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**THE WITHDRAWAL OF UN PEACE OPERATIONS AND STATE CAPACITY:
DESCRIPTIVE TRENDS AND RESEARCH CHALLENGES**

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While United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UN PKOs) have moved away from traditional, security-focused mandates in the last generation of peacekeeping, most research on the effectiveness of peace missions continues to evaluate success based on security outcomes — such as levels of violence on the battlefield, civilian victimization, duration of ceasefires and violence containment.¹ Few studies adopt broader and longer-term criteria for evaluation. Pioneers of this change, Doyle and Sambanis reframed the terms of peacekeeping from a focus on military strategies to a focus on peacebuilding.² But while they showed that multidimensional missions can foster democratization and participatory peace in post-conflict societies, there is still debate among scholars and policy-makers about the use of peace missions as effective tools for state-building.³ Most of the discussion, especially among scholars, pays little attention to whether peacekeeping creates stable polities and institutions that endure when the international presence eventually leaves. In other words, if peace missions are beneficial for state capacity, is their legacy strong enough to avoid the possible pitfalls associated with PKO *withdrawal*?

The primary challenge in answering these questions is identifying a suitable definition of state capacity. Maintaining order within recognized borders and a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence is the core pillar of state capacity. Indeed, a definition based on security and military aspects is, as noted by Hendrix,⁴ consistent with Weber's definition of what a modern state is. Governmental quality and administrative capacity is a second dimension that should be considered. Such quality can be assessed by examining the combination of democratic and authoritarian features of a government⁵ and, thus, it is often operationalized using the Polity index.⁶ This dimension, however, remains conceptually separate from the productive and extractive capacity of the state. Productive capacity relates to the economic performance of the state, such as its gross national product and export volumes. Extractive

¹ Di Salvatore and Ruggeri, "The Effectiveness of Peacekeeping Operations".

² Doyle and Sambanis, "International Peacebuilding: A Theoretical and Quantitative Analysis".

³ Lake, "The Statebuilder's Dilemma: On the Limits of Foreign Intervention".

⁴ Hendrix, "Measuring State Capacity".

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Marshal, Jagers and Gurr, "Polity IV: Political Regime Characteristics and Transition, 1800-2008".

capacity captures the ability of the state to extract resources from the population — as measured by, for example, the share of GDP from tax revenues. The last pillar of state capacity captures external relations or the ‘diplomatic capacity’ of the central authority. The ability to establish relations with other states is an attribute of statehood, and— as a consequence—it remains an important, if underexplored, pillar of state-building programs. One challenge is that the impact of PKO withdrawal on a state’s foreign relations may be difficult to identify immediately after exit and yet, as argued by Diehl and Druckman⁷, long time frames can make it difficult to draw causal connections between interventions and outcomes (see also Caplan’s contribution to this forum). Overall, it is worth noting that different time frames may be more appropriate for evaluating the impact of missions’ withdrawals on each of the four dimensions of state capacity.

Multidimensional missions that aim to increase the host state’s capacity need to operate across these four different dimensions to create conditions for durable, strong institutions. However, only a few studies have analysed the impact of peace missions across all the above-mentioned state-building dimensions. Joshi,⁸ and Steinert and Grimm,⁹ focus on democratization processes and find that peacekeeping results in positive changes in the quality of governmental institutions, as measured by the Polity Score and the Freedom House index respectively. In terms of security, these same missions perform very well in creating less violent environments and preventing conflict relapse,¹⁰ although we know less about the success of security sector reforms.¹¹ The productive and extractive pillars of state capacity are also understudied, although there is some limited evidence of a beneficial effect of peace missions on agricultural economic productivity in South Sudan.¹² To our knowledge, meanwhile, there has been no systematic research on how peace missions affect a state’s diplomatic capacity. Most importantly, a systematic and comparative study of the effects of UN missions — after those missions have closed and peacekeepers have withdrawn — is missing across all of these dimensions of state capacity.

