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Many hurdles to take: Explaining peacekeepers' ability to engage in human rights activities

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Hannah Smidt
Department of Political Science, University of St. Gallen, Switzerland

Constantin Ruhe
Department of Social Sciences, Institute of Political Science
Goethe University Frankfurt am Main, Germany

Sabine Otto
Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, Sweden

Abstract
Human rights are a fundamental principle and purpose of the United Nations (UN). Yet, UN peacekeeping operations (PKOs) exhibit substantial variation in their ability to engage in human rights activities. While existing research has investigated deployment and mandates, we explain what peacekeepers can actually do on the ground. We argue that the UN Security Council's permanent member states (the P5) limit human rights mandates if they have private interests in PKO host countries, thereby diminishing peacekeepers' ability to promote and protect human rights. Moreover, armed conflict shifts priorities away from human rights activities. We use novel data on 21 human rights activities in African countries (1991–2016) and item response models to capture PKOs' latent ability to engage in these activities. Random and fixed effects regression and mediation analyses with sensitivity tests support our expectations. We find that the P5's economic interests in the PKO host country negatively correlate with the strength of human rights mandate provisions, which in turn negatively correlates with PKOs' ability to engage in human rights activities. We find similar, although less consistent, correlations for P5's security interests. Yet, while mandates partly define the scope of PKOs' activities, field-level conditions also have an influence. Specifically, ongoing armed conflict negatively correlates with PKOs' ability to engage in human rights activities. Our results suggest that rising challenges to the liberal international order by powerful states, coupled with the more frequent deployment of PKOs in conflict zones, will likely increase the hurdles that UN PKOs need to overcome to meet expectations regarding their human rights engagement.

Keywords
United Nations, peacekeeping, human rights, latent variable, measurement model

Introduction

Human rights promotion and the maintenance of peace and security are the principle ambitions of the United Nations (UN) Charter (United Nations, 1945). While the two ambitions have long existed in silos (Maus, 2020), today the UN prides itself with mainstreaming

Corresponding author:
Constantin Ruhe, Department of Social Sciences, Institute of Political Science, Goethe University Frankfurt am Main, Campus Westend – PEG-Building, Theodor-W.-Adorno-Platz 6, 60323 Frankfurt am Main, Germany.
Email: ruhe@soz.uni-frankfurt.de

human rights in all peace and security-related activities (Guterres, 2020), including UN peacekeeping operations (United Nations, 2011). Nevertheless, UN peacekeeping operations (PKOs) show substantial variation in their human rights engagement on the ground. For example, in its initial deployment phase, the PKO in South Sudan (United Nations Mission in South Sudan) engaged in educating security forces on international human rights law, building capacity of human rights institutions and supporting domestic human rights groups. Since late 2013, however, the United Nations Mission in South Sudan prioritized human rights monitoring and investigations and 'nearly eliminated [human rights] capacity building' (Day et al., 2019: 84). This article seeks to explain this variation. Why are PKOs sometimes able to engage in many ambitious human rights activities and other times must scale back their human rights work or even become unable to engage in this policy area at all?

We define human rights broadly as 'inalienable rights of people' including physical integrity, civil and political rights, and social, economic and cultural rights (Carey et al., 2010: 8–9). Empirically, we investigate all activities that PKOs themselves classify as protecting and promoting human rights, including protecting children and preventing sexual-based and gender-based violence.[1] These activities differ from PKOs' democracy promotion activities, that is, assisting elections, educating voters, forming political parties and strengthening democratic institutions (Blair et al., 2023), although their overarching goals (i.e., human rights respect and democratization) naturally overlap. Moreover, PKOs' human rights activities are broader than their civilian protection activities, which focus on physical integrity rights violations resulting from *imminent* (threats of) physical violence (United Nations, 2023).

Existing research tells us little about the origins of systematic variation in what peacekeepers do on the ground. Despite human rights being a cornerstone of the UN, where, when and why PKOs implement human rights activities thus remains unknown. Instead, researchers overwhelmingly concentrate on explaining where PKOs (not) deploy (e.g., Beardsley and Schmidt, 2012; Fortna, 2008; Gilligan and Stedman, 2003; Ruggeri et al., 2016) or, to a lesser degree, the variation in their mandates (Hultman, 2013; Kreft, 2017). Recently, Blair et al. (2022) examined the proportion of mandated security and peacebuilding-related tasks that peacekeepers translate into action on the ground. Since PKOs' engagement may go beyond their mandate, however, they fail to capture the full extent of PKOs' ability to engage in a policy area.

This research gap is a significant omission. First, when peacekeepers fail to engage in a policy area that is widely held to be a core task of UN peacekeeping, disappointed expectations hurt the legitimacy of PKOs (Talentino, 2007). For instance, people in the Democratic Republic of the Congo took to the streets to protest against peacekeepers' inactivity in the face of gross human rights violations (Moloo, 2016), while politicians in the United States used the PKOs' inability to protect human rights to propagate budget cuts (NPR, 2017). Thus, as Secretary-General Guterres explained, creating 'realistic expectations' about what PKOs can do is a primary policy concern (UN News, 2018). Creating realistic expectations, however, requires knowledge about when and where PKOs actually have the ability to protect and promote human rights.

Second, researchers argue that human rights engagement of multidimensional PKOs contributes to their success in post-conflict peacebuilding (Fortna, 2008: 100).Yet, human rights activities are not randomly assigned to PKOs: peacekeepers might be less likely to promote human rights when conditions militate against peacebuilding success. Conversely, peacekeepers might be more likely to do human rights work when stable peace is likely anyway. Therefore, we aim to provide systematic insights into when and where PKOs can actually engage in human rights work. Only with these insights, can we accurately assess whether (and to which degree) peacekeepers' human rights activities contribute to peacebuilding effectiveness.

Recognizing that PKOs are field operations of an international organization, we argue that their ability to engage in human rights activities is affected by decision-making processes at both the international level and the field level. At the international level, the permanent member states of the UN Security Council (the P5) may restrict mandate provisions for peacekeepers' human rights work if they fear that this work impinges on their private economic and security interests. For example, if a P5 has a security cooperation agreement or shares large trade volumes with the PKO host state, then it may be reluctant to support a human rights mandate that allows the PKO staff to scrutinize and potentially criticize the human rights implications of such security or trade relations. In turn, limited human rights mandates may reduce PKOs' ability to promote and protect human rights by curtailing their authority, personnel and budget for activities in this domain. At the field level, ongoing armed conflict likely obstructs PKOs' human rights work because insecurity shifts peacekeepers' priorities away from human rights and makes host governments

reluctant to support human rights activities that could potentially constrain counterinsurgency.

P5 interests, limited mandates and ongoing conflict are not obvious obstacles to peacekeepers' human rights engagement. Scholars have argued that: (i) P5's power politics has much less explanatory power for international organizations' human rights promotion after 1990 than commonly assumed (Lebovic and Voeten, 2006); (ii) PKO mandates can diverge from PKOs' activities given field-level agents autonomy and capacity constraints (Blair et al., 2022); and (iii) armed conflict can motivate rather than constrain peacekeepers' efforts (Duursma and Smidt, 2023; Ruggeri et al., 2016). Ultimately, how these three conditions affect peacekeepers' human rights engagement is an empirical question.

