June focuses on adopting General Assembly resolutions on the budgets of peacekeeping missions and the peacekeeping support account, as well as various crosscutting issues.⁹ The General Assembly tasks the Fourth

Committee with conducting a “comprehensive review of peacekeeping operations” every year, including an annual debate in October. This is where the C-34 has a role, as it is assigned that agenda item as a subsidiary body of the Fourth Committee.

While the C-34 is one of several intergovernmental bodies involved in peacekeeping policymaking, many member states argue it is the most important.

Established in 1965 to resolve an impasse over funding for peacekeeping missions, the C-34—a title that stuck after China became the thirty-fourth member of the committee in 1988—still has a mandate to undertake “a comprehensive review of the whole question of peace-keeping operations in all their aspects.”¹⁰ It meets in a substantive session in February and March every year to agree on a report or outcome by consensus.¹¹

6 For example, the Security Council recently adopted Resolution 2518 on the safety and security of UN peacekeepers in March 2020.

7 Lisa Sharland, “How Peacekeeping Policy Gets Made: Navigating Intergovernmental Processes at the UN,” International Peace Institute, May 2018, p. 18.

8 Most recently, in 2016, the issue of sexual exploitation and abuse was considered in a plenary debate at the request of Egypt and resulted in the adoption of a resolution. United Nations, “Addressing Sexual Exploitation, Abuse Cases Involving Peacekeepers Requires Swift Accountability, Decisive Action, Speakers Tell General Assembly,” UN Doc. GA/11810, September 7, 2016; UN General Assembly Resolution 71/278 (March 10, 2017), UN Doc. A/RES/71/278, March 20, 2017.

9 The Fifth Committee considers the budget of the UN as set out in Article 17 of the Charter. Special political missions, for instance, are considered during the fall session from September to December. The Contingent-Owned Equipment Working Group falls under the auspices of the Fifth Committee but meets separately every three years.

10 UN General Assembly Resolution 2006 (February 18, 1965).

11 During one of the committee's early meetings, it “agreed that on the question of the procedure for taking decisions it should be the aim to conduct the work in such a way that the Committee should endeavor as far as possible to reach agreement by general consensus without need for voting.” See: UN General Assembly, *Report of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations, 1965 Substantive Session*, UN Doc. A/5915, June 15, 1965, para. 3.

A Growing Set of Challenges

Over the last decade, the C-34 has often struggled to adopt a substantive report on time, or even to adopt one at all.¹² Although the committee has grown marginally in size in that time (from 145 members in 2010 to 154 in 2020), the key countries and negotiating blocs, led by regional coordinators, have remained consistent (see Table 1). Delays have instead arisen from differences over broader peacekeeping reforms, the committee's working methods, and disputes over the committee's role in relation to other intergovernmental bodies.¹³ Such differences are common in multilateral negotiations because peacekeeping stakeholders have different vested interests: major T/PCCs need to justify deploying their personnel into harm's way, while significant financial contributors need to demonstrate effective performance and efficiency to domestic constituencies. But in the C-34, the committee's all-or-nothing approach means that no report is adopted if members failed to agree on any one issue.

Over the last decade, the C-34 has often struggled to adopt a substantive report on time, or even to adopt one at all.

While one of the primary measures of the committee's success is the delivery of its annual report, there is also value in its process. It is the intergovernmental body involved in peacekeeping policymaking that is most representative of T/PCCs, and it offers a platform for the Secretariat to engage with the most peacekeeping stakeholders. Because of this, many major T/PCCs, largely represented by the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), view the C-34 as the only intergovernmental body that can undertake a comprehensive review of peacekeeping. This view is not shared by France, the UK, and the US, which see the C-34 as a "risk-management" tool and a "less important forum for influencing policy."¹⁴

The work of the C-34 has increasingly been supplemented by other fora for discussing and building consensus on peacekeeping policy such as peacekeeping ministerial events, the group of friends on peacekeeping, and the A4P initiative. The Security Council has also increasingly passed resolutions on thematic peacekeeping issues, despite differing views from some of its permanent members on

Table 1. Regional blocs and countries that are represented by regional coordinators or contributed language in 2019 and 2020

Regional Blocs	Key Countries
Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Mexico (ABUM)	China
Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (CANZ)	Japan
European Union (EU)	Norway
Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)	Republic of Korea
	Russia
	Switzerland
	United Kingdom ¹⁵
	United States

¹² For instance, the report was late in 2011 and 2012, and the committee did not adopt a substantive report in 2013 and 2019.

¹³ There are tensions and differing views among member states over the role of the Security Council, C-34, and Fifth Committee in considering different peacekeeping issues. There has been particular disagreement over financial issues such as reimbursement for troops, with differing views over the role of the C-34 and Fifth Committee. See: Sharland, "How Peacekeeping Policy Gets Made," p. 30.

