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Slow Progress on UN Rapid Deployment: The Potential Perils of Policy Paradigms in International Organizations

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Abstract¹

When reform negotiations in international organizations (IOs) produce limited substantive progress, the diagnosis is typically a lack of political will. We identify a different dynamic: in protracted negotiations, international policy paradigms can emerge that enshrine a politically realistic but incomplete issue definition and thereby focus the debate on a subset of policy instruments that do not fully address the underlying problem. We draw on the multilateral negotiations literature to show how policy paradigms – which are widely explored in Comparative Politics, but largely neglected in International Relations – can emerge even in heterogenous IOs, where deep cognitive cohesion is unlikely. The risk of negotiation failure incentivizes negotiators to adopt and maintain “achievable” issue and goal definitions, which over time are accepted as axiomatic by diplomats, IO officials, and policy experts. The resulting international policy paradigms help avoid institutional paralysis, but also impede ambitious and necessary reforms. To establish the empirical plausibility of this argument, we highlight the contemporary international policy paradigm of rapid deployment in UN peacekeeping, which focuses on establishing an initial brigade-sized presence rather than on rapid deployment of the full peacekeeping force. Drawing on primary documents and interviews, we identify the roots of this “First Brigade” policy paradigm in reactions to the UN’s failure to respond to the 1994 Rwandan genocide and trace its consolidation during UN reform negotiations in the 2000s and early 2010s. We also demonstrate that an alternative explanation of the paradigm as reflecting operational lessons-learned does not hold: a brigade-sized initial presence is rarely sufficient for mandate implementation, does not reliably speed up full deployment, and creates risks for peacekeepers. By highlighting the existence and impact of international policy paradigms, our study adds to scholarship on the role of ideas in International Relations and provides a novel perspective on reform negotiations in IOs.

Key words: Policy paradigm; rapid deployment; peacekeeping

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International organizations (IOs) often face major challenges, including mitigating climate change, controlling global epidemics, and – our focus in this article – rapidly deploying peacekeeping missions to respond to crises. Yet member states are frequently reluctant to commit substantial resources to address these challenges. How do IOs respond to such intractable problems? We argue that sometimes advocates for a solution redefine the issue, emphasizing policy goals and institutional reforms that are politically feasible over those that comprehensively capture the policy challenge and are most likely to address it. We identify the emergence of *international policy paradigms* anchored by such “achievable” policy goals and argue that they may impede progress on difficult issues in large IOs.

Policy paradigms – conceptual frameworks in which the definition of a policy issue implies a particular policy goal and set of policy options (Hall 1993) – are widely explored in Comparative Politics but largely neglected in International Relations, especially in the context of large, heterogeneous IOs where deep cognitive cohesion is unlikely (Princen and van Esch 2016, 356-7). In the first substantive section of this article, we draw on multilateral negotiation theory to argue in that policy paradigms nevertheless provide a relevant explanatory framework in large IOs. They emerge and persist because of – rather than despite – heterogeneity among IO actors: policy paradigms help prevent a continuous return to paralyzing definitional debates as member states, Secretariat officials and experts negotiate a common response to pressing challenges. Simultaneously, however, policy paradigms can impede reform efforts by entrenching an expedient but incomplete issue definition that focuses attention on a subset of policy instruments that do not fully address the underlying problem. By concentrating on what is politically achievable, advocates for a solution risk losing sight of what is necessary in practice. This downward adjustment of policy ambitions (“aiming low” dynamics) means that lengthy reform processes – even if successfully implemented – may ultimately produce only limited results.

The UN rapid deployment case establishes the plausibility of this argument. There is broad consensus that rapid deployment is critical to the effectiveness of UN peacekeeping, but member states have long resisted reforms that would guarantee a UN rapid reaction capability (UN 2000, §90; Langille 2014, 2-3). Nevertheless, states, UN officials, and policy experts have continued to propose, debate, and even implement measures aimed at enhancing UN rapid deployment. Drawing on primary documents and nine semi-structured interviews with key policymakers (Table

A.1), we document in the second substantive section of this article that by the 2010s this debate was taking place within an international policy paradigm. Participants advocated differing rapid deployment mechanisms, but converged on a common goal definition: they overwhelmingly equated rapid deployment with a rapid *initial* response, usually involving a brigade-size presence established within a 30-90 day timeframe.² Far less attention was paid to the expeditious deployment of the whole authorized force. We call this the First Brigade policy paradigm of UN rapid deployment.

We show empirically (in the third section) that there is no convincing operational-functionalist explanation for the emergence of the First Brigade policy paradigm: it does not represent a distillation of ‘best practices’ for rapid deployment learned from UN peacekeeping experience. UN peacekeeping missions are routinely mandated to deploy far more than one brigade, and such troop ceilings typically underestimate rather than overestimate mission personnel requirements. Rapid deployment of an initial presence does not reliably speed up the deployment of the whole force. Indeed, missions established in the 2010s, following two decades of efforts to improve UN rapid deployment, deployed more swiftly initially but took *longer* than missions in the 1990s or 2000s to reach full deployment. Moreover, an extended gap between initial partial deployment and the arrival of the full force creates additional challenges, encouraging spoilers and generating popular disappointment.

