

POLICY BRIEF



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE

TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME
AND UN PEACE
OPERATIONS



Summer Walker

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Summer Walker is the GI-TOC's Head of Security and Rights Initiatives. She leads projects and provides research and analysis on international policy, with a focus on peace, security and human rights issues. She has worked with the United Nations, international NGOs, development agencies and research institutes.

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Please direct inquiries to:
The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
Avenue de France 23
Geneva, CH-1202
Switzerland
www.globalinitiative.net

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SUMMARY

At a moment when long-held global alliances for peace and security are being tested, the United Nations is undergoing a wholesale review of its peace operations. In 2025, it is undertaking both a peacekeeping review and a peacebuilding architecture review.¹ In May 2025, Germany will host a peacekeeping ministerial, a high-level forum for member states to consider the future of peacekeeping, after which the UN in New York will take up the process. The peacebuilding review is beginning an intergovernmental process this year, which should culminate in final resolutions in the UN General Assembly and Security Council this year.²

These reviews are happening at a time of dramatic ruptures in global politics, which are likely to have implications for sustainable peace. It is also a time of major changes within the UN peace agenda, with continual calls for Security Council reform, cases of countries ejecting UN peace and political missions, such as Mali and Somalia, and slashed UN budgets.

In the preparatory work for the UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding negotiations, transnational organized crime has been raised as a key risk to address. Much has been done in the past to try to counter organized crime in the context of conflict, but efforts have fallen short of meeting the challenge. This year's focus on the future of peace operations is a timely opportunity to spark new debate within the United Nations on the crime–conflict nexus and generate ideas for more effective interventions.

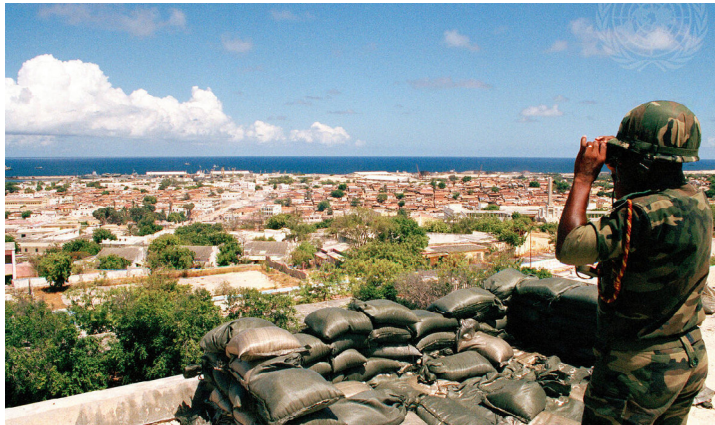
This policy brief addresses the shifts underway in the UN peace operations framework, and geopolitically. It considers what they mean for combating transnational organized crime and identifies four key points for policymakers to consider as negotiations get underway for the peace operations architecture:

Account for responses to organized crime across the spectrum of peace operations. As both review processes get underway, the pervasive harms to peace caused by organized crime should not be isolated to one discussion, but embedded in each.

Move beyond past technical responses. Much has been tried and lessons learned. But the impacts of transnational organized crime extend far beyond trafficking routes. Especially in conflict settings, illicit markets expand, diversify and impact a growing geographic and societal space. The future of combating organized crime in peace operations should be strategic, networked across agendas and agile. Partnerships between the UN, regional organizations, coalitions of willing governments, civil society and local actors will be key for this.

Make rule of law a centrepiece in the debates. Justice sector reform, accountability and rule of law are critical components of peace operations. They are also critical for combating criminal networks. Downplaying these components would signal a retreat from holistic responses to crime and conflict, and an opening for criminal opportunists.

Resilience to crime is resilience to conflict. Include a reference in the peacebuilding architecture review outcome document that recognizes the challenge to peace caused by transnational organized crime and that efforts to reduce the harms caused by organized crime help build peace.