¹⁴ This difference in viewpoint is not surprising, given that T/PCCs have preponderant influence in the C-34 based on sheer numbers, while France, the UK, and the US have less influence in the C-34 than in the Security Council. For further detail on some of these challenges and tensions, see: Sharland, "How Peacekeeping Policy Gets Made," pp. 22–31.

¹⁵ The UK negotiated independently in the C-34 for the first time in 2020 rather than as part of the EU, following Brexit.

taking up certain thematic issues.¹⁶ In recent years, these included resolutions on sexual exploitation and abuse, policing, AU-UN cooperation, peacebuilding, peacekeeping performance, and the safety and security of peacekeepers.¹⁷ Yet even then, the C-34 has retained some relevance in negotiations over thematic peacekeeping resolutions, with council members drawing on agreed-upon language in negotiations when it suits their interests. For instance, council members drew on the language in the C-34 report to find common ground (e.g., in Resolution 2518 on safety and security) or to avoid advancing issues in council resolutions (e.g., only “noting” the secretary-general’s report on policing in Resolution 2382).¹⁸

Prior to the 2020 session, the benchmark for the report’s success had become whether it was delivered on time rather than whether it was useful to the Secretariat, field missions, and member states, which it increasingly was not. Substantive sessions focused on language over substance, and the committee remained mired in debates over its working methods and the report’s structure that had been ongoing for close to a decade. The reports were thus difficult to understand, repetitive, and far too long. And efforts to reform the report structure and working methods over the previous decade had so far proven unsuccessful.

Previous Efforts to Reform the C-34

Around the time of the Brahimi Report in 2000, the length and complexity of the C-34 report embarked on an upward trajectory. This coincided with an increase in the number of multidimensional peacekeeping missions in the late 1990s and early 2000s

and reflected these missions’ greater complexity. It also coincided with the growing membership of the C-34, which had been opened to past and present troop and personnel contributors in 1997.¹⁹ These changes resulted in a fivefold increase in the membership of the C-34 in the two decades that followed. While this made the committee representative of the views of a wider range of stakeholders, particularly T/PCCs, it also made it more difficult for members to reach consensus.

Within a decade of opening its membership, the committee was struggling to conclude its work in a timely manner.²⁰ By 2010, the Canadian chair of the Working Group of the Whole (hereafter “the chair”), who generally guides and coordinates the negotiating process each year, was leading an effort to consider options for reforming the committee’s working methods. In its 2010 report, the C-34 encouraged member states to engage in an informal dialogue on how to enhance the working methods. When that dialogue gained little traction, the committee’s Bureau, which oversees the work of the committee, facilitated a dialogue to enhance the work of the working group in 2011.²¹ Canada (as a member of the Bureau) and Morocco (as the coordinator of the NAM) subsequently commissioned IPI and the Center on International Cooperation (CIC) to examine options for reforms to be put to member states.²²

By 2011, the working methods of the C-34 faced numerous challenges. While some of these mirrored challenges faced by other intergovernmental UN processes, others were distinct to the C-34. For instance, rather than starting with a blank page or zero draft and working based on a facilitator’s text, the C-34 would use the previous

16 For instance, in a debate on UN peacekeeping operations during Indonesia’s presidency of the Security Council in May 2019, Russia stated, “Unfortunately, however, we are still encountering attempts to circumvent the Special Committee on Peacekeeping in order to push issues through the Security Council that have failed to reach agreement in the General Assembly. Needless to say, we cannot accept that approach.” See: UN Security Council, 8521st Meeting, UN Doc S/PV.8521, May 7, 2019.

17 See: UN Security Council Resolutions 2272 (March 11, 2016) and 2382 (November 6, 2017) on sexual exploitation and abuse; Resolution 2447 (December 13, 2018) on policing, justice, and corrections; Resolutions 2320 (November 18, 2016) and 2378 (September 20, 2017) on AU-UN cooperation; Resolution 2282 (April 27, 2016) on peacebuilding; Resolution 2436 (September 21, 2018) on performance; and Resolution 2518 (March 31, 2020) on safety and security.

18 See: What’s in Blue, “Peacekeeping: Vote on a Draft Resolution,” March 29, 2020; and “UN Policing Briefing and Resolution,” November 6, 2017.

19 See: UN General Assembly Resolution 51/136 (December 13, 1996), UN Doc. A/RES/51/136.

20 For example, the committee concluded its work several months after the substantive session in 2008 (in July) due to a lack of consensus on the inclusion of a reference to the protection of civilians, among other things.

21 “The Special Committee encourages its members to continue to hold an informal dialogue with a view to enhancing the work of its Working Group, without prejudice to the rules and procedures of the General Assembly and its resolution 2006 (XIX) of 1965. The Special Committee encourages the Bureau to facilitate this dialogue and to keep Member States updated on developments related thereto prior to its next session.” UN General Assembly, *Report of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations, 2011 Substantive Session*, UN Doc. A/65/19, May 12, 2011, para. 277. The Bureau includes the committee’s chair (Nigeria), vice-chairs (Argentina, Canada, Japan, and Poland), and rapporteur (Egypt). Unlike other committees, the representation of member states in the C-34 Bureau has not changed for nearly three decades.