⁷ Diehl and Druckman, “Evaluating Peace Operations”.

⁸ Joshi, “United Nations Peacekeeping, Democratic Process, and the Durability of Peace after Civil Wars”.

⁹ Steinert and Grimm, “Too Good to Be True ?”

¹⁰ Ruggeri, Dorussen and Gizelis, “Winning the Peace Locally”; Hultman, Kathman and Shannon, “United Nations Peacekeeping and Civilian Protection in Civil War”; Hultman, Kathman and Shannon, “Beyond Keeping Peace.”

¹¹ Karim, “Restoring Confidence in Post-Conflict Security Sectors.”

¹² Caruso et al., “The Economic Impact of Peacekeeping. Evidence from South Sudan.” Also, Beber et al.’s working paper suggests that the arrival of peacekeepers fuels the local economy and generates high demand for low-skilled workers that will likely require “painful adjustment” after withdrawal (see Beber et al., “Challenges and Pitfalls of Peacekeeping Economies”).

This brief article first presents descriptive statistics on how host states perform on different dimensions of state capacity *after* UN blue helmets leave. Based on proxies suggested by the existing literature¹³ and current mandates, we focus on GDP growth, level of democracy, state authority, and women's conditions. While these measures do not map neatly onto the four dimensions of state capacity, they are still relevant for peacebuilding and proxy at least three of the dimensions. Polity score, for example, can measure the quality of institutions, while GDP growth and infant mortality rates (IMR) proxy potential productive capacity, and territorial control and rule of law capture state capacity in the security dimension. Trends of ~~aeross~~all of these dimensions have been studied during peace missions, but not across the transition from deployment to withdrawal. This article moves from these descriptive trends to highlight significant methodological challenges encountered when studying peacekeeping legacies.

Descriptive Trends: Before, During and After UN Mission Presence

In this section, we provide graphs that reflect trends ~~before~~during and after UN peace missions on four variables, namely GDP growth, level of democracy, the extent of state authority and women's conditions proxied by infant mortality rates and empowerment.¹⁴ We focus on these variables not only because they map onto key dimensions of state capacity, but also because peacebuilding activities of contemporary missions are often expected to impact these measurements. Economic and political development, support for restoration of state authority and cross-cutting gender tasks complement most missions' core security tasks.¹⁵

Our sample includes countries that have experienced a civil war (as defined by UCDP/PRIO), received a UN deployment, and then seen the UN withdraw. Our time frame comprises 10 years *during* the mission and 10 years *after* withdrawal ($t=0$).¹⁶ In the graphs, we chart one standard deviation above and below the mean with dotted lines, to show the level of variation within a certain period among different cases. The red line indicates average pre-deployment levels for that variable.¹⁷ We use the term "descriptive trends" because we do not provide inferential statistics and we do not claim any causal effects; however, these descriptive

¹³ Hendrix, cited in Ibid.

¹⁴ [IMRs are commonly used as indirect measure of women's access to health. As noted above, IMRs also have implications for future economic growth.](#)

¹⁵ See Lanholtz, 2010, United Nations, "Principles and Guidelines for UN Peacekeeping Operations", Chapter 2.

¹⁶ Average mission duration in our sample (1990-2015) is 11.3 years. When a mission replaces an existing one in the same country, we do not consider this as an after-mission case. Notice that we also collapse multiple missions in the same country (e.g. UNAMID and UNMIS in Sudan).

¹⁷ We use pre-deployment level as reference because we want to compare during-mission with after-mission periods to observe whether positive changes linked to mission's presence reverse when host countries are left alone.

