

CANADA'S RETURN TO PEACEKEEPING:  
INTRODUCTION TO *PEACE RESEARCH* SPECIAL ISSUE

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In a world in which liberal internationalism appears to be falling out of favour, overshadowed by a rising wave of nationalist populism, the very idea of UN peacekeepers serving as the world's helpful fixers in conflict-affected contexts can seem increasingly quaint and anachronistic, if not downright naïve. Contributing to multilateral peace operations may have made sense in an earlier era, but serious countries with serious foreign policies—so the argument goes—no longer have the luxury of committing troops and treasure to far-off conflicts where key national interests are not at stake. What's more, many of these far-off conflicts appear to be messier, nastier, and more intractable than ever; with UN missions targeted by extremists in Mali and overwhelmed by seemingly unachievable mandates in South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, it is little wonder that few countries are lining up to contribute to missions mired in what are widely viewed as open-ended quagmires.

In the context of a generalized retreat, by developed countries in particular, from the front lines of UN peacekeeping, then, the Government of Canada's bold promise in 2015 to renew Canada's engagement with peace operations ran very much against the grain. It also, in retrospect, felt like a moment of irrational exuberance on the part of a newly-elected government eager to distance itself from the policies of its predecessor. Notwithstanding Canada's recent commitment of an aviation taskforce to the UN's Mali operation, the main Canadian storyline over the past few years on the peacekeeping file has been one of dithering and under-delivering, with the government's initial enthusiasm for peace operations having been curbed considerably

by the enormously challenging conditions within which contemporary UN missions operate. And while Mali may be neither more dangerous nor more complex than Afghanistan—Canada’s last major multilateral commitment—it is also less directly linked to a compelling narrative as to why Canadian lives should be put at risk in the Malian desert.

Whatever else it might have accomplished, then—and the prospect of securing a temporary seat on the UN Security Council has always been part of the government’s “Canada is back” strategy—Canada’s cautious return to peacekeeping has prompted renewed reflection both on the place of peacekeeping in the contemporary international order and on appropriate Canadian contributions to international peace and security. The collection of papers published in this special issue of *Peace Research* emerged from this spirit of reflection, and in particular from a two-day conference—Canadian Peacekeeping: Where Have We Been? Where Should We Go?—organized in September 2017 by the Peace and Conflict Studies Association in Canada (PACS-Can) and hosted by Waterloo’s Balsillie School of International Affairs. The four papers presented here—two of which focus primarily on the domestic context and two of which emphasize wider peacekeeping trends—help make at least some sense of the rationale underpinning Canada’s cautious approach, while also highlighting the reality that peacekeeping remains a central, if imperfect, instrument in the international peace and security toolkit.

In her contribution, Jane Boulden assesses the strain that the growing emphasis on protection of civilians and stabilization in peace operations mandates is putting on the “holy trinity” of traditional peacekeeping principles, namely impartiality, consent of the parties, and the use of force for self-defence only. Actions taken by peacekeepers to protect civilians against abuses perpetrated by government forces, for example, can imperil host-government consent for the mission’s very presence. Conversely, mission-led stabilization efforts aimed at broadening and deepening the reach of government authority also, almost by definition, support the regime in power, raising questions about impartiality when the government itself is an ongoing party to the conflict. Navigating such tensions, particularly in contexts in which peacekeepers face growing pressures to use force in defence of either civilians or of the mission mandate, is part of the new reality of contemporary peacekeeping.

Countering violent extremism, as Patrick O'Halloran writes, is also part of this new reality. His paper considers the seven strategies put forward in the UN Secretary-General's 2016 *Plan of Action* to Prevent Violent Extremism in light of unfolding events in Mali, and finds that few offer any easy paths to de-radicalization. On the one hand, many of the strategies—including the promotion of good governance, human rights, and the rule of law—are not only generic but also indistinguishable from liberal peacebuilding strategies that have foundered across a range of conflict-affected contexts in recent years. On the other hand, in a context such as Mali, building state capacity to counter terrorism and extremism risks legitimizing the very same predatory domestic political structures that drive individuals towards extremism in the first place. Ultimately, then, while confronting “homegrown” extremists remains a vexing political challenge in the liberal democracies of the West, the challenge is many orders of magnitude greater in contexts where state fragility, extreme social exclusion, and civil war intersect.

Turning to the domestic context, Mathieu Landriault analyzes recent public opinion polling in an effort to read the Canadian mood—in the aftermath of the Afghan experience—towards future Canadian involvement in multilateral military interventions. He finds that while Canadians continue to have a high regard for the institution of peacekeeping and are generally supportive of Canadian participation in international missions, they display greater ambivalence when it comes to more “robust” operations likely to put Canadian personnel directly in harm's way. Canada's current contribution of an aviation task force in Mali, he suggests, is in fact entirely consistent with a wider public mood that supports softer forms of power projection—from logistics to training—as the way forward for Canadian engagement in peacekeeping.

Finally, my own contribution traces the trajectory of Canada's “re-engagement” policy from the initial post-election enthusiasm of late 2015, through an extended period of sober second thought, and finally to the decision to make a limited and time-bound Canadian commitment to the United Nations Multidimensional Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Placing Canada's evolving position in the wider context of shifts in the broader peacekeeping and international security environment, I suggest that where Canada has landed is consistent with the kinds of distancing strategies employed by other Western countries vis-à-vis contemporary peacekeeping.

More broadly still, I make the case that the Canadian example is indicative of a wider crisis of confidence in the liberal interventionist paradigm that has prevailed since the end of the cold war. Beyond troop-contributor politics, this has implications for the very future of international engagement with fragile and conflict-affected states.