It is “aiming low” dynamics – driven by considerations of political feasibility rather than operational requirements – that account for the emergence of the First Brigade policy paradigm, as we demonstrate in the fourth section. The focus on rapidly deploying a first brigade is rooted in the 1990s, notably in reactions to the UN’s failure to respond to the 1994 Rwandan genocide. This focus was contested in the 2000 *Brahimi Report*, but the failure of that report’s more ambitious rapid deployment definition – *full* deployment within 30-90 days – cemented views that aiming beyond the first brigade was politically impossible. By the time of UN’s most recent major reform, the 2015 creation of the Peacekeeping Capabilities Readiness System (PCRS), the focus on a first brigade was axiomatic.

² After 2015 this timeframe was largely standardized to 60 days (see below).

This article makes two theoretical contributions. First, we add to work on the impact of ideas in international politics by demonstrating the applicability of the policy paradigm concept, especially in large, heterogeneous IOs. Going beyond more commonly employed terms in International Relations, like organizational culture, the concept highlights that multilateral negotiations may be shaped by relatively stable – but not necessarily optimal – understandings of the policy problem that are shared not only by international bureaucrats but also by national diplomats and independent policy experts.

Second, we highlight that international policy paradigms can hamper the search for institutional solutions to difficult challenges in large IOs. Dominant perspectives on IO evolution often focus either on member states' conflicting agendas or bureaucratic inertia as impediments to such reforms. We show another dynamic, in which actors may genuinely seek an effective solution but a flawed initial diagnosis of the policy problem undermines their effort. Our single case does not allow us to estimate how prevalent policy paradigms are across contemporary IOs, but there is no theoretical reason to believe UN rapid deployment to be an isolated case. Our intention is thus to open the way for more systematic investigation of how frequently and severely international policy paradigms impede the quest for multilateral solutions to today's problems.

At the same time, we shed important light on a key policy debate in UN peacekeeping. The First Brigade policy paradigm alone does not explain the UN's rapid deployment challenges: member states' unwillingness or inability to supply UN peacekeepers quickly deserve further study (Lundgren et al. 2018), supplementing existing literature on why states choose to contribute peacekeepers in general (Bove and Elia 2011; Bellamy and Williams 2013; Coleman and Nyblade 2018). However, by equating rapid deployment with the challenge of swiftly establishing an initial presence, the First Brigade policy paradigm focuses reform efforts on a series of purported solutions that do not address the fundamental problem of deploying the entire force in a timely manner.

Intractable Problems, Reform Efforts, and Policy Paradigms in IOs

IOs routinely confront politically intractable policy problems: solutions may exist, but states are unable or unwilling to adopt them or furnish the resources to implement them. UN rapid deployment exemplifies this phenomenon. It is critical to peacekeeping success, helping operations establish credibility, deter violence, discourage spoilers, and sustain progress towards reconciliation (Durch et al. 2003; Doyle and Sambanis 2006; Whalan 2013; Langille 2014). Mandate implementation depends on the expeditious arrival of the authorized force: “a mission’s ability to fulfill mandated goals changes as it is progressively outfitted with its necessary components” (Hultman et al. 2013, 876). Rapid full deployment cannot guarantee an operation’s success – other factors including the mandate, size, composition, access, awareness of local dynamics, and actual activities also matter (Bove et al. 2020; Fjelde et al. 2019; Fortna 2008; Howard 2008; Karim and Beardsley 2017; Murdie and Davis 2010; Smidt 2020; Steinert and Grimm 2014) – but slow deployment threatens it (Hardt 2014).

While it is logistically difficult to quickly deploy thousands of troops into a crisis situation, it is not impossible. States do so when they are at war, and there is even precedent for UN rapid deployment: in 1960, the UN Operation in the Congo (ONUC) deployed 14,000 peacekeepers in five weeks (Jones et al. 2009). For decades, however, member states have been unwilling to make binding commitments for rapid deployment or create a standing UN military capability (Langille 2014, 2-3). Consequently, rapid deployment “continues to be one of the most vexing operational challenges for UN peacekeeping” (UNDPKO 2016, 7).

There are several ways IOs can react to intractable policy problems. They can cease working on the issue. They can engage in organized hypocrisy – adopting decisions that rhetorically address the issue without taking substantive action (Brunsson 1989) – or create “empty institutions” that deflect attention from the lack of progress (Dimitrov 2019). Alternatively, diplomats, secretariat officials, and experts may persist in their advocacy for an institutional remedy. If they succeed in keeping the issue on the agenda, they will trigger a policy debate, often protracted, both within the IO and in the broader policy community. We argue that such protracted policy debates provide fertile ground for the emergence of international policy paradigms, even – perhaps especially – in large, heterogeneous IOs.

In Hall's seminal definition, a policy paradigm is "a framework of ideas and standards that specifies not only the goals of policy and the kind of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing" (1993, 279). Hall's focus was on British macroeconomic policy-making, but the concept subsequently found wider application and became "the enduring workhorse of the comparative public policy field" (Kay 2011, 143), highlighting that national policy debates often occur within a stable overarching structure. Broadly accepted problem and goal definitions anchor these debates; together with causal beliefs about the consequences of particular actions, they define which strategies are recognized as part of the policy "toolbox" and which are left out of consideration. Importantly, policy paradigms admit considerable debate, because causal beliefs can evolve. Within a stable policy paradigm, however, the debate is about means rather than ends: the question is whether existing policies can be adjusted to better address the acknowledged problem and reach the accepted goal.³ The strongest empirical evidence for the existence of a policy paradigm, therefore, is when policy debates feature little to no disagreement on issue and goal definitions, even as participants disagree profoundly regarding policy tools.