22 Alberto Cutillo, “For Special Committee on Peacekeeping, the Devil Is Still in the Details,” IPI Global Observatory, March 14, 2013.

year's report as a starting point for language submissions. This meant that agreed-upon language was often treated as hallowed ground, and member states did not have any incentives to cut language from the report.²³ Rather, submissions would build on the text that was already there, continuously expanding the length of the report. Because of this, the structure remained stagnant, only shifting to include new subheadings rather than to reflect the direction of major peacekeeping reforms. This approach also added to the time required to negotiate texts due to the need to streamline the submissions that delegations put forward, often on the same issues.

Member states had varied concerns over the committee's working methods, but they broadly pertained to the agenda (which continued to grow), the process (which involved lengthy discussions of the issues), the report itself (which was repetitive), and support from the Secretariat (which some argued did not provide adequately detailed materials and provided these materials too late).²⁴ IPI and CIC subsequently put forward a series of options for strengthening the work of the C-34 in both the short and the long term. These included standardizing parts of the report (i.e., not opening them up for negotiation each year), streamlining inputs into the first draft of the report, reducing the number of sub-working groups, separating the operative paragraphs (i.e., recommendations) and non-operative paragraphs (either in the text or in separate reports), and agreeing to a set of ground rules. Longer-term recommendations included negotiating certain issues only every other year, prioritizing issues for discussion each year, eliminating formal briefings in the first week of the substantive session to enable more time for negotiations, and holding informal preview meetings months in advance of the session.

These options were discussed and negotiated during the 2012 session, with the C-34 agreeing to adopt several reforms to take into its 2013 session

(in an annex to the 2012 report). These included stabilizing certain parts of the text, streamlining the proposals put forward by delegations ahead of the substantive session, limiting the number of working groups, and separating non-operative paragraphs from recommendations.²⁵ Unfortunately, efforts to act on these reforms in 2013 resulted in a complete breakdown of negotiations, leading to a failure to deliver a substantive report that year and concerns that the committee might abandon consensus and go to a vote. Consequently, the committee agreed to a paragraph that established an intersessional Group of Friends of the Chair to consider working methods, particularly the recommendation about separating operative and non-operative paragraphs.

The most notable reform that was implemented was limiting the number of sections that were up for negotiation each year.²⁶ It was expected that this would reduce the negotiating burden on delegations while also restricting the growth of the report. Unfortunately, neither happened. While the C-34 agreed to reports by consensus from 2014 to 2018, the report continued to grow in length and complexity, particularly as delegations sought to insert language on issues not under negotiation into paragraphs that had been opened. Ongoing efforts to change the working methods resulted in piecemeal changes (e.g., the inclusion of a list of requests for briefings in the 2018 report). The most significant change happened outside of the substantive session when C-34 delegates visited several peacekeeping missions, which allowed them to better understand challenges in the field.

Breaking Point: Failure to Reach Consensus

Heading into its 2019 substantive session in February, there were high expectations that the C-34 would fulfill its remit and contribute to the formulation and implementation of the A4P initia-

23 This is one of the reasons why the 2020 C-34 report, which departed from this process, includes the statement "the Special Committee recalls its previous reports and reaffirms that each of their recommendations remain valid unless they are superseded by recommendations included in the present report." See: UN Doc. A/74/19, para. 24.

24 International Peace Institute and Center for International Cooperation, "Enhancing the Work of the C-34," December 2011.

25 See: UN General Assembly, *Report of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations, 2012 Substantive Session*, UN Doc. A/66/19, September 11, 2012, Annex I, paras. (a)(i), (a)(ii).

26 The C-34 decided not to proceed with operative and nonoperative paragraphs, instead reverting to the 2012 format of the report. See: UN General Assembly, *Report of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations, 2014 Substantive Session*, UN Doc. A/68/19, April 1, 2014, Annex I.

tive. However, there were 428 substantive paragraphs in the 2018 report, making it a challenging negotiating exercise, even if not all the sections were up for negotiation.

One of the many sections open for negotiation was on the enhancement of African peacekeeping capacities. The NAM, which includes all the African countries that are members of the C-34, wanted the C-34 report to recognize the AU Peace Fund. This was a red line for the United States, which opposed both the general use of assessed UN funds for AU peace support operations as well as the specific way the AU Peace Fund is funded.²⁷ Despite a number of meetings at the expert and ambassadorial levels, the chair of the working group concluded that the impasse could not be overcome and that the C-34 would be better off concluding the session and refocusing its efforts on reform.²⁸

The inability of the committee to reach consensus on fundamental issues of concern brought to the fore the question of whether the committee should resort to a vote.²⁹ As in previous years when this option had been floated, several delegations viewed this possibility as a disaster that would be a death knell to the committee's consensus outcomes.