Thus, we test our argument using novel data on 21 different human rights activities implemented by 19 UN PKOs in Sub-Saharan Africa between 1991 and 2016. Based on these activities, we estimate PKOs' ability to protect and promote human rights using an item response model (IRM). We then estimate linear regression models of PKOs' ability across host countries and months. Random effects (and, alternatively, fixed effects) and a diverse range of controls (e.g., PKOs' organizational capacity) account for time-invariant and time-varying confounding (e.g., human rights violations and PKOs' organizational capacity).

Consistent with our expectations, we find that the P5's economic interests in the PKO host country negatively correlate with the strength of human rights mandate provisions, which in turn negatively correlate with PKOs' ability to engage in human rights activities. We find similar, although less consistent, correlations for P5's security interests. Yet, while mandates partly define the scope of PKOs' activities, field-level conditions also have an influence. Specifically, ongoing armed conflict negatively correlates with PKOs' ability to engage in human rights activities. We detail the implications of these results for policy and research in the 'Conclusion' section.

Research on determinants of peacekeeping

Cross-national research explores peacekeeping deployment decisions (Fortna, 2008; Gilligan and Stedman, 2003; Ruggeri et al., 2016; Townsen and Reeder, 2014) and selected aspects of PKO mandates (Howard and Dayal, 2018; Hultman, 2013; Hultman and Johansson, 2017; Kreft, 2017). We know much less about the determinants of peacekeepers' engagement upon deployment. As Gilligan and Stedman (2003: 52) already pointed out two decades ago, 'understanding where the UN intervenes in civil wars is only a first step in evaluating whether the organization lives up to its universal aspirations. A second question is whether the UN provides equitable care to the countries in which it intervenes.'

Instead, research focuses on explaining deployment and mandates of PKOs (Fortna, 2008; Gilligan and Stedman, 2003; Mullenbach, 2005; Stojek and Tir, 2015; Zhang, 2022). This research suggests that the permanent member states of the UN Security Council (P5) want to protect their 'sphere of influence,' which makes them less likely to send PKOs to neighbouring countries (Fortna, 2008) and to military allies (Mullenbach, 2005). Yet, stronger trade ties between the P5 and war-torn states seem to facilitate PKO deployment (Stojek and Tir, 2015; Zhang, 2022). Moreover, the P5 seem to follow the 'responsibility to protect'-principle. Specifically, high levels of civilian killings and sexual violence increase the chance that the P5 mandate PKOs to address these atrocities (Hultman, 2013; Hultman and Johansson, 2017; Kreft, 2017). What remains unexplored is to which degree their private interests shape how mandate provisions *are translated* into what peacekeepers actually do on the ground. Do limited human rights provisions in mandates limit human rights engagement or do PKOs autonomously engage in human rights work despite missing mandate provisions?

Beyond international-level conditions (i.e., the P5 interests and mandate design), field-level factors shape peacekeeping. Specifically, armed conflict motivates *greater* investment into peacekeeping. For example, PKOs scale up troop deployments in the most insecure regions where battle-field activities threaten human rights (Ruggeri et al., 2016; Townsen and Reeder, 2014). However, ongoing armed conflict can also delay PKOs' implementation of peacebuilding tasks (Blair et al., 2022). Moreover, peacekeepers may find it difficult to implement human rights monitoring during ongoing conflict (Paddon Rhoads, 2016, 2019). Given these mixed findings, more research on how field-level armed conflict affects peacekeepers' ability to engage in human rights activities is warranted.[2]

In sum, previous research reveals important determinants of PKO mandates and deployment. Yet, once a PKO is mandated and deployed, its ability to carry out activities, for example, in human rights, has not been examined systematically across countries. We help fill this gap.

The relevance of PKOs' ability

The term *ability* describes what it takes to do something and do it well. Ability is an attribute that PKOs possess

to varying degrees but that we cannot observe directly. However, this latent trait determines the likelihood that PKOs succeed in implementing more or less complicated activities (Carr and Kingsbury, 1938).[3] We focus on PKOs' ability rather than their *willingness* because PKOs are instruments of international organizations. Willingness is a variable that characterizes member states and individual bureaucrats within PKOs. Suppose some states or bureaucrats are less willing to do human rights work. In that case, this lack of will reduces the ability of the international organization – the UN and its PKO – to engage in human rights activities. We theorize about PKOs' ability to engage in a policy domain (i.e., human rights) rather than the implementation of individual activities for several reasons. First, focusing on ability enables us to formulate a widely applicable, coherent theory. For example, one might explain assistance with human rights-related legal reforms with peacekeepers' legal expertise, but human rights monitoring with the prevalence of atrocities. By conceptualizing different activities as manifestations of PKOs' underlying ability to engage in the policy area 'human rights,' it is possible to identify the common determinants of this engagement. Indeed, policy-makers often seek to understand what they can do to strengthen PKOs' ability to engage in a policy area (e.g., the UN's Call to Action for Human Rights (United Nations, 2020)).

Second, ability is a more meaningful outcome than individual activities because not all activities are equally easy or difficult for peacekeepers to implement. While some activities are standard operating procedures in peacekeeping, others require exceptional expertise. Crucially, however, the ease or difficulty of implementing an activity is not directly observable. Thus, what we can infer from seeing peacekeepers implement a selected set of activities remains unclear. In contrast, measuring peacekeepers' ability to become active in a policy area is an intuitively meaningful concept for evaluating PKOs.

Explaining PKOs' ability to do human rights work

In short, we argue that PKOs' ability to protect and promote human rights in war-affected countries is fraught with obstacles. At the international level, the P5 may oppose human rights provisions in PKOs' mandates if these provisions go against their economic and security interests in the PKO host country.[4] Since mandates circumscribe peacekeepers' authority and define their budget and personnel resources (Di Salvatore et al., 2022), limited human rights mandates likely diminish PKOs' ability to engage in this policy area. Yet, even if PKOs have a strong human rights mandate, obstacles in the field and, specifically, armed conflict may incentivize peacekeepers to shift activity away from human rights.

International level obstacles: P5 interests

The UN Security Council (UNSC) members negotiate the design of PKOs' mandates, including more or less extensive provisions for human rights engagement. Through the threat of a veto against the whole mandate, the P5 wield the highest influence on mandate design. In turn, mandates have important downstream effects. Specifically, human rights mandates are the legal permission for peacekeepers to promote and protect human rights in their host states. In addition, only PKOs with a human rights mandate get the budget for establishing dedicated human rights sections and hiring civilian personnel with relevant human rights expertise. These experts are fundamental to, for example, identifying rights violations, training domestic actors in human rights matters, or persuading them to pay attention to human rights issues (Maus, 2020). Thus, if P5 states limit human rights provisions in PKOs' mandates, they likely restrict the range of human rights activities that peacekeepers can implement on the ground.