Transposing this concept into the international context, we hold that an international policy paradigm exists when the state and non-state actors engaged in international efforts to address a specific challenge broadly agree on the issue definition and policy goal, so that negotiations revolve primarily around means for achieving that goal. In the UN context, relevant actors include diplomats representing member states, UN officials, and the "Third UN" of experts and consultants (Weiss et al. 2009).

The notion of international policy paradigms usefully complements cognate concepts in International Relations theory. Constructivists have long highlighted issue definition and framing as critical to norm advocacy (Price 1998; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Payne 2001). The international policy paradigm concept elucidates how the impact of such efforts may extend beyond norm emergence into policy implementation debates: if widely adopted by policymakers, definitions and framing generate a shared diagnosis of the problem and policy goals to anchor a

³ Hall (1993, 279-80) calls policy adjustments "first order changes" and new policies "second-order changes." A key question for Comparative Politics has been how to conceptualize "third-order" changes, i.e. changes *of* rather than *within* paradigms (Kay 2011; Skogstad 2011; Daigneault 2014). Our focus, however, is on a persisting policy paradigm.

nascent policy paradigm. Epistemic communities, defined as transnational experts united by shared understandings of a policy challenge and causal beliefs about how to address it (Haas 1992), can be understood to revolve around transnational policy paradigms. If they successfully entrench their ideas among key officials and diplomats within a given IO, an international policy paradigm arises. Similarly, as long as organizational culture, defined as “the rules, rituals, and beliefs that are embedded in the organization” (Barnett and Finnemore 1999, 719), affects only an international bureaucracy, it has a narrower base than international policy paradigms.⁴ By contrast, Autesserre’s (2010, 11) notion of peacebuilding culture as “a set of ideologies, rules, rituals, assumptions, definitions, paradigms, and standard operating procedures” shared by UN officials, national diplomats, and humanitarian workers points to the existence of an international policy paradigm in this field.

Despite its cogency, the policy paradigm concept has attracted far less attention among IR scholars than in Comparative Politics. It is sometimes used to analyze foreign policy (e.g. Hassan 2017), and transnational policy paradigms have been detected in the European Union (Princen and van Esch 2016; Juncos 2017) and the international financial institutions (Babb 2013; Güven 2018; Kaya and Reay 2019). To our knowledge, the possibility of policy paradigms emerging within the UN has not yet been explored analytically.⁵ International organizations with “a large number of veto players with often strongly diverging interests, and power politics between member states” are seen as “unlikely candidate[s] for paradigmatic policy-making” (Princen and van Esch 2016, 356-7). This mirrors research on groupthink in IOs, which argues that this dysfunction is most likely in small and homogenous decision-makers’ groups (Woods 2004). The cognitive coherence seen to be fundamental to policy paradigms has so far been expected only in the highly integrated European Union (Skogstad 2011, 110; Princen and van Esch 2016) or in the international financial institutions as a result of severe power concentrations (Babb 2013) and staff cohesion (Chwieroth 2008).

By contrast, we draw on multilateral negotiations scholarship to argue that policy paradigms not only can emerge in heterogeneous IOs but may play an important role in their functioning –

⁴ Organizational culture also arguably has a wider substantive focus than implied in the concept of international policy paradigm, since IOs typically address multiple policy challenges.

⁵ Martin and Owen (2010) trace the rise and fall of the human security “policy paradigm” in the UN and the EU but offer little theoretical analysis of the concept.

while also potentially producing problematic effects. Negotiation scholars have long recognized “inventing and choosing among alternative definitions of the problem” as a critical element of pre-negotiation (Zartman 1989, 246; see also Zartman and Berman 1982, 95-6; Stein 1989, 485-7) that frames and structures subsequent negotiation phases. This is especially important in complex multilateral settings (Jönsson 2002, 222), where unresolved differences about problem definitions can impede negotiation progress (e.g. Hansen 2006, 25-7). In protracted multilateral negotiations – with multiple formal or informal rounds – several factors militate against returning to pre-negotiation on issue definitions for each successive cycle. Previously used definitions offer focal points (Schelling 1980, 68) on which negotiators can converge. It is “standard practice” for participants in recurring multilateral negotiations to fall back on “already agreed-upon text” to resolve impasses (Schmitt 2017, 514). Protracted negotiations often foreclose further definitional debate in order to maintain forward momentum: members of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change no longer revisit debates about whether climate change is anthropogenic; review meetings under the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants do not renegotiate the definition of these pollutants.⁶ By contrast, a draft convention on terrorism that had been before a UN committee for years reached a stalemate due to the absence of a universally accepted definition of the term (UN 2019a). In short, in protracted multilateral policy negotiations, locating debate within the parameters of an accepted issue definition – in other words, within a policy paradigm – is a means to manage complexity, avoid paralysis, and allow negotiators to focus on fine-tuning policy proposals.