Consensus outcomes are an important component of peacekeeping intergovernmental decision-making processes. For instance, the Fifth Committee works on a consensus basis when reaching agreement on the peacekeeping budget (although there are a few well-established exceptions). However, it went to a vote over whether to reference a Board of Auditors report on the A4P agenda in its crosscutting resolution in July 2019.³⁰

The C-34 hit rock bottom in 2019. The report was too long to negotiate and was primarily an editing exercise.

Similarly, while the Contingent-Owned Equipment Working Group agreed on forty-eight recommendations in its 2020 report, it was unable to reach consensus on the review of reimbursement rates.³¹ Put differently, some of the established fractures around issues of performance (advanced by some of the major financial contributors) and reimbursement (advanced by some of the major T/PCCs) continued to emerge in different processes ahead of the 2020 C-34 substantive session.

With the A4P initiative moving ahead with the support of the UN Secretariat and member states, there was concern that the C-34 would be sidelined if it could not reach consensus on a report in 2020.

Action for Peacekeeping: An Unexpected Reform Opportunity

Most of the delegations interviewed for this paper agreed that the C-34 had hit rock bottom in 2019. The report was too long to negotiate and was primarily an editing exercise. In some ways, the

C-34's role had also been encroached on by the A4P initiative. There was thus appetite among member states to find a new way forward. Following the conclusion of the 2019 session in March, the committee's chair commenced a "listening tour" to understand the interests of member states and regional groups when it came to reforming the work of the C-34.

Attempting C-34 Reform Again

As part of the reform process, the chair of the C-34 looked at other committees' approaches to negotiating consensus outcomes and the ways in which

27 United Nations, "Concluding Session, Peacekeeping Operations Special Committee Approves Report Outlining Procedural Elements but Unable to Agree on Substantive Items," UN Doc. GA/PK/236, March 27, 2019.

28 Interview with member-state representative based in New York, August 2019.

29 See: Sharland, "How Peacekeeping Policy Gets Made," pp. 6–7.

30 Several major T/PCCs opposed the report's characterization of the performance of peacekeeping missions. Samuli Harju, "Missed Deadlines, Difficult Compromises, Ongoing Divisions: Reviewing the Fifth Committee's 2019 Session on Peacekeeping," Center for Civilians in Conflict, August 14, 2019.

31 See: UN General Assembly, *Letter Dated 10 February 2020 from the Chair of the 2020 Working Group on Contingent Owned Equipment to the Chair of the Fifth Committee*, UN Doc A/74/689, February 13, 2020.

the Secretariat supports them.³² This involved engaging with the Fifth Committee, the Committee for Programme and Coordination, the Commission on the Status of Women, and the Secretariat's Department for General Assembly and Conference Management. The chair also engaged with the Bureau and each of the regional coordinators to find out what they wanted from the report. The goal was to make "form follow function," and the function of the C-34 was ultimately to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of UN peacekeeping operations in all their aspects.³³

Initially, reforming the working methods was more problematic than reforming the structure of the report. In the view of many delegations, these methods were not working and needed to change. In particular, there were questions about whether there should be a process for the committee to take a vote when it could not reach consensus on certain parts of the report. Thinking differed on the requirements of going to a vote. Some delegations agreed with the advice from the Office of Legal Affairs that there had to be consensus among all members that the committee could go to a vote.³⁴ But the NAM did not agree with this interpretation and favored being able to bring any issue to a vote, which it would then have the numbers to win. Some members of the EU were also interested in having a process whereby some sections could be agreed by consensus even if others had to go to a vote, partly due to the sections that were lost when the 2019 report was not concluded.³⁵ Regardless, there was nothing preventing the General Assembly from adopting a resolution setting new parameters for the C-34, including voting mechanisms, if this was what some member states decided to pursue.

With discussions on working methods remaining contentious and making little progress, the chair

and the Bureau undertook discussions on the structure of the report instead. Early conversations with regional coordinators focused on four proposals. The first option was a report summarizing discussions and recommendations, which would rely on the Secretariat drafting a summary of the general debate and discussions in the working groups, with recommendations agreed by consensus. The second option was a thematic report, which would rely on facilitators drafting outlines of thematic papers, also with recommendations agreed by consensus. The third option was a three-year program of work agreed to by the regional coordinators. The fourth option was a hybrid report, which would attempt to overcome some of the report's structural issues through a new format. These four options were then reduced to two, but progress was slow. The real breakthrough in the negotiations came with a proposal from Morocco, on behalf of the NAM, to align the structure of the report with that of the A4P initiative.³⁶

By July 2019, there was in-principle agreement that the report could be restructured around the eight pillars of A4P. There were concerns about resistance from some delegations given that this was a significant change. However, this change in structure could ensure that the C-34 had a more substantive role in discussions around the A4P initiative.³⁷ It meant that the report would now include eight subheadings: conduct of peacekeepers and peacekeeping operations; partnerships; peacebuilding and sustaining peace; performance and accountability; politics; protection; safety and security; and women, peace, and security. Concerns that there would be a debate over the ordering of the paragraphs were allayed when delegations agreed to list the topics in alphabetical order.³⁸ Similarly, it was agreed that the introduction and guiding principles would be retained, with the addition of language recalling the

32 While reform had been attempted numerous times previously, including through intersessional meetings, efforts had been less successful, presumably as the existing methods continued to result in a report in some shape or form.³³ Interview with member-state representative based in New York, June 2020.