A member of the UN forces surveys Mogadishu. Several countries have ejected UN peace operations, such as UNSOM in Somalia. *Photo: UN Photo/Milton Grant*



UN REFORM DURING GEOPOLITICAL REALIGNMENT AND DIMINISHED PEACEMAKING

The UN is undertaking these reviews at a critical inflection point. One of the main challenges it faces is that shared responsibility for global peace is breaking down. In this context the Security Council is having trouble taking action. The number of resolutions adopted by the Council is declining. In 2024, 20 per cent fewer resolutions were adopted than in 2021 and 2020. Resolutions are being vetoed by permanent members while other resolutions cannot secure sufficient votes to advance.³ The majority of governments are now of the opinion that the Security Council needs reform so that it can provide more permanent representation and limit the power of vetoes to stop critical action.⁴

The Peacebuilding Commission, an advisory body to the Security Council that supports peace efforts in countries emerging from conflict, has faced criticism for being a voluntary intergovernmental body that forms opinions based on consensus and has no mandate to enforce decisions. While it reports to the Security Council, it does not always provide new information to the Council because of this.⁵

Inside the corridors of the UN, people are questioning whether traditional modes of peacekeeping are the appropriate way forward. Peacekeeping missions are shutting down and new types of missions are emerging. The Multinational Security Support Mission in Haiti is the most recent new configuration. This combined force has not been able to overcome significant obstacles – it is under-staffed, under-funded and has been faced with a significant escalation of violence in Haiti without the capacity to respond adequately. Elsewhere, there have been complete drawdowns, such as the mission in Mali, where security has been handed to a foreign mercenary group. Special Political Missions – distinct from peacekeeping but also authorized by the Security Council – have been asked to wrap up their work and leave the country, such as in Somalia and Sudan. And there has been hesitation, where mission drawdowns have been paused. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a dramatic escalation of fighting between rebels and government forces in the North and South Kivu provinces, especially in Goma, has led to a reported 7 000 deaths⁶ and 480 000 displaced persons between October 2024 and January 2025.⁷ This has delayed a full withdrawal of UN peacekeepers from the country.⁸



High levels of transnational organized crime converge with conflict, as is the case in the DRC, shown here, so peace operations need to be designed to take into account the organized crime threat. *Photo: UN Photo/Jorkim Jotham Pituwa*

Outside, the geopolitical environment is rapidly changing. Under the second Trump administration, the United States appears to be aligning its foreign policy with that of Russia,⁹ including supporting some of Russia's positions on the Ukraine war. For instance, at the UN, the US voted with Russia and North Korea against Ukraine and Europe on a General Assembly resolution condemning Russian aggression and calling for a ceasefire.¹⁰ Some argue this shift is intended to bring a return to powerful world leaders making decisions among themselves, with imperialist aspirations.¹¹ If so, inside the UN, this approach could have the effect of creating stronger alliances across regions than existed before. For instance, it could bring stronger coalitions across European, African, Latin American and Asian countries to counter a new colonialism. Individually, each of these blocs have more votes than the United States, and significant power collectively. The US stood as an outlier with Russia in the General Assembly vote on Ukraine. Yet Russia and the United States have historically had large roles setting agendas and bargaining positions, particularly in the peace and security agenda. As the eight decade-long transatlantic world order is challenged, new alliances could shape negotiations on peace and security at the UN.

At the same time, debates over who might keep peace in a post-conflict Ukraine hint that a UN banner could be necessary to overcome the risks of either a regional or US-led military presence. Despite the challenges and criticism they face, the UN and the Security Council remain the last resort for underwriting peace in complex situations. The UN peace operations negotiations will have to carefully consider what the future of peacemaking looks like in this climate and come up with novel, yet workable, approaches.



TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME AND PEACE

Before the new US administration was sworn in, transnational organized crime was already a highly political, complex issue. Given the recent geopolitical ruptures, governments may decide to sideline transnational organized crime in the discussions, or cherry-pick specific elements. We would caution against this. Organized crime's impacts on conflict and peace are so far-reaching that technical solutions or trainings cannot solve them alone.

Its impact has been felt in numerous conflict settings, for example in Colombia, Afghanistan, the DRC, Libya, Mali, Myanmar and Haiti. These manifest in different ways according to the context. For instance, gangs in Haiti are the main aggressors in the country. Meanwhile, in DRC armed rebel groups are fighting in part over control of minerals, which the Security Council has labelled 'systematic illicit exploitation and trafficking of natural resources'.¹² Criminal economies and trafficking in conflict-affected areas, as these examples illustrate, not only cause local harm and exacerbate hostilities, but contribute to regional destabilization and fuel global trafficking. The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC)'s Organized Crime Index¹³ shows a globally pervasive problem where organized crime correlates very strongly with areas of conflict and fragility.

Research by the GI-TOC found that in 2024, 52 per cent of Security Council resolutions referenced at least one illicit market, most often in reference to their impact on conflicts (see Figure 1).¹⁴

Addressing transnational organized crime, though recognized as a threat, has never had an easy policy fix. It has been the little sibling to anti-terrorism within the UN, and often sidelined as a technical issue within mission mandates. For many years, the nexus debate at the UN centred on how crime enriched armed groups, focusing on the financial impact. But the reality is much more complex. The impacts of organized crime in conflict are economic, political and social, critically impacting efforts to decrease violence, improve public safety, create development opportunities and improve governance in post-conflict settings. It is as much a political issue as a technical one.

Over the past 15 to 20 years, the UN and regional organizations have implemented various approaches to address the problem. These have entailed law enforcement initiatives, including technical assistance, embedding experts and executive police within missions, and specific monitoring of organized crime. UN sanctions regimes and panels of experts have reported on country situations and provided the