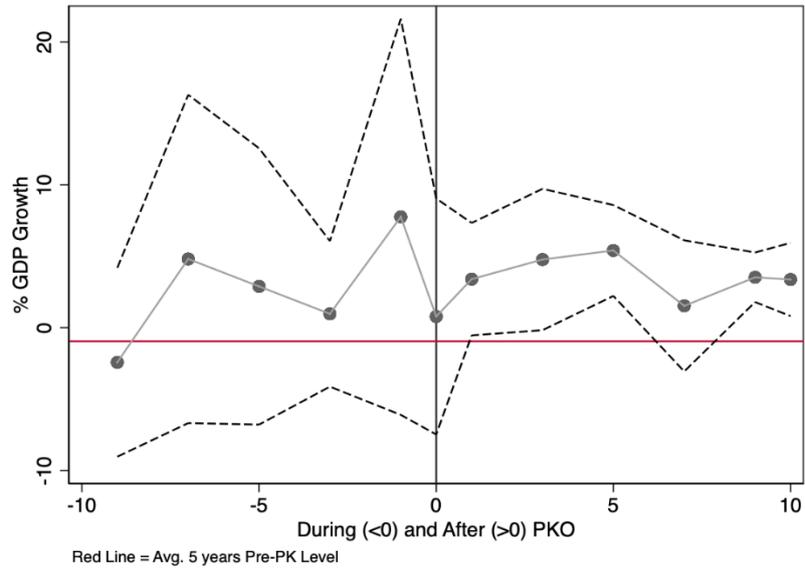
analyses visualise temporal trends of core variables that could provide some starting insights into the relationship between the outcomes observed and UN PKO withdrawals. To be more explicit, we avoid using regression tables for two reasons. First, this piece seeks to offer an introductory empirical context for studying the effects of UN missions' withdrawals and, second, regressions track the correlational nature between observables and we do not want to suggest any causal effects given the paucity of data, the research design challenges, and the limited space of this piece. All variables are from the V-Dem data project.¹⁸

GDP Growth: The literature on armed conflict has highlighted that civil wars have a significantly negative effect on a state's GDP and economic development.¹⁹ Figure 1 shows a feature that is common to all of the graphs that follow. The dashed lines plot the standard deviation from the mean (solid line), describing variation in the sample. The red line indicates the average *pre-deployment* level of GDP growth. We can see that at some point in time, especially during the first year of UN deployment, the deviation from the mean is too large to be indicative. It seems, however, that countries have a more similar trajectory after UN withdrawal (shown by the smaller standard deviation), and most (but not all) countries experience growth in GDP, after exit. Notice the scale, which suggests that GDP changes have a very broad range.

Figure 1. GDP growth during and after UN missions

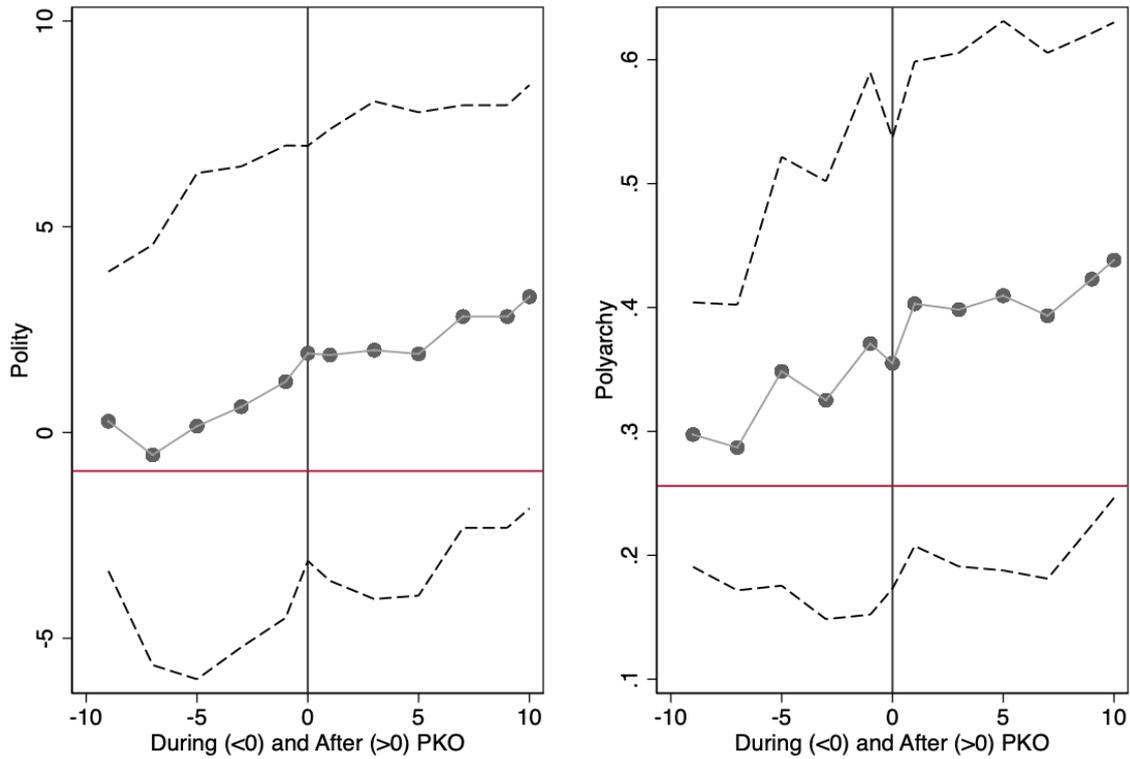
¹⁸ Coppedge et al., "V-Dem Dataset v7".