34 This was in line with the requirements stipulated in the General Assembly resolution establishing the committee in 1965. Interview with member-state representative based in New York, June 2019.

35 Interview with member-state representative based in New York, June 2019.

36 Jake Sherman, "Action for Peacekeeping: One Year into the Implementation of the Declaration of Shared Commitments," International Peace Institute, September 2019.

37 Russia refrained from endorsing certain provisions in the A4P Declaration of Shared Commitments, noting "the key role in defining the parameters of peacekeeping belongs to United Nations intergovernmental bodies, such as the General Assembly, its Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations and the Security Council." See: United Nations, *Letter Dated 31 August 2018 from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations Addressed to the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. A/72/110-S/2018/815, September 10, 2018.

38 The A4P Declaration has a different order, with WPS coming second after politics, but this ordering was not acceptable to some delegations.

text of previous reports. This ensured that language on the peacekeeping principles and the role of the committee would remain in the report and not come up for negotiation again.

Discussions on working methods had continued in parallel with those on the report structure, with some delegations linking any agreement on the structure to agreement on working methods. Ultimately, it was too difficult to secure consensus on a revised approach to the working methods and decision making, but delegations still decided to move forward with the revised structure as a trial in the 2020 session. The chair, along with some members of the Bureau, continued to engage with member states on the reform process in preparation for the 2020 session. This included hosting workshops and briefings on different options and processes available to the committee to set expectations.³⁹

Implementing a New Approach: Opportunities and Potential Risks

Delegates were incredibly disappointed at the failure to agree on a report the previous year. There was dissatisfaction with the approach of the NAM and the EU, as well as with what some viewed as “American exceptionalism” holding the committee hostage to a consensus report.⁴⁰ With no agreement on how to resolve another impasse, there was a strong desire to find a way to produce a consensus report in 2020.

The new structure of the report created opportunities to address some of the challenges hampering the effectiveness of the committee in informing the development of peacekeeping policy. The focus was on helping end users—primarily the Secretariat—understand the report and the actions they were expected to take. For instance, delegates to the C-34 agreed to a standard template with the eight subheadings that aligned with the themes of A4P. The template also included a general context

section (limited to four paragraphs), a list of policy documents (to be provided by the Secretariat), and recommendations (which delegations had agreed during the intersessional period to make every effort to keep to no more than eighty).

The separation of the recommendations and general context followed through on previous attempts to separate operative and non-operative paragraphs. While this was an imperfect science, with some general text making its way into the recommendations, it focused delegations on developing text that was more action-oriented. While the report included more than eighty recommendations (ninety-three, to be exact), this was a significant reduction from previous years, making the recommendations more accessible for other stakeholders.

Similarly, by starting with a blank page, delegations had to give more thought to what issues to prioritize. Because of the eight new subheadings, they also needed to think about and engage with the A4P initiative rather than simply replicating text from previous years’ reports. While some old language was still proposed, and some delegations put forward a considerable amount of text that was not streamlined with the text put forward by like-minded delegations, many agreed that it was a marked improvement in terms of clarity (though not always in terms of substance, as discussed below). As one delegate noted, the old report “was like a cancerous cell, replicating and replicating.”⁴¹ The reforms stopped this uncontrolled growth, though questions remain about whether it will still do so in 2021 if the report uses some of the language adopted in 2020 as a starting point.

The new format also increased clarity on the policy documents issued by the Secretariat. In previous years, the C-34 had not acknowledged these policies consistently or clearly, particularly if it had not explicitly requested them or if certain member states had reservations.⁴² While listing these policy documents in the report did not solve this problem,

39 For example, Japan, as a Bureau member, hosted a workshop with C-34 to guide delegates through the new process for submitting language.

40 Interview with member-state representative based in New York, June 2020.

41 Interview with member-state representative based in New York, June 2020.

42 For example, Russia has previously expressed reservations about the development of an intelligence policy for peacekeeping missions and noted the need for the Secretariat to seek approval from member states through “competent intergovernmental bodies.” See: Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Speech by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at the UN Security Council Session on Reforming UN Peacekeeping,” New York, September 20, 2017.

it was an improvement. It also allows T/PCCs, other member states, and researchers to identify the policies relevant to them on each A4P theme more easily, thereby broadening the relevance of the report.

Despite these structural reforms, the success of the C-34 negotiations was still beholden to the will and interests of member states. Nothing was agreed until everything was agreed, meaning that consideration of certain issues, such as women, peace, and security, was delayed until later in the negotiating process, with lower-hanging fruit tackled first. The threat of a vote also remained ever present, as did the looming restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, putting pressure on delegations to reach consensus. Adoption of the report was a success, but what did it mean for support for the A4P initiative and peacekeeping reform?