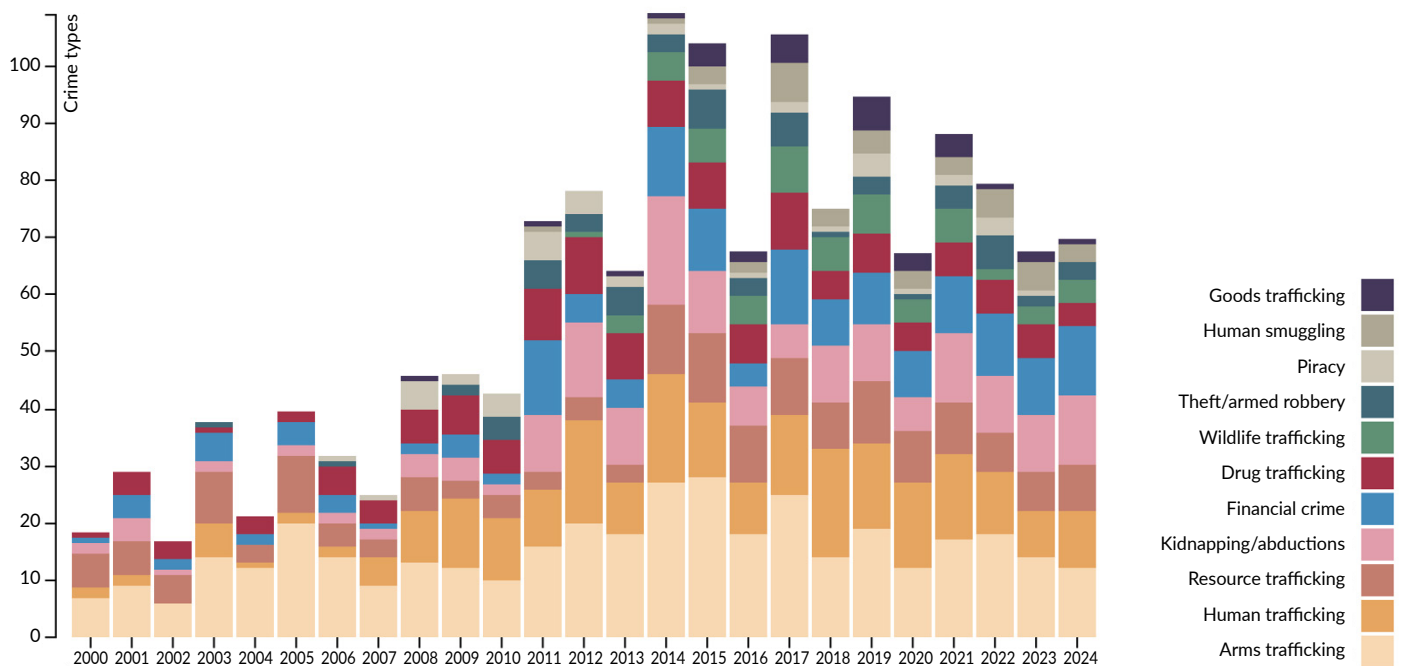


FIGURE 1 References to criminal markets in UN Security Council resolutions.

SOURCE: GI-TOC, 2000–2024: Charting organized crime on the UN Security Council agenda, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/scresolutions/>

Security Council with names of people to consider for sanctioning. Many mandates for sanctions committees include listing criteria connected to illicit markets,¹⁵ yet a roadblock occurs when certain names put forward by the panels are too close to powerful political and business interests. There have been numerous approaches taken to hold criminal actors accountable, such as extraterritorial piracy courts for Somalia, or the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, which operated for over a decade before being shut down by the government. These approaches all offer lessons learned for the upcoming debate. But it is also time to think bigger.

The two reports setting the stage for reform of peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts at the UN recognize that the problem is much wider. The peacekeeping report identifies transnational organized crime as a major threat to global peace and security. It also suggests countering organized crime could serve as a standalone model for peacekeeping in the future.¹⁶ The Secretary-General's report, which forms the basis for the peacebuilding review, also identifies transnational organized crime as a critical issue. It notes how armed groups are linked to criminal networks and markets that thrive during conflict as key risks to peace. While the report notes that it is important to support efforts to combat transnational organized crime as part of UN-wide cooperation, it does not suggest a need to integrate resilience to illicit economies as a component of peacebuilding. While the peacekeeping report supercharges transnational organized crime as a rationale for a peacekeeping mission, the peacebuilding report recognizes the risks but compartmentalizes the response. The solution is likely to lie somewhere in the middle.