Actors participating in negotiations within large, heterogeneous IOs may therefore pragmatically accept a policy paradigm. They may also see a benefit in not re-opening a fundamental debate that could jeopardize previous negotiation victories, or resign themselves to the existing paradigm as reflecting the prevailing distribution of power (Hall 1993, 280; Payne 2001; Babb 2013, 271). Over time, actors that have invested resources in a particular approach to the problem may become attached to the policy paradigm (Skogstad 2011, 95), mirroring discussions on “sunk costs” in institutions (Pierson 1996). Would-be policy reformers may also recognize that working from previously agreed problem definitions and policy goal improves their proposals’ chances (Thakur 2017; Coleman 2017). In addition, international policy paradigms may

⁶ Thanks to Dr. Jen Allan, Cardiff University, for this information.

persist for cognitive reasons. Issue and goal definitions may become “internalized” and “taken-for-granted” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 895; Babb 2013, 271). As Jacobs notes, even highly motivated negotiators have to rely on pre-existing “mental models” in complex issue areas (2009, 252). Subconsciously, moreover, decision-makers may be predisposed to believe that politically acceptable issue and problem definitions also have the advantage of inherent quality (Jervis 2017, 128; see also Autesserre 2017, 120-1). These various dynamics help explain why “continuous negotiations... develop a culture, behavioural norms and a language of their own” (Jönsson 2002, 223).

Yet while policy paradigms may allow large IOs to avoid paralysis, they can also become obstacles to more far-reaching reforms. Policy paradigms vary in the degree to which their issue definitions and policy goals capture the key characteristics of the underlying problem, and there exists a risk of policymakers becoming “entrapped” in counter-productive policy paradigms (e.g. Larsen 2002). In policy paradigms that arise out of complex multilateral negotiations, problem definitions and policy goals may reflect negotiation dynamics rather than close analysis of the issue. A partial problem definition adopted as a compromise in one negotiation round may subsequently emerge as a focal point and come to anchor a policy paradigm, crowding out more ambitious ones that may then be rejected out of hand as politically unachievable and potentially destabilizing of progress to date.⁷ Any failed attempts to advocate more ambitious problem definitions will reinforce this dynamic, as will perceptions that states’ commitment to resolving an issue is tenuous or ebbing. Ironically, the incentive to “aim low” may be especially high among committed advocates of reform, who have the most at stake in protecting past gains and ensuring that negotiations do not founder.

Yet an international policy paradigm anchored by issue definitions and policy goals that only partially capture the empirical problem risks biasing the debate in counterproductive ways: policies that incompletely address the underlying issue may be added to the “toolbox” while superior policies are sidelined or ignored. Autesserre (2010) notes, for example, that the predominant “peacebuilding culture” – which we suggest above includes an international policy paradigm – has

⁷ This echoes insights that “means [may] become ends in themselves” in IO bureaucracies (Barnett and Finnemore 1999, 720) and that “a widely endorsed weak norm [may] ruin the chances of establishing a stronger norm later” (Coleman 2013, 172).

undermined the UN-led efforts in the Democratic Republic of Congo by precluding full recognition of how local conflicts fuel country-wide violence (a flawed issue definition) and perpetuating emphasis on national reconciliation and elections (an incomplete set of purported solutions), which could only partially address the underlying problem of country-level violence. Similarly, we observe a restrictive issue definition and incomplete set of purported solutions in contemporary debates on UN rapid deployment.

The First Brigade International Policy Paradigm of UN Rapid Deployment

The contemporary debate about enhancing the UN's peacekeeping rapid deployment capacity illustrates both the existence of international policy paradigms and their potentially problematic origins in multilateral negotiation dynamics rather than analysis of the requirements for addressing issue at hand. This section demonstrates the existence of an international policy paradigm of UN rapid deployment in the 2010s, while the two subsequent sections make the case that this paradigm arose not from operational experience but from "aiming low" dynamics in protracted multilateral negotiations.

As argued above, the strongest empirical evidence for a policy paradigm is when participants in a debate share a largely unquestioned acceptance of the basic issue definition and policy goal even when advocating different instruments to achieve that goal. This was the case for international debate about UN rapid deployment in the 2010s. This debate included UN Secretariat officials, state diplomats, and members of think tanks and universities. Participants advocated three distinct rapid deployment mechanisms: standby arrangements, standing capabilities, and partnership with regional IOs.⁸ Yet they shared a definition of rapid deployment as rapid initial deployment and the policy goal of enabling the rapid establishment of an initial, typically brigade-sized, mission presence.