Restructuring the report around the eight pillars of the Action for Peacekeeping initiative provided the C-34 the opportunity to revise its approach to peacekeeping reform.

Assessing Efforts to Support A4P and Peacekeeping Reform

Several new dynamics had an impact on the 2020 C-34 report. Some of these are tangible, such as the restructuring of the report. Others are less tangible and difficult to assess. For instance, several delegates noted the change in personalities taking part in the negotiations as a factor that contributed to progress on certain issues, some of which may not have been possible the previous year. Similarly, in 2020, some delegations took a more activist role in putting forward language. These included China, which had traditionally only defended its position, and the UK, which, due to Brexit, was negotiating independently for the first time in decades.⁴³

The restructuring of the report provided the C-34 an opportunity to revise its approach to peacekeeping reform. But it also makes it more challenging to assess where progress has been made

and where there were setbacks in 2020, given that previous language no longer exists as a benchmark.

Progress on the A4P Action Items

The section on the conduct of peacekeepers and peacekeeping operations was the first that delegates concluded, reflecting both its placement at the beginning of the negotiating process and the fact that some of the issues under discussion were less contentious. Language on punitive measures and compensation for false allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse proposed by the NAM was not included in the final recommendations. However, the section mirrors the commentary and recommendations in the A4P declaration, including on zero tolerance for sexual exploitation and abuse, the unacceptability of misconduct, and environmental management in field missions.

Negotiations on the section on partnerships were contentious. The NAM put forward language on the AU Peace Fund similar to the previous year, and the section remained unresolved until the committee made a “grand bargain” on all outstanding issues toward the end of the negotiations. The compromise text “acknowledges the sustained commitment and efforts of the AU and its member states to self-financing AU peace support operations in Africa, while recognising that regional organisations have the responsibility to security financial resources for their organisations in a transparent manner.”⁴⁴ The impasse of 2019 had been overcome.

However, this section has few references to cooperation with regional organizations apart from the AU compared to the 2018 report. For instance, there is no detailed discussion of cooperation with the EU, despite the EU’s inclusion along with the AU in the A4P declaration. Nonetheless, the recommendations section encourages “greater collaboration” with the Association of Southeast

⁴³ Brexit also meant that France, the UK, and the US could have independent but complementary roles when coordinating on shared interests.

⁴⁴ UN Doc. A/74/19, para. 48.

Asian Nations (ASEAN). The partnerships section also mirrors many of the points in the A4P Declaration, recognizing the importance of different models of support to peacekeeping, including triangular partnerships, co-deployments, and parallel forces.

One of the areas where the A4P declaration and the C-34 report diverge is on recommendations directed at host states. On the issue of peacebuilding and sustaining peace, the A4P declaration commits host governments to building and sustaining peace and cooperating with peacekeeping missions. By comparison, the C-34 rarely directs its recommendations at host states, with most recommendations and requests targeted at the Secretariat and only indirectly at member states (largely T/PCCs).

Recommendations aside, the section on peacebuilding and sustaining peace mirrors many general concepts in the A4P declaration, including strengthening national ownership, planning for transitions, referencing the Global Focal Point and the role of police, and coordinating with the Peacebuilding Commission and UN country teams. Notably, this is the section that incorporates most of the guidance on police, corrections, and prison support. Given that the new format lacks a section on policing, the breadth of language and recommendations on the role of police in peacekeeping operations has been reduced, which could be a limitation of the new format. This section also includes language on the “*full, effective, and meaningful* participation of women and youth in peacebuilding” (emphasis added), which marks a step forward, even if there are fewer references to the role of youth in peacebuilding efforts.⁴⁵

The section on peacebuilding and sustaining peace is one of the few that refers to Security Council products, namely the resolution on sustaining peace and a presidential statement encouraging the Security Council to draw on the advice of the Peacebuilding Commission to mainstream feedback from the field and host states.⁴⁶ By

contrast, the section on peacekeeping performance includes no reference to the Security Council resolution that had been adopted on this issue in 2018, despite attempts by some delegations to include it. This reflects ongoing tensions between the roles of the Security Council and C-34 when it comes to pronouncements on thematic peacekeeping issues.

The section on performance and accountability appears to focus substantively on military capabilities and includes the longest list of policy documents, all related to missions’ uniformed components. Some T/PCCs may see this as an unfortunate development, as they argue that there needs to be greater focus on performance and accountability beyond the uniformed components.⁴⁷ However, the recommendations include a request for evaluations of civilian mission support components that incorporate feedback from uniformed components. The report also emphasizes the importance of the roll-out of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment System, which covers the Secretariat, mission leadership, and both uniformed and civilian components.