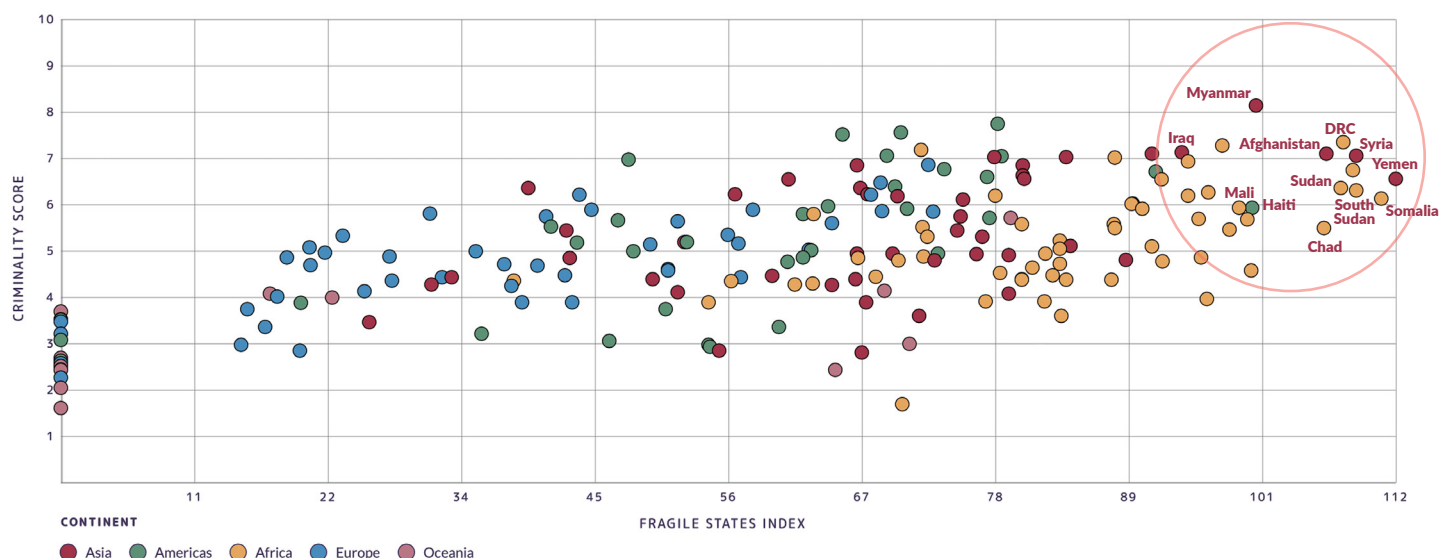


FIGURE 2 Correlation between high crime scores and conflict (2023).

NOTE: The correlation between high crime scores and conflict zones can be seen in the highlighted countries.
 SOURCE: Global Organized Crime Index, GI-TOC, 2023, <https://ocindex.net/>.

Given this opportunity to spark new debate in the UN on the crime–conflict nexus and generate ideas for more effective peace interventions, below are four key points to consider as discussions get underway. The challenge, especially under current political and financial constraints, will be to identify, gain support for and fund innovative policy options. These points are intended to begin this discussion by positioning the crime–conflict nexus in the modern context as the UN undertakes reforms of peace operations.

Combat organized crime across the spectrum of peace operations

The Secretary-General's report addresses the challenges posed by mission transitions and drawdowns, highlighting how interlinked the two reform agendas are.¹⁷ During transitions, it is essential for policymakers and practitioners to know the state of illicit markets, their impacts on the conflict and the potential ways they will obstruct pathways to peace. Handovers of duties from one department to the next can lead to knowledge loss, and priorities can shift. But the markets do not act this way – they are dynamic and responsive to changes in the environment.

Organized crime threat assessments should help missions address the crime–conflict nexus in a more strategic way, understanding the wider ecosystem of illicit economies and the links to political transition, humanitarian efforts and regional impacts. Actions to combat organized crime should be in the mandates for each step of any peace operation.

Past technical responses do not meet contemporary challenges

Addressing organized crime within the police components of peacekeeping does not address the pervasive harms. Nor can sanctions solve the problem alone. In conflict settings in particular, markets expand, diversify and impact a growing geographic and societal space. Mediators and peacemakers

have little guidance on how to deal with criminal actors and economies in the context of crisis management, peacemaking and peacebuilding. While technical efforts are necessary, they should be complemented with a broader strategy that includes political and development approaches. The future of combating transnational organized crime in peace operations should be strategic, networked across agendas and agile. Peacekeeping is likely to come less from the UN alone but in partnership between the UN, governments, regional and local organizations, civil society and local actors. Identifying a network of actors that reinforce one another can create longer-lasting impacts and foundations for peace, and will be a key element of the future of peace operations. The focus on the future of peace operations is an ideal time for translating this into policies and practice.

Centre rule of law in the debates

Justice sector reform, accountability and rule of law are critical components of peace operations. They are also critical to combating organized crime. While many states from different regions will champion rule of law as part of peacekeeping and peacebuilding mechanisms, they may lose the support from key backers. If the centrality of the rule of law – from the laws of war designed to protect civilians to anti-corruption efforts – is not maintained in peace operations, transnational organized crime and kleptocratic governments will take advantage. Illicit economies contribute to long-term instability by prolonging conflict, eroding good governance and contributing to institutional breakdown.¹⁸ The negotiations must therefore prioritize rule of law, with a focus on holding accountable armed groups, criminal groups and state actors involved in violence against civilians. This should include breaking the umbrella of protection provided by politicians and state-embedded actors.