¹⁹ Bove, Elia and Smith, "On the Heterogeneous Consequences of Civil War"; Costalli, Moretti and Pischella, "The Economic Costs of Civil War".



Democracy: For countries that suffer civil war and then host a UN peacekeeping operation, which subsequently withdraws, we chart an apparent positive change in both Polity (left) and Polyarchy scores (right), after exit. However, dashed boundaries in Figure 2 suggest significant levels of uncertainty surrounding that observation, and so even though we can see positive trends, it means that there has been such large-scale variation among cases that it is not possible to assert with confidence that there is a positive trend.

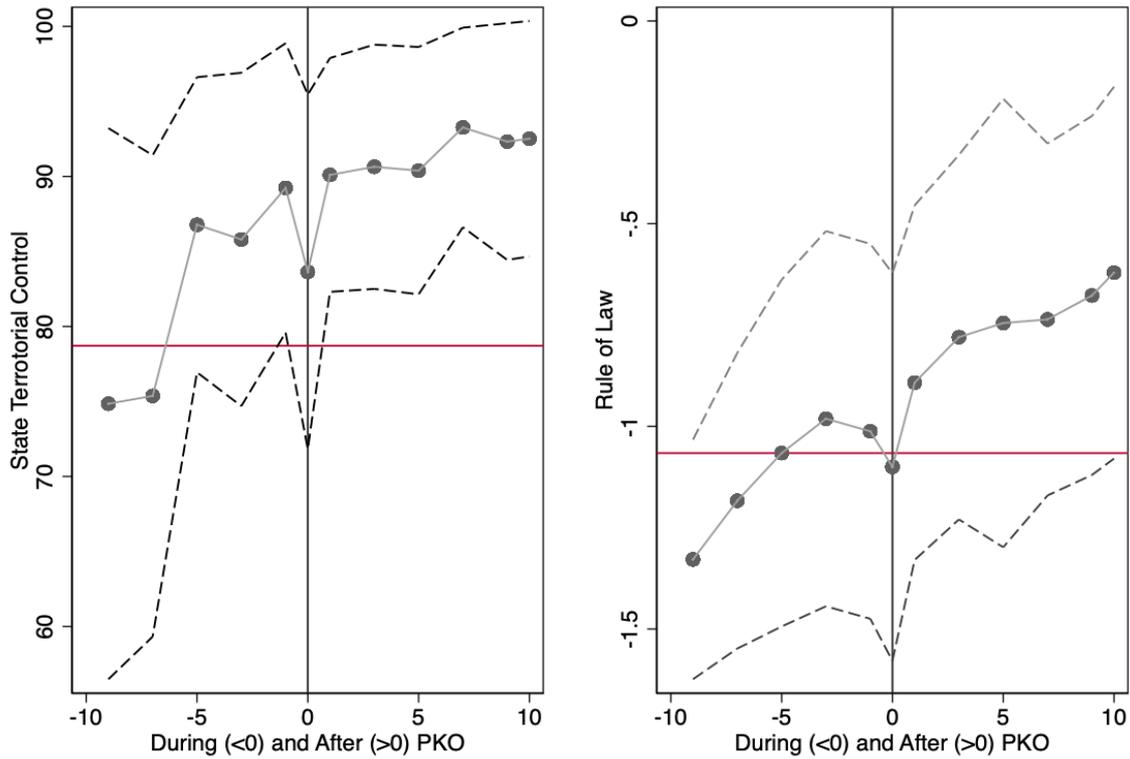
Figure 2. Democracy scores during and after UN missions