Standby arrangements have long been the UN's privileged rapid deployment mechanism. They allow states to indicate in advance what capabilities they might be willing to deploy to a UN

⁸ Some reform proposals combined several mechanisms.

operation. States maintain control of these capabilities, however, and make case-by-case decisions about their actual deployment. UN standby arrangements emerged in the 1960s (Macfarlane 2007) but remained weakly institutionalized throughout the Cold War. They drew renewed policy attention with the expansion of peacekeeping in the early post-Cold War period. UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali urged states to enhance standby arrangements in 1992 (UNSG 1992, §51), and the General Assembly established the UN Standby Arrangements System (UNSAS) in 1993. Despite the initial enthusiasm for the mechanism (Boutros-Ghali 1999, 27-8) and pledges totaling 108,400 personnel by 2013 (OMA 2013, 6), UNSAS proved flawed in two respects. First, states were reluctant to approve deployment requests for pledged troops. In May 1994, when the UN expanded its peacekeeping operation in Rwanda in the wake of the country's genocide, "not one of the 19 Governments that at that time had undertaken to have troops on standby agreed to contribute" (UNSG 1995, §43). Second, when states were willing to deploy pledged capabilities, the UN frequently found that units had training and equipment gaps. In 2000, the Brahimi Report argued that "UNSAS... has yet to become a dependable supply of resources." (UN 2000, 14). By the 2010s, there was widespread consensus that UNSAS was "not meeting its envisaged purposes as a planning and force-generation tool or as a platform to facilitate rapid deployment" (Smith and Boutellis 2013, 12).

Some participants in the 2010s policy debate advocated improvements to UN standby arrangements, notably a narrower focus on small initial deployments. One prominent report proposed "refin[ing] the scope of UNSAS, limiting it to only critical enablers... and/or capabilities for key stages of a mission (such as start-up or surge)" (Smith and Boutellis 2013, 15). The 2015 High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) recommended a small, regionally-based UN "vanguard capability" for quick insertion into a new or escalating crisis (UN 2015, §199).⁹ It did not specify this capability's size, but subsequent UN documents refer to the HIPPO recommending a "Vanguard Brigade," and to the Secretary-General endorsing "the development of a UN Vanguard Capability...[of] approximately 4,000 troops and police" (UNDPO 2019b, 3).

In July 2015, UNSAS was indeed replaced, not least because the USA insisted on a more effective mechanism to register pledges being in place before it hosted the September 2015

⁹ There was ambiguity about whether this would be a standby or standing capability.

Leaders' Summit on UN Peacekeeping (Interview 6). In apparent contradiction to the First Brigade policy paradigm, the Peacekeeping Capability Readiness System (PCRS) did not focus solely on a small, rapidly deployable initial presence: it was designed to include “sufficient capabilities...for the potential deployment of a new medium sized peacekeeping mission (approx. 15,000 troops and police)” (UNDPKO 2016, 9). However, this structure did not reflect an expanded rapid deployment ambition, but a perceived dual purpose for the PCRS: “we needed two different things, right? We needed a reserve system for normal deployments, and we needed something more rapid” (Interview 3). This bifurcation marks the consolidation of the First Brigade policy paradigm despite – and in isolation from – a broader policy debate about persistent capability gaps and capacity deficits in UN peacekeeping operations.¹⁰ With rare exceptions (Rappa 2016), these broader force generation challenges were seen as distinct from the much more narrowly defined rapid deployment issue: “the PCRS wasn't primarily about rapid deployment... [It] wasn't primarily about speed, it was primarily about quality” (Interview 6).

The PCRS thus features four levels of pledged capabilities, only one of which is dedicated to rapid deployment. Levels 1 and 2, which include the vast majority of pledged units (UNDPO 2019a), address the issue of troop contribution quality by allowing for improved recording and verification of pledges. Neither level specifies deployment timelines, though enhanced visibility may modestly increase deployment speed. By contrast, Level 4 is the designated Rapid Deployment Level (RDL), reserved for units “willing and able to be deployed in under 60 days” (UNDPKO 2016, 7). Fully reflecting the First Brigade policy paradigm, it effectively houses the UN Vanguard Capability and aims to comprise only “the capabilities of one integrated brigade (approx. 4,000 troops)” (UNDPKO 2016, 9). Thus, the RDL is “up to a brigade and then it's full” (Interview 6). Confirming the sharp separation policy-makers perceived between issues of ‘quality’ and ‘speed,’ Level 3, which bridges Levels 2 and 4 by beginning administrative procedures for deploying pledged contingents, was initially “probably the most debated level internally, whether it's necessary or not” (Interview 3).

Subsequent implementation efforts further underlined the centrality of the “first brigade” approach to rapid deployment. The September 2016 UN Peacekeeping Defence Ministerial in

¹⁰ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for stressing this point.

London – despite again noting persistent capability gaps – discussed rapid deployment in terms of “a Vanguard Brigade of 4000 troops” (London 2016, 5-7). It generated pledges “for rapidly deployable capabilities” that would “help to develop the vanguard brigade concept” (UNSG 2017b, §39). A March 2017 UN diplomatic workshop hosted by Bangladesh identified the goal of having states “commit on an annual basis to keeping a combined 4,000 of their troops and police at a high-state of readiness (deployable within 60 days) to retain the required capabilities for the vanguard concept” (Bangladesh 2017, 1). UN Secretariat presentations focused on the “UN Vanguard Concept” (de Koning 2017) and the “Vanguard Brigade Structure” (Smith 2017). The November 2017 Vancouver UN Peacekeeping Defence Ministerial saw Secretariat officials making a similarly “dedicated outreach effort to make sure we secured pledges for the RDL” (Interview 6). A proposal in the UN’s Contingent Owned Equipment Working Group (2017) to partially reimburse states for the maintenance costs of pledged rapidly deployable units also focused on the RDL,¹¹ and the General Assembly approved the measure for RDL units only (UN 2017, §46). Level 3, a potential repository for additional more rapidly deployable units, atrophied in this period (UNDPKO 2016), partly because PCRS officials dedicated “the resources we had... mostly to figuring out the RDL” (Interview 6). In 2017, focus on and pledged capabilities in Level 3 increased (UNDPO 2019a), but it tended to be seen as providing “fall back units” in case RDL units failed to deploy rather than a supplemental rapid deployment capacity (Ulich 2017).¹² Training proposals, meanwhile, also focused on the “vanguard capability” through field exercises for RDL contributors planned in 2017 (UNSG 2017a) and 2019 (Interviews 3 and 4).