Indeed, while human rights have become normative guideposts of state behaviour, '[UN Security] Council decision-making is also shaped by power and national interests [. . .] leading to selective and inconsistent human rights outcomes' (Walling, 2020: 303–304). For example, Russia has recently blocked the addition of human rights tasks in the new mandate of the PKO in Haiti (Security Council Report, 2017). Likewise, 'China not only tries to prevent the inclusion of human rights language in official UN documents but also makes consistent efforts to curb the number of human rights positions within UN peace operations' (Zürcher, 2020: 136). However, the liberal P5 also sometimes oppose human rights in peacekeeping. For instance, 'the United States [. . .] has blocked human rights language in many country-specific situations in the past' (Di Razza and Mamiya 2016: 3, footnote 4). While the deployment of a PKO required consensus among all P5 (Beardsley and Schmidt, 2012), a single P5 state can utilize negotiations, backdoor diplomacy and veto threats to limit human rights provisions in PKO mandates (Walling, 2020).

When do the P5 have an interest in weakening human rights provisions in PKO mandates? Our intuition is that obstruction of human rights provisions is more likely if a P5 state has stronger bilateral ties with

and, thus, private interests in the PKO host state (Donelly, 1988: 211). This intuition aligns with realist accounts of UNSC politics that 'permanent members . . . apply human rights standards against enemies but not friends' (Walling, 2020: 301–302). One relevant dimension of bilateral ties between the P5 and the host government is security (Mullenbach, 2005). Existing research underlines the reluctance of the P5 to accept peacekeeping on the territory of security partners (cf. Beardsley and Schmidt, 2012; Mullenbach, 2005). We argue that if the P5 allow a PKO in their 'sphere of influence' (e.g., as Russia did in Tajikistan, 1994–2000 or China did in Sudan, 2005–2021), then the P5 likely want to maintain tight control over what peacekeepers do.

Specifically, the P5 may want to forestall extensive human rights provisions in PKO mandates, which enable peacekeepers to conduct human rights activities that are potentially costly for their allies. When mandates allow PKOs to work on human rights issues, peacekeepers can draw attention to the host state's sub-standard human rights situation. PKOs may detect and report on government-perpetrated violations. Yet even if peacekeepers only find that non-state actors commit atrocities, host governments may be accused of complicity or inactivity. In any case, PKOs' attention to rights violations can bring governments into the international spotlight, trigger material costs, including sanctions, and embolden domestic rivals (e.g., Murdie and Davis, 2010). The P5 states may want to prevent such costs for their friends.

Moreover, the P5 may want to prevent human rights provisions in PKOs' mandates to preserve allied host states' sovereignty and, specifically, the latter's freedom to decide on how to address security threats (Hirschmann, 2020: 27–28). For example, in 2015, UN peacekeeping officials told the Congolese Foreign Minister to discharge two generals, General Bruno Mandevu and General Fall Sikabwe, for human rights abuse. Upon refusal of the request, '(t)he U.N. peacekeeping mission, MONUSCO, "effectively stopped" support to the Congolese army (FARDC) for its planned military campaign against the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR)' (Nichols, 2015). P5 states allied with the PKO host state likely seek to forestall such pressures on state sovereignty.

Finally, the P5 may also anticipate that PKOs with extensive human rights mandates reduce their own room for security cooperation with the host country, for example, military operations, weapon delivery or intelligence exchange. With an extensive human rights mandate, PKOs may scrutinize bilateral security cooperation of the host state for negative human rights implications. For example, in the autumn of 2021, Russia concluded a security deal with the Malian interim government. In June 2022, Russia then abstained on the UNSC vote over the extension of the PKO in Mali, because it evaluated the human rights language in the mandate as too 'intrusive' (Nichols, 2022).[5] Likewise, after concluding a security deal with the government of the Central African Republic in 2018 (Reuters, 2018), Russia, with the support of India and China, effectively opposed mandate proposals that would have made human rights a priority task for the PKO in the country (Security Council Report, 2021). In sum, we expect that security ties between the P5 and the PKO host state may lead the former to use their leverage in the UNSC to weaken human rights language in PKO mandates.

A second relevant dimension of shared interests between the P5 and the host government evolves around economic relations. We know that the P5 approve peacekeeping deployment in a conflict-affected country when they estimate PKO-induced stabilization as conducive to their trade relations with that country (Stojek and Tir, 2015; Zhang, 2022). For similar reasons, the P5 likely prefer PKO mandates with security-related and stability-related tasks over PKO mandates with human rights tasks. This is because PKOs struggle to implement complex mandates that include many different tasks at once (Blair et al., 2022) and, therefore, trade-offs exist between implementing human rights tasks that may benefit stability indirectly and in the long run and executing security tasks that foster stability directly and in the short run. We expect that the P5 with economic interests in a PKO host country prefer the latter to safeguard economic returns.

Moreover, the P5 may oppose a strong human rights mandate because its implementation could increase attention to their trade partner's sub-standard human rights performance. This attention may also have negative repercussions on the P5, especially if they maintain trade relations. For example, safeguarding economic investment and building international reputation are key objectives of China's participation in peacekeeping. Peacekeepers' human rights activities can endanger both objectives: human rights tasks likely distract peacekeepers from stabilization tasks (that might be deemed necessary for securing investments) and expose human rights violations, which in turn would reflect poorly on countries that trade with the abusive government (Zürcher, 2020). Furthermore, a P5 may obstruct human rights language in the mandate of the PKO on its trade partner's territory

just in order to prevent further interference and the resulting above-mentioned limitations on its ally's sovereignty.

Finally, not only the P5 but also their trade partners may influence human rights mandate provisions. Specifically, when the P5 rely on natural resource exports from the host state, the host state likely has leverage to sway outcomes of UNSC negotiations away from unwanted human rights elements in PKO mandates. For example, trade between China and Sudan developed in the 1990s, and China and Sudan signed an oil development deal in 1997. However, Sudan proved volatile and risky for business. In an unprecedented step, China lobbied the Sudanese government to accept a PKO in Darfur. In return, 'Liu [the Chinese special envoy to Sudan] traveled to Western capitals where he argued that priority should be given to 'stability in order to ensure economic development.' The final text of the PKO mandate proved consistent with Sudanese and Chinese preferences (Macleod, 2017: 394). The African Union–United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur was authorized with only three human rights provisions, well below the human rights provisions' average for other PKOs deployed at the time.

> *Hypothesis 1:* Security and economic ties between the P5 and the host government negatively correlate with a PKO's ability to engage in human rights activities through fewer human rights provisions in its mandate.

Field-level obstacles: Ongoing armed conflict

Our understanding of PKOs' ability to engage in human rights activities likely remains incomplete without considering conditions that affect decisions made by peacekeepers and their implementing partners on the ground. Several field-level conditions may influence PKOs' ability to protect and promote human rights in their theatres of intervention. However, since PKOs are increasingly deployed in volatile environments, we theorize about armed conflict as a particularly important one.

Research shows that PKO leadership prioritize security tasks to repel threats and stabilize the situation during armed conflict (Blair et al., 2022; Karlsrud, 2015). This prioritization may reduce the overall mission capacity to mainstream and implement human rights activity, for example, reducing UN military personnel available to accompany and protect human rights officers. Yet, recurring armed conflict intensifies threats to the safety of UN personnel, who may even become deliberate targets (Fjelde et al., 2016). These threats may disproportionately affect the freedom of movement of unarmed civilian components responsible for the majority of human rights activities. For instance, in Sierra Leone, the UN Secretary-General reported in May 2000 that '[t]he deployment of United Nations human rights monitors to key locations in the country had to be curtailed as a result of the recent hostilities' (United Nations, 2000).