Red Line = Avg. 5 years Pre-PK Level

State Authority: The data in Figure 3 show that both UN deployment, and subsequent withdrawal, are associated with an improvement in state territorial control (left) and rule of law (right) in recipient countries. The short-lived decline corresponding to mission’s withdrawal on both measures of state control and authority may be attributed to an adjustment for complete hand over of responsibility from the UN, suggesting potential unintended effects of missions’ withdrawal that would bear attention. Interestingly, the “after exit” period has a significant increase of territorial control by the central authority (left figure). Again, uncertainty around the observed trend begs caution.

Figure 3. State Authority during and after UN missions

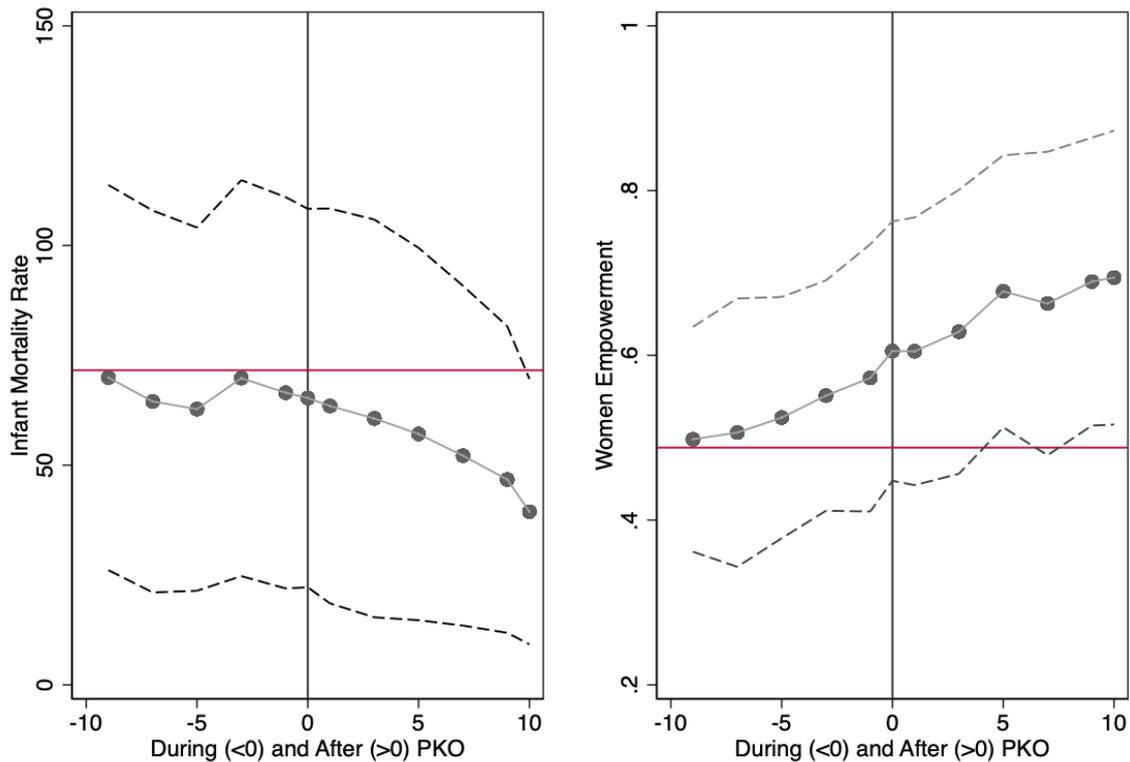


Red Line = Avg. 5 years Pre-PK Level

Women's Conditions: Figure 4 suggests that the level of infant mortality decreases after PKO withdrawal. However, two possible issues emerge. First, variation of these declines is substantial. Second, this data may also capture the system-level effect of declining infant mortality rates across the developing world since World War II. We also note that another measure of women's conditions, namely women empowerment, steadily improves both during and after the mission.

Taken together and with a grain of salt given the large uncertainty boundaries, these trends describe a seemingly positive trajectory for countries after PKO exit. Some positive trends, such a decline in IMR and institutional improvements seem to persist, though trends in economic recovery measured by GDP growth are less clear-cut.

Figure 4. Women's conditions during and after UN missions



Red Line = Avg. 5 years Pre-PK Level

Empirical Challenges

In light of the trends presented above, it is vital to highlight three important challenges for future research that aims to investigate effects of the withdrawal of UN peace operations on state capacity: missing data, small samples, and non-random assignment of the treatment.

A key challenge researchers will encounter is the small population of cases, as our sample includes a maximum of 20 UN missions. Given the aim of investigating after-exit trends, the sample is necessarily limited to missions that are concluded. Also, data is not always available for all cases, which further limits the available sample and potentially signals an issue of non-random missing data. This challenge is significant as, even if we were able to include the entire universe of completed UN missions, the sample would only number 57: excluding Cold War-era missions—the first generation of