In the negotiations on the performance section, the issue of caveats was contentious. The NAM proposed language urging the Secretariat not to accept any pledges from member states that impose caveats (including so-called “declared caveats”), which was opposed by CANZ, the EU, and the US, among other delegations. The compromise language encourages contributors to avoid caveats that would have a “detrimental impact on mandate implementation and performance.” It also draws on language from the A4P declaration calling on the Secretariat to develop clearer and more transparent procedures on the use of caveats.⁴⁸

One of the challenges presented by the restructuring of the report was where to reference the A4P initiative in a substantive way. Ultimately, it was included in the section on politics, which was agreed upon toward the end of the negotiations. The C-34 welcomes the efforts of the secretary-

⁴⁵ Ibid., para. 69.

⁴⁶ The resolution on sustaining peace was adopted concurrently by the General Assembly.

⁴⁷ Issues related to human resource management (which applies to civilians) tend to be discussed in the Fifth Committee.

⁴⁸ UN Doc. A/74/19, para. 92.

general to mobilize stakeholders in support of the A4P initiative and to develop indicators tracking its progress. The report also acknowledges the primacy of politics in guiding peacekeeping operations and refers to the links between analysis and planning and between peacekeeping mandates and resources. While some delegations proposed language encouraging greater engagement with host governments, particularly by penholders in the council, these proposals were not included.

While CANZ, the EU, and Norway, sought to advance the report's language on protection, China and Russia opposed strengthening this language, as they had in previous years.⁴⁹ As a result, there is no reference to senior protection of civilians (POC) advisers, community liaison assistants, joint protection teams, or civil affairs officers in relation to the implementation of POC mandates, despite such references in previous reports. Similarly, the report does not clearly acknowledge the revised POC policy, despite a push by several member states to do so. There was also considerable disagreement about references to human rights in parts of the section on protection, which meant that proposals to recognize the centrality of human rights to POC efforts were not included. Nonetheless, there are references to the roles of child protection advisers and women protection advisers, though these are lacking in detail, partly because the report no longer has a section on children and peacekeeping.

Some delegations, particularly CANZ, the EU, and the US, viewed the inclusion of references to intelligence in the section on protection as a significant gain. Similarly, the inclusion of a reference to intelligence in the safety and security section (consistent with the 2018 report) links peacekeeping-intelligence to the safety of peacekeepers. This is one of the areas where the C-34 has a more pronounced position than the Security Council, where some delegations unsuccessfully tried to draw on the

committee's language to include a reference to intelligence in a resolution on safety and security adopted shortly after the C-34 report.⁵⁰

On the issue of safety and security, the C-34 report notes the first conviction for the murder of a peacekeeper as an important milestone. This is one of the few areas where the C-34 report calls on host countries to take action, namely to "promptly investigate and effectively prosecute those responsible for attacks on United Nations personnel."⁵¹ The report also references the Santos Cruz Report and action plans on the security of peacekeeping personnel, as well as the medical and casualty evacuation processes, although this reference does not go far enough for some delegations. Notably, the section on safety and security also includes language on addressing anti-UN propaganda, reflecting a growing concern about disinformation in peacekeeping environments.

The biggest challenge for the committee moving forward is likely to be around the issue of mutual accountability.

The section on women, peace, and security (WPS) was not only negotiated last but also contains the least substantive recommendations in the

entire report, in terms of both the number of recommendations and what they include. It was the last chapter to close and was still being negotiated even as the report was being gavelled through. Some felt that not all delegations made a good-faith attempt to negotiate the section, with some not even attending negotiations at the beginning. As a result, WPS became a bargaining chip. The final language includes no references to Security Council resolutions, despite it being the twentieth anniversary of Resolution 1325, or to the Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy. While the Secretariat has noted that the A4P declaration offers a valuable tool to advance progress on WPS, this did not carry over into the C-34. Instead, consensus on a substantive report and on the role of the C-34 was viewed as a more valuable outcome. Some delegations rationalized this approach by referring to normative advancements

49 Interview with member-state representatives based in New York, June 2020.

50 This resolution, which was adopted three weeks after the C-34 report, instead referred to "situational awareness." UN Security Council Resolution 2518 (March 30, 2020), UN Doc. S/RES/2518. See: What's in Blue, "Peacekeeping: Vote on a Draft Resolution," March 29, 2020.

51 UN Doc. A/74/19, para. 152.

on WPS in other bodies such as the Security Council, an argument that delegations tend to use selectively when it meets their broader strategic objectives.

Impact of Changes to the Structure and Working Methods

The structural changes to the report had unintended consequences for some of the constituencies taking part in the negotiations. For instance, police advisers had traditionally engaged substantively in the section on policing. Now, with the restructuring around A4P, they had to engage across different sections of the report. While that is not necessarily a bad thing, it may have contributed to a considerable drop in detailed requests and recommendations on the role of individual police and formed police units in the 2020 report. This drop could also reflect a decrease in the delegations' expertise on policing issues or in the priority they attached to these issues given the limited references to them in the A4P declaration.