Renewed armed conflict may also drive a wedge between the PKO, which is mandated to protect civilians from human rights abuses, and the PKO host government, which seeks to repress insurgent threats and, thereby, often become responsible for civilian casualties. This disagreement is consequential because many human rights activities require the host state's cooperation, for example, human rights awareness training of state security forces or institutional reform. Moreover, when fighting challengers, governments are likely particularly reluctant to spend time and resources on supporting human rights activities. Governments may also fear increased international scrutiny of their counterinsurgency efforts, which might weaken their capacity to fend off armed threats. For example, after armed conflict recurred in South Sudan in 2013, the government started obstructing peacekeepers' work, citing security reasons, and threatened to withdraw consent to PKO deployment. human rights monitoring by the PKO has become limited due to these restrictions (Paddon Rhoads, 2019: 293–294). Potentially, PKO leaders themselves may scale back controversial human rights activities to maintain governments' consent and cooperation in other areas. Thus, we expect:

> *Hypothesis 2:* Ongoing armed conflict negatively correlates with a PKO's ability to engage in human rights activities.

We note that inactivity is not peacekeepers' automatic response to conflict. Since armed conflict can fuel human rights abuses, peacekeepers could also engage in more, not less, human rights activities despite the before-mentioned obstacles (Duursma and Smidt, 2023; Ruggeri et al., 2016). Thus, our hypothesis warrants testing. We also note that explanations of PKOs' ability are inevitably more complex. We cannot model all these complexities but focus on constraints external to the PKO (the P5 interests, the mandate strength and the conflict context) and control for other conditions, including organizational factors within PKOs.

Research design

We test our hypotheses across 19 UN PKOs deployed in Sub-Saharan African countries between 1991 and 2016. We focus on Sub-Saharan Africa because it is the locus of most PKOs that were newly authorized after the end of the Cold War. Moreover, PKOs on the continent also include some of the most interesting cases for this study. Several P5 states have strong private ties to African countries, for instance, Mali and Sudan. Thus, human rights activities of PKOs deployed in these countries regularly spark controversy at the UNSC (Nichols, 2022; Shinn, 2009). In addition, some but not all PKOs in Africa, for example, the current missions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Central African Republic (Karlsrud, 2015), operate during intensive fighting. As such, we can examine the implications of ongoing armed conflict for peacekeepers' human rights work. Our analysis begins at the outset of the post-Cold War period, which marks the beginning of human rights provisions in PKO mandates (Maus, 2020). Our analysis ends in 2016 because data on PKO mandates and activities are unavailable for later years. Our main units of analysis are PKO-months. Online Appendix A describes our sample.

Data on PKOs' activities

We measure PKOs' ability to engage in protecting and promoting human rights by drawing on a subset of the Peacekeeping Activity (PACT) dataset (Blair et al., 2022). The PACT codes information on PKOs' activities from 476 UN Secretary-General (SG) reports. SG reports are typically published every three to four months. While we use months as the unit of analysis in the main analysis, Online Appendix C replicates the results using the PKO-reporting period. We tend to prefer months because mandates can change during a reporting period.

While the PACT is the most comprehensive and up-to-date dataset on peacekeepers' activities, it has limitations. SG reports are political documents that inform the UNSC on the compliance of a PKO with its mandate. Nevertheless, we think it is unlikely that a PKO under-reports activity (i.e., fails to report activities that were actually implemented). First, a PKO has incentives to comply with mandated tasks, so it should not under-report its efforts to do so. Second, while specific details of activities may be under-reported, the PACT dataset codes an activity as being implemented if this activity is mentioned at least once in a report. This coding rule guards against under-estimating engagement. Additionally, it is unlikely that a PKO over-reports activity (i.e., reports activities that were not implemented). Media and civil society groups scrutinize *public* SG progress reports, deterring over-reporting through threatening reputational costs for such behaviour.[6]

Dependent variable

To measure PKOs' ability to protect and promote human rights, we identify 21 activities in this domain. Hence, we follow the conceptualization of ability as a latent trait, which can be inferred from observed activities (Carr and Kingsbury, 1938). These activities include monitoring, organizing outreach, facilitating meetings, assisting state capacity, providing material or logistical aid and implementing activities without the state government in the domain of human rights, including children's rights and protection from sexual-based and gender-based violence as special categories. Our estimation approach of PKOs' ability does not require us to capture all possible human rights activities but just a diverse subset of human rights activities. In Online Appendix K, we provide a list of these activities and examples from SG reports.[7]

Using these observed human rights activities, we estimate PKOs' ability to engage in human rights work using IRMs. IRMs were initially developed in psychology to measure individuals' latent (i.e., unobserved) traits (e.g., their ability) from observed behaviour. For example, based on the correct and incorrect answers to a series of mathematical test questions, IRMs can estimate: (i) the difficulty of correctly answering questions; and (ii) a person's mathematical ability. We apply this logic to PKOs' ability. We use a two-parameter logistic IRM, which estimates for each activity j the probability that a PKO i implements it in month t:

$$\mathrm{P}(\text{activity}_{jit}) = \frac{\exp(\beta_j(\theta_{it} - \alpha_j))}{1 + \exp(\beta_j(\theta_{it} - \alpha_j))} \quad (1)$$

where θ_{it} estimates the PKO's latent ability to engage in human rights activities on a continuous scale with a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1. The parameter α_j describes the difficulty of an activity. β_j is the discrimination parameter, which determines how much we can learn from each observed activity about the PKO's ability.

Figure 1 illustrates the probability of observing specific human rights activities (on the y-axis) for different levels of ability (θ on the x-axis). The black line depicts

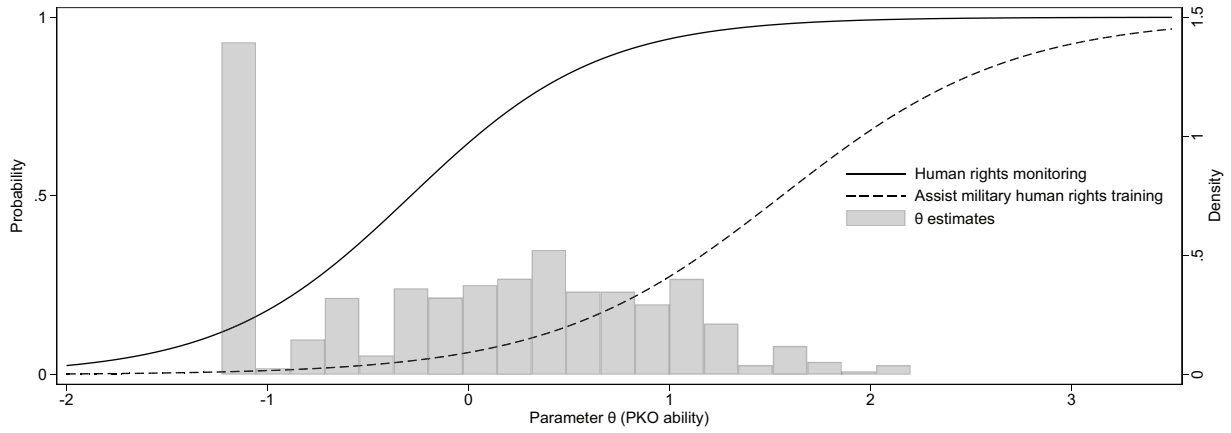

Figure 1. Estimated association between ability and monitoring human rights and assisting human rights training for the military.

