

Cheap at Half the Price: Why UN Peacekeeping is Good Value for Money

Fred Carver

US President Donald Trump is threatening to cut his country's contribution to the UN peacekeeping budget. But this could end up being the more expensive option in the long run.

In 2016, the US provided over 28% of the UN peacekeeping budget – more than double the amount provided by any other country. Yet in his 2018 budget blueprint, President Donald Trump has made clear his intention to reduce this to 25%, which would leave UN peacekeeping \$281 million poorer. Trump needs to recognise that UN peacekeeping represents extraordinarily good value for money.

UN peacekeeping has its problems. As convener of a campaign to combat impunity for sexual abuse by UN peacekeepers, this author's organisation – the United Nations Association-UK – is well aware of that fact. This should not overshadow peacekeeping's incredible value.

Consider peacekeeping from the perspective of the US president. The approximately \$2 billion that the US provides is a vital and enormous sum to the UN, but small change to the US. It represents only 0.3% of US defence spending – the largest in the world – and a mere \$5.24 per person per year. To put this into context, this is less than the price of a Big Mac meal.

For that money, the US effectively gets to deploy 112,000 uniformed personnel – of which only 121 are from the US – in some of the most difficult and unstable countries in the world. Were those to be US troops it would cost 83 times more, \$2 million per pair of boots, but as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, the US has significant control over where UN peacekeepers are sent, while only having to foot a fraction of the bill.

UN peacekeeping also provides stability overseas without the need to risk the lives of US citizens. Peacekeeping fatalities are, relatively speaking, low, but when body bags come home from UN missions they come home to the cities of the countries that supplied most of the troops: to Beijing, Kigali, Kathmandu or the Togolese capital Lomé, not to Andrews Air Force Base.

This also maintains an arms-length detachment to US international involvement. From Vietnam to Iraq, American overseas engagements have ended – if at all – messily. UN missions carry with them the guarantee that the vital, but often protracted and expensive task of extricating oneself from military involvement in another nation will be shared and shouldered by the world's leading global institution.

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Peacekeeping is also more successful as an approach to building stability overseas than unilateral moves. The experience of the past few decades has taught us that unstable situations only become more unstable if left to fester, such as in Somalia in the 1990s, but that too heavy handed an intervention can often make the situation far worse, as in Iraq.

What is needed is the right kind of intervention: improving the reach and increasing the legitimacy of the state, reducing the scope and capacity of non-state users of violence and providing the space, relative calm and absence of threat to civilian populations required to allow peace and stability to develop.

The UN is well placed to achieve this. The moral authority provided by the UN Charter and a Security Council mandate, and the wide-ranging nature of the coalition of nations that peacekeeping represents mean that the barriers to acceptance by the local population are lower, and this makes it easier for UN peacekeepers to develop the trust necessary for success. Further, the expertise and skillsets that UN peacekeepers have honed are well suited to the difficult task of peacekeeping, and to creating the space for peacebuilding.

Peacekeepers are also a vital part of so-called 'upstream conflict prevention'. The best time to stop a war is before it has begun. The second best time – given that 64% of, for example, civil wars take place in a country that has already had a war – is right after a war has ended, and before it can restart. These are precisely the places in which the UN is serving. Most of the 16 currently active UN missions are in places where war is either ongoing or is a recent phenomenon, and war is significantly less likely to restart in these countries as a result of the presence of peacekeepers.

If the US wants to ensure that the most difficult and dangerous parts of the world are stabilised and pacified, then there is no cheaper, safer or more effective way to do so than via UN peacekeeping missions.



A UN helicopter circles overhead as UN peacekeepers from Uruguay patrol in Goma, in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo. *Courtesy of AP Photo/Marc Hofer.*

It is also in the US interest to ensure that the most difficult and dangerous parts of the world are stabilised and pacified. This is not just for clear moral reasons, but because instability knows no borders. In our modern interconnected world, the consequences of an uprising in the Democratic Republic of Congo are felt by mobile phone and laptop manufacturers – [Coltan](#), which is mined in the country, is a vital component in the manufacture of such goods. Piracy off the coast of Somalia [increases the](#)

[costs](#) and risks to America’s considerable merchant marine, and – as these past few decades have made abundantly clear – terrorism originating from places such as Mali is likely to claim victims of many nationalities.

On a grander scale, conflict and instability will only deepen and spread if not addressed. Local uprisings become civil wars, civil wars become regional wars, and regional wars have a global impact. The consequences of neglecting conflict and fragility in some

of the world’s most dangerous hot spots will not be limited to those places. The consequences of a more violent and unstable world will be felt in the US too; first by American businesses, and then by its citizens.