Some participants in the 2010s debate maintained, however, that standby arrangements could not satisfactorily address the UN’s rapid deployment challenges. The World Federalist Movement, for example, argued in a submission to the HIPPO that “peacekeeping challenges require standing, not just standby, capacities” (Langille 2015, 1-2). In contrast to standby arrangements, *standing capacities* are under direct UN control and can be activated by the Security Council without further negotiations with troop-contributing countries. Advocacy for this mechanism dates back to Secretary-General Trygve Lie’s proposals for a standing UN force in the 1940s and 1950s (McCarthy 2000, 141) and was revived in the 1990s by Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali (UNSG

¹¹ Reimbursement is conditional on the unit rapidly deploying when requested.

¹² See below for further discussion. Level 3 initially included a 90-day deployment timeline, which was subsequently removed. It also has functions other than rapid deployment.

1992, §43) and former Under-Secretary-General Brian Urquhart (1993). Despite their Charter commitment to provide the forces “necessary for the purpose of maintaining international peace and security” (UN 1945, §43.1), UN member states have long refused to cede this degree of autonomy to the UN (Macfarlane 2007). Nevertheless, advocacy for this mechanism persisted in the 2010s, taking two main forms – both of which reflected a “first brigade” definition of rapid deployment.

The more ambitious form proposed creating a UN Emergency Peace Service (UNEPS), staffed by volunteer personnel and available for immediate deployment at the Security Council’s direction. This was the concept the World Federalist Movement proposed to the HIPPO (Langille 2015, 2-4). UNEPS also enjoyed support from other scholars, civil society organizations, and some retired UN officials (Herro 2015; Johansen 2006). Advocates differed on UNEPS’s exact size: a 2005 experts’ discussion recommended 12,000-15,000 personnel (Johansen 2006), Herro (2015) 10,000 troops, and Langille (2016) 13,500. Proposals in the 2010s specified, however, that UNEPS would not deploy all its personnel together. Langille (2016, 46) envisioned “two brigade groups” available for two possible missions. Herro (2015, 126) saw UNEPS personnel “divided between two mobile mission headquarters which means that a UNEPS operation might only comprise 5,000 of them.” Thus, both proposals shared the vision of a rapid deployable brigade-size force. Serving UN officials, however, tend to dismiss UNEPS’s emphasis on standing capabilities as unrealistic: “That’s like saying the veto should be abolished. No, of course it’s not feasible” (Interview 6).

The more modest standing capacities mechanism focuses more narrowly on mission headquarters. Proposals for a rapidly deployable headquarters have been discussed since the 1990s (UN 1996b). The HIPPO renewed this impetus by advocating a rapidly deployable “integrated civilian, military and police headquarters capacity” (UN 2015, §201). The proposal gained some traction, with secretariat members seeking to further develop the concept (de Koning 2017). By 2019, a “Permanent Core Command Element” of 14 military personnel was envisioned within UN Headquarters (UNDPO 2019b, Annex A), though not all affected officials knew they were assigned to it (Interview 3). Koops and Novosseloff (2017, 438) interpret this as signaling that “the UN Secretariat and member states have scaled down their ambitions from the model of a full-fledged brigade in the 1990s and early 2000s to a more limited tool.” However, the rapidly deployable headquarters proposals were pursued in tandem with efforts to develop the Vanguard

Capability within the PCRS (de Koning 2017; UNDP 2019b). The standing headquarters capacity was intended to provide the leadership element for pledged units in order to allow the UN to rapidly deploy an integrated brigade-sized force.

The third rapid deployment mechanism advocated in the 2010s focused on *UN/regional peacekeeping partnerships*, envisioning regional organizations – long assumed to be nimbler in responding to local crises (ICISS 2001, 53) – as providers of “bridging missions” in advance of a UN deployment. UN/regional peacekeeping partnerships might also provide other advantages, including local legitimacy and greater enforcement capacities (AUPSC 2015), but in rapid deployment terms the expected benefits were three-fold: an early non-UN peacekeeping presence could deliver immediate operational benefits; prepare the ground politically and logistically for a subsequent UN mission; and be incorporated (“re-hatted”) into the follow-on UN mission, thus providing a core UN presence that could be supplemented with further personnel and equipment.