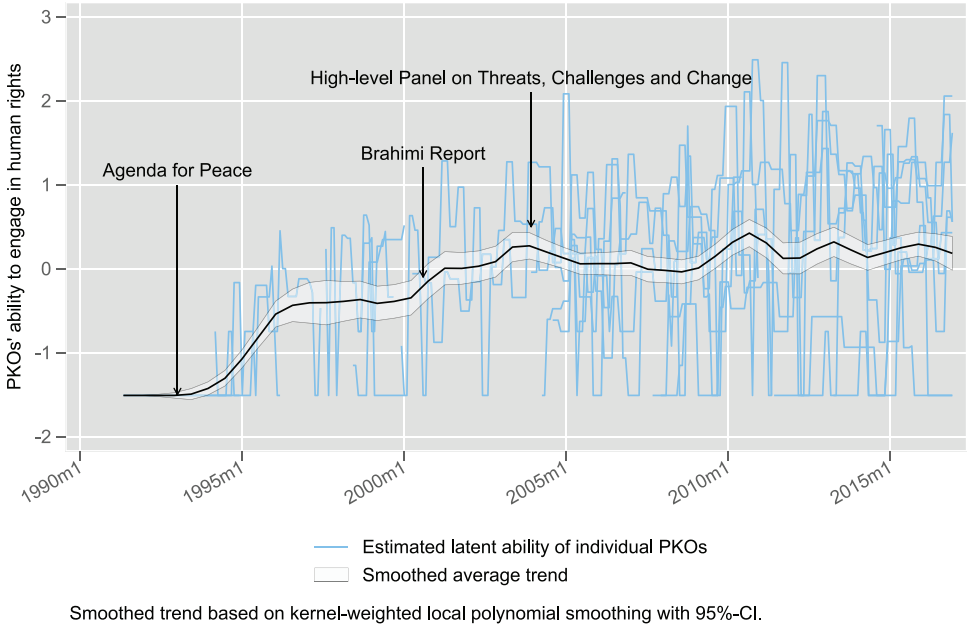

Figure 2. Trend in United Nations peacekeeping operations' ability to engage in human rights activities.

the probability function of human rights monitoring. Monitoring is a relatively easy activity. Even if PKOs' ability is below average (<0), the probability of monitoring is above 50%. In contrast, assisting human rights training for the domestic military (dashed line) is a rather ambitious activity. PKOs with a lower-than-average ability (<0) rarely implement this activity. Figure 1 also shows the distribution of PKOs' ability in our sample (grey bars). While many PKOs possess a relatively low ability to engage in human rights work, most PKOs range in the middle. Ability is at -1.23, when PKOs did not implement any human rights activity. Our regression models explain these instances as well as any other ability level (see Online Appendix M).

Our concept of ability directly translates into our measurement model, and we validate our measure for PKOs' ability to engage in human rights activities in five ways (Online Appendix L). The estimates are in line with the historical development of human rights policy in peace operations (Maus, 2020: 9–11, 30–31): Figure 2 shows the estimated ability of each PKOs' (blue lines) and the global average of PKOs' ability (black line) to engage in human rights activities over time. PKOs' ability to promote human rights has generally increased between 1991 and 2003. This increase reflects key milestones: the 'Agenda for Peace' by SG Boutros Ghali, including the first explicit reference to human security; the Brahimi Report emphasizing human rights activity as key element

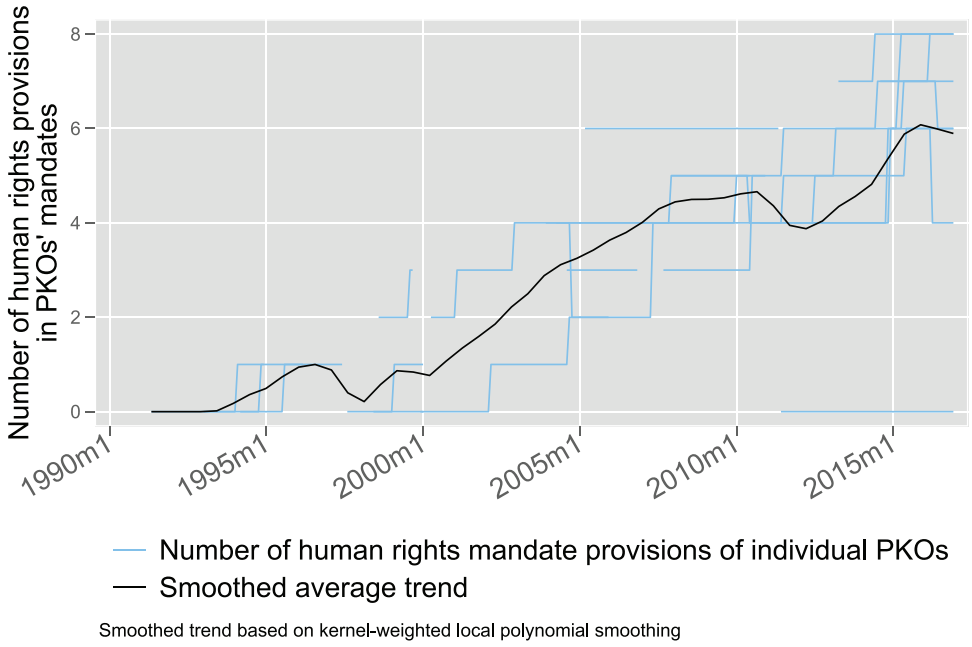

Figure 3. Trend in the strength of human rights provisions in United Nations peacekeeping operation mandates.

of PKOs; and the report of the High-level Panel on 'Threats, Challenges and Change' highlighting that state security is strongly related to respect for human rights.

Main independent variables

Per Hypothesis 1, we expect that security and economic ties between the P5 and the host government influence PKOs' ability to do human rights work through the P5's influence on human rights provisions in PKO mandates. We capture *the strength of human rights provisions* by drawing on the Peacekeeping Mandates (PEMA) dataset (Di Salvatore et al., 2022). The PEMA codes all UNSC resolutions concerning PKO mandates between 1991 and 2017, including information on 41 distinct tasks and the requested modality of engagement, for example, monitoring, assisting, or providing security.

To operationalize the strength of human rights provisions, we count the authorized modalities of engagement for human rights, children's rights and the prevention of sexual-based and gender-based violence. The variable ranges from 0 to 9. Figure 3 shows the sample variation in human rights provisions across PKOs over time (various blue lines) and the global average (black line). While the number of human rights provisions generally increased, there still remains substantial variation both across and within PKOs.

Following Beardsley and Schmidt (2012), we operationalize security-related ties using an indicator for whether at least one P5 state has a *military alliance or defence cooperation agreement* with the PKO host country. Data come from the Alliance Treaty and Obligations Dataset Version 5.1 (Leeds et al., 2002) and the Defense Cooperation Agreements Dataset Version 1.0 (Kinne, 2020).[8] In Online Appendix H, we show the robustness of results using an indicator for P5 military assistance during conflict and data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program External Support Dataset (Meier et al., 2023).