peacekeeping operations—the number of cases drops to 44 missions globally. Among these 44 missions, we may decide to focus only on those whose mandates included capacity building, and whose presence extended beyond phases of intense violence. Samples (N) shrink further when accounting for additional treatments across time. The largest sample is N1, where all units could experience a civil war (first treatment).

Then, within the smaller N2 of civil war countries only, some of these could receive a UN deployment (second treatment). This leads to an even smaller N3 of countries with UN peace operations. Finally, only some countries have experienced the withdrawal of UN missions (third treatment), making up a sample of N4; and if we are to study countries over 5 years after withdrawal, this would leave us with the smallest sample (N5).

Furthermore, available cases of completed missions exhibit one crucial problem. Not only do countries receive multiple treatments over time, but these treatments are also systematically related and unlikely to be random. Effective research design to evaluate the effects of UN withdrawal would need to account for the multiple treatments and their likely non-random assignment based on observable data-generating processes or, even harder, on unobservable ones. These research designs must also assess the different intensities and timings of each treatment.

Final Remarks

Should empirical and methodological limitations prevent the academic community from investigating the effects of UN peace missions on state capacity after exit? We believe not. Even in the absence of clear-cut identification strategies for gauging the effect of UN withdrawals, the lasting consequences of these missions on state stability – after the UN has left — are vital to understand. However, this means that scholars should invest heavily in methodological triangulation (qualitative/quantitative and different level of analysis) and transparency of inferential scope conditions. As we highlighted above, when using aggregate-level data (country-year) analysis, these preliminary trends show a high level of heterogeneity between cases. Thus, beside useful and necessary qualitative analysis based on fieldwork, quantitative analyses based on observational data with subnational variation²⁰ and surveys after UN exit²¹ will serve as fruitful models to gauge the effects of UN withdrawal on state capacity.

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²⁰ Ruggeri, Dorussen and Gizelis cited in Ibid.

²¹ Dorussen “Security Perception after the Completion of UN Peacekeeping in Timor-Leste”.

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