This mechanism – often seen as a complement rather than substitute for improved UN standby arrangements – attracted considerable support. The UN Under-Secretary-General for Field Support suggested in 2014 that regional organizations “played an important role in ensuring rapid deployment” and that “re-hatting regional forces as Blue Helmets could become a more regular feature of [UN] missions” (UN 2014). A 2015 brief drafted for AU meetings with the HIPPO stressed “a partnership model” where AU or subregional bodies “acted as first responders to African crises” and deployed personnel was subsequently “re-hatted and became UN peacekeepers” (AU 2015). The HIPPO report highlighted that regional actors could “provide the Security Council with a significant first-response capacity where slower-deploying and lower-capacity United Nations peace operations are not a viable option” (UN 2015, §202-3). The UN Secretary-General announced his intention to explore with the AU and the EU how regional capacities may serve as “bridging forces pending the mobilization and deployment of a United Nations mission” (UNSG 2015b, §31). In fact, sequential regional and UN peace operations had already become common, especially in Africa. Re-hatting regional bridging missions was thus an established part of the UN’s rapid deployment “toolbox”, though there was continued debate about the challenges of re-hatting personnel (UNSG 2015a) and UN financial and logistical support to regional actors (Coleman 2017, Coleman and Williams 2017).

The regional partnership mechanism also reflects a “first brigade” approach to the rapid deployment issue. Regional bridging forces were envisioned to “act as a first response to larger-scale United Nations missions” (UN 2008, §39). Empirically, while it is not impossible for regional organizations to deploy larger forces – AMISOM deployed over 22,000 troops – re-hatted regional missions in Liberia, Burundi, Sudan, Ivory Coast, and the Central African Republic numbered 3,600, 3,250, 7,700, 1,500, and 5,739 troops, respectively, with only the mission in Mali as an outlier at 9,620 (Williams 2016, 14-5). All were replaced by significantly larger UN forces. Institutionally, the main mechanisms by which regional actors sought to create a rapid response capacity also focused on a brigade capacity. The African Union Standby Force envisions five regional brigades of approximately 5,000 personnel. Any given deployment is expected to involve just one brigade: planning documents focus on logistic support “for a brigade-sized mission” and indicate cost projections “based on a Brigade size force” (AU 2010, 49, 20). Meanwhile, difficulties in advancing the African Union Standby Force to operational readiness led African states to create the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crisis in 2013, a temporary alternative mechanism drawing on states throughout the continent rather than subregions. It, too, was a brigade-size capacity of 5,000 military personnel (Langille 2014, 20).

In short, the debates about UN rapid deployment in the 2010s took place within an international policy paradigm that defined rapid deployment primarily in terms of quickly establishing an initial, roughly brigade-size presence. The impact of this First Brigade policy paradigm is apparent in the striking consensus on this problem definition and policy goal among national diplomats, UN officials, and experts, even as they vigorously debated the relative merits of stand-by arrangements, standing capabilities, and regional/UN partnerships as the mechanisms for achieving it.

The Deficiency of an Operational-Functionalist Explanation for the First Brigade Policy Paradigm

Does the First Brigade policy paradigm reflect the operational lessons learned from peacekeeping deployments since the 1990s? We argue that this operational-functionalist

explanation for the paradigm's emergence fails. It is contradicted by three facts about contemporary UN peace operations. First, they are routinely mandated to include more than one brigade of military personnel, and mandated troop ceilings themselves are often conservative compared to the tasks identified for the mission. Second, the rapid deployment of an initial vanguard presence does not reliably speed up full deployment of the mandated force. Third, the gap between initial and full deployment has repeatedly created significant operational risks in UN peace operations. We examine each of these facts in turn.

Size of UN Operations

UN peacekeeping deployments vary significantly in size, both from mission to mission and over the lifespan of a mission. However, participants in the rapid deployment policy debates of the 2010s had every reason to expect future peace operations to require significantly more than one brigade of military personnel. From the 1990s onwards, the Security Council routinely mandated missions with considerably higher maximum authorized troop levels ("ceilings"). In our dataset of 29 UN missions authorized between 1992 and 2016 (Table A.2), the mean initial troop ceiling was 9,971 troops. In the 2000s, the Security Council authorized initial troops ceilings of 19,555, 11,200, and 10,000, respectively, for the UN missions in Darfur (2007), Mali (2013), and the Central African Republic (2014).

Moreover, the Security Council tends to set conservative troop ceilings in relation to the mandated tasks. Concerns about troop availability and peacekeeping costs often produce personnel authorizations set below expert estimates of operational requirements (Coleman 2014, 22). A UN Secretariat reconnaissance mission to pre-genocide Rwanda, for example, estimated that 4,500 peacekeeping troops were needed, but the Council authorized 2,217 troops and 331 military observers (UN 1999). Incoming Force Commander Romeo Dallaire faced political pressure to reduce his troop request: "I was told, 'Don't ask for a brigade, because it ain't there'" (quoted in Power 2002, 341). In 1993, when the Secretariat requested 34,000 troops to bolster deterrence and protect "safe areas" in former Yugoslavia, but also proposed an interim "light option" of 7,600 troops (UN 1993), the Council authorized only 7,600 troops. Similarly, in 2011, an assessment