Following Stojek and Tir (2015), we capture economic ties with *trade flows* between the P5 and the host state (in current United States dollars). Since we argue that P5 states with the strongest trade ties hamper human rights provisions, we use the maximum of trade between each of the P5 states and a PKO host country in a year. Data come from the Trade Dataset Version 4.0 (Barbieri et al., 2009). We z-standardize this and all other continuous variables to facilitate interpretation. In Online Appendix G and Appendix I, we also show the results using these measures of security and economic ties for each P5 state separately.

Per Hypothesis 2, we expect that armed conflict influences PKOs' ability to engage in human rights work. We measure the presence of *armed conflict* with the Uppsala Conflict Data Program/Peace Research Institute Oslo Armed Conflict Dataset Version 20.1 (Gleditsch et al., 2002; Pettersson and Öberg, 2020). The variable is coded 1 for the presence of at least minor armed conflict (causing more than 25 battle deaths) in a given PKO host country-month, and 0 otherwise.

Identification

We test our hypotheses using linear models. Omitted confounding factors, post-treatment controls and reverse causality might threaten inferences. We discuss each challenge and propose remedies.

Country-specific differences (e.g., particular historical legacies) are a potential source of confounding. We account for time-invariant differences between PKO host countries using random effects. Coefficient estimates are virtually identical using fixed effects specifications, although confidence intervals are wider (Online Appendix B). We also control for four potentially confounding time-varying factors and add another eight in Online Appendix D. That is, we include *interest variability in the UNSC* as it may affect mandates and, thus, shape PKOs' ability (Beardsley and Schmidt, 2012). We measure interest variability using the standard deviation among the dynamic ideal point estimates based on the P5 votes in the UN General Assembly in each year (Bailey et al., 2017). Moreover, international norm changes likely influence UN policy priorities and, subsequently, affect mandate design and PKOs' activities (Hultman, 2013; Oksamytna and Lundgren, 2021). Thus, we control for *human rights norms in peacekeeping* using an indicator that is 1 for years after 2000, the period after the publication of the report of the Panel on UN PKOs ('Brahimi Report') calling for mainstreaming human rights in PKOs, and 0 otherwise. Furthermore, we control for *human rights conditions* that may influence both human rights mandates and peacekeepers' ability to prioritize their implementation. We use the reverse of the human rights scores estimated by Schnakenberg and Fariss (2014) and Fariss (2019), so that higher values represent more severe abuses.[9] Finally, we control for *economic development* in the host state that may influence P5 interests, affect conflict and enable peacekeepers to conduct human rights activities, using gross domestic product per capita (in constant United States dollars) from the World Bank's World Development Indicators (World Bank, 2016). Summary statistics are in Online Appendix A.

Post-treatment controls are a source of bias. Our measure for human rights violations is likely post-treatment, since ongoing armed conflict – one of our 'treatment' variables – may increase violations. However, we cannot simply exclude rights violations from our models because we are interested in whether armed conflict has a *direct* effect on peacekeepers' ability after accounting for rights violations. We, therefore, employ sequential g-estimation to recover the direct-controlled effect of armed conflict washed off by the effect of human rights violations (Acharya et al., 2015).

Another potential source of bias is reverse causality. We claim that the P5 with private ties to the host country limit human rights mandates. Reverse causality would be present if the P5 cut their ties to host states in response to human rights mandates or peacekeepers' ability to engage in human rights activities. This possibility is unlikely because inter-state ties tend to be stable over time. Security ties in the form of security alliances or defence cooperation agreements seem particularly sturdy (in our sample, on average 6.25 years). Likewise, trade ties often escape contemporary governments' purview since they depend on past governments, world markets and business actors.

Reverse causation would also be present if the P5 anticipate PKOs' ability to engage in human rights activities and adapt PKO mandates accordingly. Again, this scenario is unlikely because the P5 keep assigning tasks regardless of the conditions in PKOs' theatres of intervention (Blair et al., 2022; Howard and Dayal, 2018). Finally, we propose that ongoing armed conflict decreases PKOs' ability. The reverse may be true. Peacekeepers' human rights activities might decrease the likelihood of armed conflict. However, as Online Appendix E shows, longer lags of conflict (that should be unaffected by contemporaneous PKO activities) still negatively correlate with PKOs' ability to implement human rights activities.

Mediation analysis

We expect that economic and security ties between the P5 and the host state influence PKOs' ability *through* mandates. Thus, we estimate the average mediation effects in two steps. A first-stage model estimates the strength of human rights mandates of PKO i in month t:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Mandate}_{it} = {} & \beta_0 + \beta_1 * \text{International}_{it} + \\ & \beta_2 * \text{Field}_{it} + \tau * \text{X}_{it} + \alpha_i + \varepsilon_{it}\end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

The vectors $\text{International}_{it}$ and Field_{it} contain the international-level predictors (P5's ties to the host state) and the field-level predictor (armed conflict). The vector X_{it} includes the control variables. The vector α_i is the PKO-specific random effect.

In a second step, we estimate the association between our core independent variables and the latent ability of PKO_i to implement human rights activities in month t:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Ability}_{it} = {} & \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 * \text{Mandate}_{it} + \\ & \gamma_2 * \text{International}_{it} + \gamma_3 * \text{Field}_{it} + \\ & \tau * \text{X}_{it} + \alpha_i + \varepsilon_{it}\end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

Table 1. Random effects models of the strength of human rights mandate provision.

	(1)	*(2)*	*(3)*
	Model 1a	*Model 1b*	*Model 1c*
Alliance/defence cooperation with P5	-0.153		-0.237
	(0.276)		(0.194)
Trade flows with a P5 (maximum, ln)		-0.214**	-0.198**
		(0.0553)	(0.0624)
Active armed conflict			-0.148†
			(0.0862)
Variability in P5 interests (1 month lag)			-0.00818
			(0.0798)
Post-Brahimi Report (1 month lag)			0.338*
			(0.146)
Human rights violations (1 month lag)			0.0116
			(0.0823)
Gross domestic product per capita (ln, 1 month lag)			0.613
			(0.532)
Constant	-0.0737	-0.222	-0.0550
	(0.298)	(0.248)	(0.351)
Observations	1,223	1,223	1,223
R^2 within	0.0135	0.239	0.364
R^2 between	0.0123	0.0330	0.0851
R^2 overall	0.0261	0.0386	0.0653

Standard errors in parentheses.
†$p < 0.1$. *$p < 0.05$. **$p < 0.01$.

The variable Mandate_{it} now predicts PKOs' ability. The *average mediation effect (AME)* is simply the product of the coefficient on mandates in the ability model (γ_1) and the coefficients on P5's defence cooperation or P5's trade flows in the mandate model (β_1) (Hicks and Tingley, 2011; Imai et al., 2011). The identification of the AME builds on the sequential ignorability assumption. We discuss this assumption and present the robustness of our result against violations of this assumption in Online Appendix N.