Even Trump, who initially demonstrated a determination to pursue an isolationist ‘America First’ foreign policy, and would seemingly still prefer that the US no longer play the role of global policeman (a role for which it is, in any case, in many ways unsuited),

must recognise that the consequence of a precipitous American withdrawal from the world stage would be a significant increase in global chaos.

UN peacekeeping would allow Trump to have his cake and eat it: save money and lives by reducing the US's formidable overseas deployment of force, but still promote the global stability and security America so badly needs, through the cheaper and more effective route of funding peacekeeping.

Trump has [outlined](#) his intention to cut the US contribution to the peacekeeping budget down to 25% of the total, from 28.6% today. He does not have the power to reduce the amount owed unilaterally, as any decrease in Washington's assessed contribution would have to be negotiated by the UN General Assembly. Negotiations on the subject are not even due until 2018.

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It is unclear why other General Assembly members would agree to such a large decrease, or if the US has done – or has an interest in doing – the requisite behind-the-scenes lobbying to build support for such a cut. If Trump were to simply reduce the amount of money that the US sent to the UN then Washington would find itself judged to be in arrears.

If the arrears continued to build up, then the US would eventually lose its vote in the UN General Assembly and significant diplomatic prestige along with it. This almost happened in the 1990s, and only the gifted diplomacy of Richard Holbrooke – the US ambassador to the UN between 1999–2001 – and an eventual payment of some billion dollars, [prevented this](#). This outcome will not concern Trump – any impact would be felt long after he has left office – but it should his successors. The likely eventual outcome of this policy is that there will no eventual long-term savings and a hefty

bill and diplomatic headache at some point in the future.

Even if Trump were to negotiate or force such a budget reduction, the savings to the US would be very small, but the impact on peacekeeping would be large – a budget gap of over \$280 million. Trump believes in doing deals; UN peacekeeping is a very good deal, and anarchy is bad for business.

If he does not see this, then the victims of his short-sightedness would not only be Americans, and that is why it is incumbent on all donor countries, the UK included, to ensure that peacekeeping is able to continue financially, plugging any gaps as they appear.

After all, if peacekeeping makes financial sense to the US, it makes so much more sense to countries such as the UK, that provide far less than Washington.

The amounts involved are reasonable when compared to their consequences. The cost of peacekeeping more than [doubled between 2003 and 2008](#), from less than \$3 billion to over \$7 billion, but has plateaued since then. This cost increase was largely due to the increased number of complex missions, particularly in the Democratic Republic of Congo. However, since 2011, the actual cost-per-peacekeeper [has fallen 16%](#), and UN missions cost on average 25% less than those conducted outside of UN auspices.

The make-up of peacekeeping missions has [changed](#) in that time, too. The five permanent members of the UN Security Council (P5) used to provide a significant proportion of the total number of peacekeepers deployed, with the French contribution topping out at just over 9,000 in 1994, the Americans just over 4,000 in that same year, the British just over 10,000 in 1996, and the Russians nearly 2,000 in that year.

Then for over a decade P5 contributions dropped away into the hundreds, to less than 1% of the total. This changed in 2007 with the deployment of more than 2,000 French troops (primarily to Mali) and over 2,000 Chinese troops (primarily to South Sudan, and the first time China [has contributed](#) significant troop numbers).

And while the size of the French contingent has tapered down since

then, the Chinese contingent has grown, standing now at around 3,000. The UK has also [increased its contribution](#), albeit more modestly. Currently the UK has 336 peacekeepers deployed, almost exclusively in Cyprus, but in the coming months around 500 additional peacekeepers will be deployed to various capacity building roles in Somalia, and staffing a field hospital and engineering programme in South Sudan.

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This increase in deployed personnel on the part of the P5 does not reduce the necessity for permanent members to contribute to the financial health of UN peacekeeping. Indeed, it should provide greater incentive to ensure that peacekeeping works effectively, by ensuring that peacekeepers have the resources and equipment they need to do the job properly.

UN peacekeeping is far from perfect. From a failure to [robustly protect civilians](#) to persistent accusations of sexual abuse, there is much that needs improving about the way the UN operates, and António Guterres, the new Secretary-General, [seems intent](#) on improving it. Some missions have outlived their usefulness, and the UN is right to [bring them to a managed end](#). But even in its current, fallible, state, UN peacekeeping is cheap at half the price.

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