Port-au-Prince: Haiti is an example of a new type of peace mission based on a non-UN multinational support force. Photo: GI-TOC

Resilience to crime is resilience to conflict

The 2020 Peacebuilding Review resolution is short and does not reference transnational organized crime as a threat to peace. The previous report in 2016 is a more robust starting point for this year's negotiations, but it also has nothing to say on organized crime. The Secretary-General's report leading up to this year's review, however, has been very clear about the risk caused by criminal networks to sustaining peace.

As mentioned, the Global Organized Crime Index¹⁹ shows a strong correlation between areas of conflict and fragility, and high levels of crime. There is often a geographic overlap where criminal networks operate for a long period and where instability and conflict occur. Looking at country-level data in the Index, high-crime, high-fragility countries score relatively low on resilience indicators, which

are measures of how countries respond to transnational organized crime. Some of the key Organized Crime Index indicators reflect staples of UN responses in peace operations, such as judicial systems, good governance and a functioning police presence.

States could consider how to incorporate building resilience to crime as a peacebuilding activity, from prevention to post-conflict peacebuilding. Initiatives could be designed to reduce the likelihood of relapses into violence and reduce dependence on criminal markets. In this work, it will be crucial to engage women, youth, the business community and civil society. The resolution from the peacebuilding architecture review should include a reference that recognizes the challenge to peace caused by transnational organized crime, and that efforts to reduce the harms caused by organized crime help build peace.



NOTES

- 1 See United Nations Department of Peace Operations, *The Future of Peacekeeping, New Models, and Related Capabilities*, November 2021; United Nations, *The 2025 Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture*; International Crisis Group, *Fresh Thinking about Peace Operations at the UN*, January 2025.
- 2 The UN peacebuilding architecture consists of three main arms. The Peacebuilding Commission is an intergovernmental body; the Peacebuilding Support Office sits within the Peacebuilding Commission to provide expertise and guidance to the commission; the Peacebuilding Fund is the main implementing arm of the architecture. It invests in prevention and peacebuilding, supporting joint UN responses and partnering across sectors.
- 3 The following longitudinal data tool analyzes Security Council resolutions: GI-TOC, 2000–2024: Charting organized crime on the UN Security Council agenda, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/scresolutions/>.
- 4 The Pact for the Future supports ongoing Security Council reform debates in Action 40. See <https://www.un.org/en/summit-of-the-future/pact-for-the-future>.
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- 11 *The new American imperialism*, *The Economist*, 21 January 2025, <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2025/01/21/the-new-american-imperialism>.
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- 13 GI-TOC, *Global Organized Crime Index, 2023*, <https://ocindex.net/>.
- 14 GI-TOC, 2000–2024: Charting organized crime on the UN Security Council agenda, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/scresolutions/>.
- 15 For examples, see Summer Walker, *Illicit economies and the UN Security Council*, GI-TOC, April 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/illicit-economies-and-the-un-security-council/>.
- 16 See United Nations Department of Peace Operations, *The Future of Peacekeeping, New Models, and Related Capabilities*, November 2021, p 29.
- 17 *Peacebuilding and sustaining peace: Report of the Secretary-General*; UN Doc A/79/552, 25 November 2025, pp 11, 15.
- 18 Summer Walker and Mariana Botero Restrepo, *Illicit economies and armed conflict: Ten dynamics that drive instability*, GI-TOC, January 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/illicit-economies-armed-conflict/>.
- 19 GI-TOC, *Global Organized Crime Index, 2023*, <https://ocindex.net/>.



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ABOUT THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE

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