Results

The results largely support our expectations regarding international and field-level hurdles for PKOs' ability to protect and promote human rights. Table 1 presents the first-stage model of human rights mandate provisions. Supporting Hypothesis 1, the coefficients on both the P5's alliances/defence cooperation and trade flows are consistently negative. If the P5 have economic or security ties with the host country, they seem more reluctant to endow a PKO in that country with a strong human rights mandate. While the coefficient on trade ties is highly significant, the coefficient on security ties has more uncertainty. Yet, the latter becomes statistically significant if we include additional control variables in our models (see Online Appendix D).

The coefficients on the control variables (in Model 1c) point in the expected direction. Armed conflict predicts lower human rights mandates, suggesting that fighting shifts priorities away from rights protection. The post-Brahimi Report period correlates with more frequent authorization of human rights tasks, suggesting that the UNSC politics also partly aligns with global norms. Interestingly, the coefficient on human rights violations is not statistically significant. In Online Appendix J, we measure rights violations with the Political Terror Scale and the Cingranelli–Richards scale, finding both positive and null effects. Although control variables should be interpreted cautiously, it seems that human rights violations are not robustly related to mandate provisions to address them.

We now turn to our outcome of interest: PKOs' ability to implement human rights activities. In Table 2, human rights mandate provisions consistently correlate with PKOs' ability to protect human rights. Across all

Table 2. Random effects models of United Nations peacekeeping operations' ability to engage in human rights activities.

	(1)	*(2)*	*(3)*
	Model 2a	*Model 2b*	*Model 2c*
Human rights mandate	0.365*	0.326*	0.401*
	(0.142)	(0.148)	(0.164)
Active armed conflict		-0.329**	-0.374**
		(0.0949)	(0.105)
Alliance/defence cooperation with P5			0.0528
			(0.145)
Trade flows with a P5 (maximum, ln)			0.0389
			(0.0945)
Variability in P5 interests (1 month lag)			0.0533
			(0.0792)
Post-Brahimi Report (1 month lag)			0.345
			(0.298)
human rights violations (1 month lag)			0.265†
			(0.137)
Gross national product per capita (ln, 1 month lag)			-0.114
			(0.139)
Constant	-0.00804	0.179	-0.107
	(0.106)	(0.134)	(0.342)
Observations	1,223	1,223	1,223
R^2 within	0.0200	0.0377	0.0602
R^2 between	0.650	0.583	0.556
R^2 overall	0.251	0.218	0.275

Standard errors in parentheses.
†$p < 0.1$. *$p < 0.05$. **$p < 0.01$.

models, a standard deviation increase in the strength of human rights provisions on average corresponds to an increase in PKOs' ability by 32.6% (Model 2b) or 40.1% (Model 2c) of its standard deviation. Interestingly, mandate provisions explain only 25.1% of the overall variation in PKOs' ability (Model 2a). This result indicates that there are unobserved determinants of PKOs' ability to engage in human rights activities, possibly including peacekeepers' agency to react to field-level obstacles (Buitelaar, 2023), for example, ongoing fighting.

Our mediation analyses suggest that ties between the P5 and the host state influence PKOs' ability to implement human rights activities *through* mandates, supporting Hypothesis 1. The AME is estimated using the full models (Models 1c and 2c). Figure 4 shows that P5's security ties with a host state indirectly (through mandate design) reduce PKOs' ability to protect human rights by 13% of its standard deviation. However, the estimation uncertainty is high, unless we adjust for additional control variables (Online Appendix D).

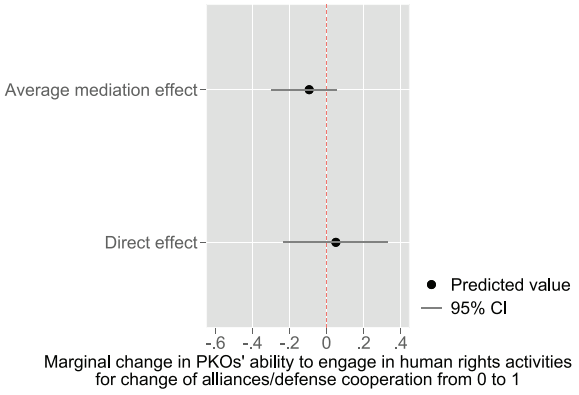

Figure 4. Security ties with the permanent member states of the United Nations Security Council (P5).

Figure 5 illustrates that a standard deviation increase in trade between a host country and its leading P5 trade partner indirectly (through mandate design) decreases peacekeepers' ability to protect human rights by 7% of its

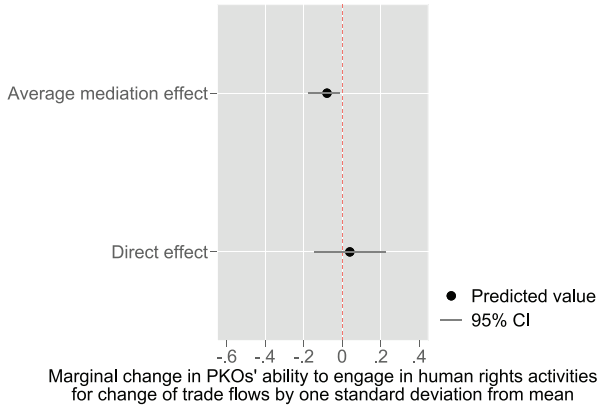

Figure 5. Trade ties with the permanent member states of the United Nations Security Council (P5).

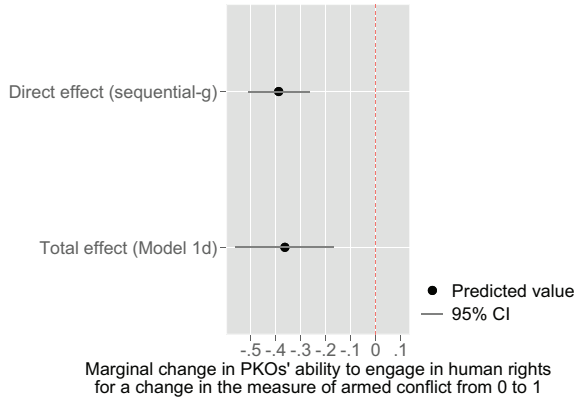

Figure 6. Estimated total and direct effects of ongoing armed conflict.

standard deviation. However, as expected, neither security cooperation nor trade ties are directly associated with peacekeepers' ability to engage in human rights activities. Overall, these results imply that the private interests of the P5 not only influence PKO deployment but also determine what peacekeepers can do for human rights on the ground by affecting mandates.

Additionally, we estimate the mediation effects of security and economic ties for each P5 state separately. Interestingly, only security ties between the PKO host state and Russia negatively relate to peacekeepers' ability to promote human rights (see Online Appendix G). One explanation is that Russia has more formalized security cooperation agreements with African states than the other P5. If we measure security ties as military support (e.g., through intelligence sharing or weapon deliveries) during years of conflict, both Russian and Chinese security ties correlate with lower ability to protect and promote human rights (see Online Appendix H).

Furthermore, only economic ties (i.e., trade volume) between the host state and the United States negatively relate to peacekeepers' ability to engage in human rights work through mandates; possibly due to the overwhelming amount of United States trade compared to other P5 trade. When we use a measure of relative trade (i.e., each P5's trade with the host country as a share of the trade of all states with the host country), economic ties of all P5 states but Russia have an indirect negative correlation with PKOs' human rights mandates (see Online Appendix I).