Some of the potential consequences of the restructuring may not have been considered in detail, causing some delegations to give away more than they expected on issues such as financing or even the AU-UN partnership.⁵² But at the same time, the inclusion of a section on WPS, as per the A4P Declaration, did not equate to more progressive language or advancements in that section. Instead, WPS was sidelined until the end of the negotiations, even as other parts of the report included references to women and gender advisers.

While there was no agreement on an approach to reforming working methods, the field visits undertaken by members of the C-34 have opened up a dialogue with field missions about the committee's relevance and exposed some delegates to developments in the field. The Canadian initiative to financially support the participation of several delegates from major TCCs in these field visits through IPI in late 2019 added to their benefit. It is possible that some issues such as integrated planning capacity

and disinformation made their way into the report because delegates saw and heard about them first-hand during the field visits.⁵³ The visits may also make the C-34 more interested in providing recommendations directly to field missions in the future. Likewise, by increasing understanding of the committee's work in some mission contexts, the visits may make the C-34 report of greater interest to field staff, especially given its more accessible format.

The biggest challenge for the committee moving forward is likely to be around the issue of mutual accountability. While traditionally the C-34 has viewed its role as directing recommendations at the Secretariat, some recommendations are relevant to member states, including T/PCCs and, in some instances, host countries.⁵⁴ Capturing these requests and tracking them may be sensitive, but it would make the work of the C-34 all the more relevant going forward and help strengthen partnerships and mutual accountability among peacekeeping stakeholders.

Conclusion: Toward a More Relevant C-34?

The real test for the C-34 will be in the year ahead, as it awaits the report from the secretary-general on its recommendations and prepares for its next substantive session in 2021. As of October 2020, the C-34 regional coordinators had agreed to proceed with largely the same format and working methods. It is expected that the paragraphs in the general context section will be retained from 2020, with edits proposed by delegations. In the recommendations section, however, the C-34 will start with a "blank page," and delegations will be invited to propose new text.

The successful restructuring of the C-34 report in 2020 fulfilled one of the objectives of the A4P Declaration of Shared Commitments, namely "[to translate] these commitments into our positions and practices in the relevant UN bodies, including

52 Interview with member-state representative based in New York, June 2020.

53 Comment from UN Secretariat, New York, September 2020.

54 According to the UN Department of Peace Operations, 66 percent of the recommendations in the 2020 report are directed at the Secretariat, 9 percent at member states or intergovernmental bodies, and 25 percent at both.

the General Assembly and Security Council in their consideration of peacekeeping.⁵⁵ Peacekeeping stakeholders are in broad agreement that the reforms to the C-34 have increased its relevance in efforts to advance peacekeeping reform. As one Secretariat official noted, even the secretary-general and under-secretary-general for peacekeeping have noted that the reform is a “big deal” and reflects positively on the A4P initiative.⁵⁶

During the 2020 negotiations, the chair and the Bureau were viewed as playing a more significant role than in previous years. While the Bureau has traditionally not been very engaged in the C-34 reform process, instead filling a largely ceremonial role, this time the chair consulted the Bureau members regularly throughout the process and engaged them in hosting discussions with regional coordinators about a way forward. Similarly, the chair effectively used his political influence throughout the negotiating process to bridge impasses and move over hurdles. Some acknowledged that it did not hurt that Canada had a vested interest in a successful session, as it was running for a nonpermanent Security Council seat at the time.

Many of the lessons from the reforms of the C-34 are specific to the unique characteristics and situation of the committee in mid-2019. As some delegates noted, these reforms served as a reminder

that reform in the multilateral system often requires hitting rock bottom first.⁵⁷ Timing had a lot to do with the willingness of delegations to take forward the reforms. Initiatives such as A4P had demonstrated that the UN would move forward with reforms without the engagement of the C-34 if necessary. This incentivized delegations to the C-34 to show that the committee was still relevant.

At the same time, there are broader lessons and principles that other UN bodies and committees could draw on. Timing and circumstances matter, and there has to be an appetite for reform. Those leading reform processes need to be open to different proposals and suggestions. Chairs and facilitators can fill an important role as leaders of these processes and must be viewed as impartial arbiters. Finally, reform processes within the UN system can take a long time,

The C-34 reform offers some lessons: timing and circumstances matter, there must be an appetite for reform, those leading the reform process must listen and be impartial arbiters, and delegations must be patient and have realistic expectations.

requiring patience and the management of expectations. None of these lessons are new, but they serve as a reminder that reform is possible if the stakeholders are committed, or if they see the alternative as worse. The nature of UN peacekeeping, which is built on a partnership among various stakeholders, requires broad political support to advance reforms. There are good reasons to continue improving processes that facilitate consensus outcomes to support reform efforts and strengthen peacekeeping moving forward.

55 “Action for Peacekeeping Declaration of Shared Commitments on UN Peacekeeping Operations,” August 16, 2018, para. 24

56 Interview with UN official based in New York, June 2020.

57 Interview with member-state representative based in New York, June 2020.

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