Our results also support Hypothesis 2, which states that ongoing conflict constrains PKOs' ability to do human rights work. In Table 2, Models 2b and 2c show that the coefficient on armed conflict is negative and statistically significant. Using sequential g-estimation (Acharya et al., 2015), we estimate the controlled direct effect of armed conflict washed off by the effect of human rights violations. Figure 6 illustrates that the total effect from Model 2c and the controlled direct effect of armed conflict have roughly the same magnitude. However, the latter is more precisely estimated (for details, see Online Appendix F). Armed conflict *directly* reduces PKOs' ability to engage in human rights activities by about 39% of its standard deviation.

Regarding the control variables, human rights violations positively correlate with the extent to which peacekeepers can engage in human rights activities (see also Online Appendix J). Although PKOs face obstacles, they are generally responsive to deteriorating rights conditions. Interestingly, the coefficient of the post-Brahimi period loses significance in the models of PKOs' ability, suggesting that global norms and UN policy priorities work on states at the UNSC and peacekeepers' mandates rather than field-level agents independently.

Robustness

As mentioned above, our results do not change when the unit of analysis is the PKO-reporting period (Online Appendix C). Although the random effects specification better fits the data, coefficients are virtually the same in fixed effects models but with slightly larger standard errors (Online Appendix B). Finally, we control for various additional covariates (democracy, oil revenue, mission duration and peacekeeping personnel numbers). Concerns about multicollinearity notwithstanding, our results are the same regardless (Online Appendix D).

Conclusion

The former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (2018–2022), Michelle Bachelet, recently described PKOs as 'one of the UN's most essential and powerful

tools to protect and promote human rights' (UN News, 2020). Our evidence suggests several hurdles that limit PKOs' ability to meet this expectation. At the international level, ties between the P5 and host countries tend to lower human rights provisions in PKO mandates, thereby reducing PKOs' ability to protect human rights. At the field level, ongoing armed conflict negatively correlates with what PKOs can do for human rights.

Our results have several implications for international human rights promotion, peacekeeping and the UN as an international organization. First, our findings validate the usefulness of conceptualizing PKOs' activity in terms of their ability to engage in a policy area. Future research can use our conceptualization and related measurement tools to explore PKOs' engagement in other important areas of multidimensional peacekeeping, such as gender, rule of law, or civilian protection, enabling comparative research on what peacekeepers actually do on the ground.

Second, previous research shows that peacekeepers select the 'hardest cases' where peace is least likely. By contrast, we suggest that peacekeepers have a higher ability to implement human rights activities in a set of peace-conducive conditions (i.e., support by the P5 and stability). This insight must inform assessments of the effects of peacekeepers' human rights engagement on post-war peacebuilding success.

Finally, speaking to broader debates on the autonomy of international organizations, we demonstrate that the UN's work in promoting human rights is partially determined by private interests of powerful states (contrasting with more optimistic findings, see Lebovic and Voeten, 2006). Yet, contrary to realist arguments, parochial state interests are not the only predictors of human rights engagement. In line with a constructivist perspective (Finnemore, 2009), the UN policy shift toward human rights mainstreaming (marked by the Brahimi Report) led states to adopt stronger human rights mandates. Moreover, after conditioning on mandates, that is, the expressed preferences of states, on-the-ground conditions (such as human rights violations) still correlate with peacekeepers' ability to promote human rights.

Cautioning optimism of human rights work by international organizations, our analyses find significant hurdles to peacekeepers' human rights work, which are likely to become steeper in the near future. Illiberal states become more vocal in their opposition to human rights, while populist leaders of liberal states tend to subordinate human rights to their interests (Lake et al., 2021). Moreover, PKOs have been increasingly deployed during ongoing war – a deployment decision that likely limits peacekeepers' engagement in promoting human rights. Our results inform the UN's current and future efforts in managing the expectations of stakeholders in peacekeeping, such as host populations or audiences in countries that contribute finance or personnel. There are hurdles to what peacekeepers can do for human rights; making these hurdles known is crucial for securing the legitimacy of peacekeeping.

Replication data

Replication data: The dataset, codebook, and do-files for the empirical analysis in this article, along with the Online Appendix, can be found at http://www.prio.org/jpr/datasets.

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ORCID iDs

Hannah Smidt https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4202-0037

Constantin Ruhe https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1698-6877

Sabine Otto https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5866-3101

Notes

1. See: https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/promoting-human-rights/.
2. Although not the focus of the article, organization-level factors matter, too. Howland (2006) concludes that limited finance and bureaucratic infighting in the peacekeeping operation (PKO) in Haiti meant that 'efforts to integrate human rights in peace operations are at best

marginal.' Employing a legal perspective, Maus (2020) proposes that a lack of mandate clarity and high-level support hampers PKOs' compliance with human rights norms. Moreover, Buitelaar (2023) argues that agency of the human rights officers helps to explain variation in rights promotion.

3. We use ability as value-neutral and refrain from judging whether peacekeeping operations' human rights work is appropriate.
4. We theorize about permanent member states of the United Nations Security Council (P5)'s rational decision-making and not about ideological reasons for certain (e.g., authoritarian) P5 states to be reluctant to adopt human rights language.
5. Two months earlier, Russia had already blocked a United Nations Security Council resolution demanding the peacekeeping operation in Mali to investigate the massacre of several hundred civilians, allegedly involving Malian soldiers and Russian paramilitaries (RFI, 2022).
6. One-third of the reports were at least double coded, and inter-coder reliability is generally very high. More details in Online Appendix K.
7. Ability might be a function of specific characteristics, for example, sufficient staff numbers (cf. Carr and Kingsbury, 1938: 355). However, if we want to test empirically whether staff numbers affect ability, we need to measure it independently of staff information. Otherwise, the empirical ability measure would be correlated with staff numbers by construction.
8. We extended the Defense Cooperation Agreements (DCA) Dataset by manually coding DCAs between a permanent member state of the United Nations Security Council and a peacekeeping operation host country in the 2011–2016 period, using news and scientific articles returned by a Factiva and Nexis-Uni search for 'defence cooperation' or 'defense cooperation' together with the relevant country.
9. We focus on government-perpetrated violations because, according to international human rights law and the United Nations, governments are primarily responsible for human rights.

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HANNAH SMIDT, b. 1987, PhD in Political Science (University College London, 2017); Assistant Professor of Political Science at University of St. Gallen; and Associated Researcher at the Institute of Political Science, University of Zurich (2022–present); current main interests: United Nations, peacekeeping; human rights; political violence; and restrictions against civil society.

CONSTANTIN RUHE, b. 1985, Dr.rer.soc. in Political Science (University of Konstanz, 2015); Professor of Political Science at Goethe University Frankfurt am Main (2018–present); current main interests: political violence; intrastate armed conflict; conflict management and resolution; peace processes; measurement; and applied quantitative methods.

SABINE OTTO, b. 1983, PhD in Political Science (University of Konstanz); Researcher at the Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University (2016–present). Her research deals with peacekeeping, civil wars and armed actors.