team proposed three options for the new UN mission in South Sudan, with troop requirements ranging from 1,000 to 12,000 depending on the mandate's ambition. After pressure from the USA, UNMISS was given a highly ambitious mandate but the troop ceiling was set at 7,000, the level originally suggested for the intermediate, moderately ambitious option (Dijkstra 2015). Only after the 2013 violence was the ceiling increased to 12,500, rising to 17,000 in 2016. In 2017, the Security Council reduced the troop ceilings for the UN mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo despite on-going operational challenges, primarily to achieve cost reductions (Coleman 2017). In short, "the Council consistently designs its missions well below recommended military-civilian ratios" (Williams 2019). While a full explanation of Council decision-making on troop ceilings is beyond the scope of this article, the critical empirical insight for the purposes of studying rapid deployment reform proposals is that these ceilings reflect the resources Council members believe are available and can agree to spend, which may be considerably less than a mission's actual operational requirements. Limiting rapid deployment targets to only a fraction of these resources exacerbates the problem.

Rapid Initial Deployment Does Not Speed Up Full Deployment

The First Brigade policy paradigm could still be explained along operational-functionalist lines if experience had shown that a rapid initial deployment – of a brigade or less – systematically speeds up full deployment. Some UN experts do point to the logistical advantages of an initial presence: "If you get your headquarters and... some of your engineering, basically your vanguard... that provides your leg on the ground for the rest to deploy relatively easy" (Interview 4). Yet others caution that logistics is only one aspect of deployment speed: "once [an early capacity] is there, it does have a foot on the ground, but it doesn't necessarily make it easier to get the rest in, because that again is just dependent on the vagaries of nations, political will, transport, and a whole raft of other things" (Interview 8). The empirical evidence supports this more skeptical position, again suggesting that the First Brigade policy paradigm did not arise from the lessons of operational experience.

For each of the 29 missions in our dataset, we recorded the troop ceilings authorized by the Security Council in the first mandate and, where applicable, all subsequent mission expansions.¹³ We compared these ceilings to the number of troops actually deployed, using data from the IPI Peacekeeping Database (Perry and Smith 2013). Because missions vary in size, we define deployment speed in relation to the attainment of proportional deployment thresholds set at the 25th and 75th deployment percentiles. The 25th percentile reflects a meaningful vanguard in relation to the entire force. In many missions, this approximates the first brigade.¹⁴ The 75 percent threshold quantifies what may be termed substantial deployment, a military presence large enough to approximate the intended force size, yet low enough to be reached by the majority of UN missions. For example, if a mission has authorized size of 12,000 troops, the 25th percentile threshold corresponds to 3,000 troops and the 75th to 9,000 troops.

Within this framework, T_{25} is the time to deploy 25 percent of the authorized troops and T_{75} the time to reach the 75 percent deployment, counting in days from the Security Council's initial authorization. Figure 1 plots the missions in our dataset based on their time to initial deployment (T_{25}) and the time they required to progress to substantial deployment ($T_{75} - T_{25}$). If rapid initial deployment leads to rapid full deployment, we would expect to see a positive correlation between the two measures: in missions where the UN was able to rapidly deploy the initial contingent – either independently or via re-hatting arrangements – we should also observe a more rapid deployment of a more substantial force. However, the data suggest no apparent relationship. There are exceptions, but missions that manage to deploy a vanguard force rapidly are typically no faster than others in getting from there to full deployment. Likewise, missions that are slow initially, deploying their vanguard force with some delay, are not slower than others in attaining fuller deployment. For example, UNMEE (in Ethiopia/Eritrea) was slow to reach initial deployment but fast to deploy the remainder of the force, whereas MINUSMA (Mali) was fast initially (largely because of re-hatting), but very slow in getting additional troops in place. The visual impression from Figure 1 is statistically corroborated: the correlation between T_{25} and $T_{75} - T_{25}$ for the missions in our sample is a mere 0.04, suggesting that whether initial deployment is fast or slow does not reliably predict whether a mission will reach full deployment quickly.

¹³ Data gathered from UN Security Council resolutions and Secretary-General reports.

¹⁴ For military planners, a brigade can range from 1,500 to 5,000 troops.

By distinguishing between re-hatted missions and entirely new deployments, Figure 1 provides an additional insight. We observe that re-hatted missions cluster to the left in the plot, indicating rapid initial deployment, but exhibit variance in the vertical dimension that represents progress to substantial deployment. In other words, while re-hatting may allow the UN to achieve rapid initial deployment (in the technical sense), such missions are no faster on average than other missions in attaining higher levels of deployment. This suggests that re-hatting has functioned as a substitute rather than supplement for independent UN rapid deployment capabilities, potentially diminishing the perceived urgency of additional UN deployments. This is echoed in the following understanding of the relationship between re-hatting and the PCRS: “We could mix and match... if they provided certain capabilities and we could pull other capabilities off the RDL to match that, so we don’t have to deploy the whole thing together” (Interview 3). Defining rapid deployment in terms of a first brigade encourages this approach: re-hatted and independent UN capabilities are substitutes if the goal is deploying one brigade. By contrast, if the goal is rapid full deployment these capabilities are supplementary: the need for rapid deployment of additional UN troops does not abate at the moment of re-hatting. Indeed, if the preceding smaller regional force were sufficient, the UN would not authorize a larger follow-on mission.

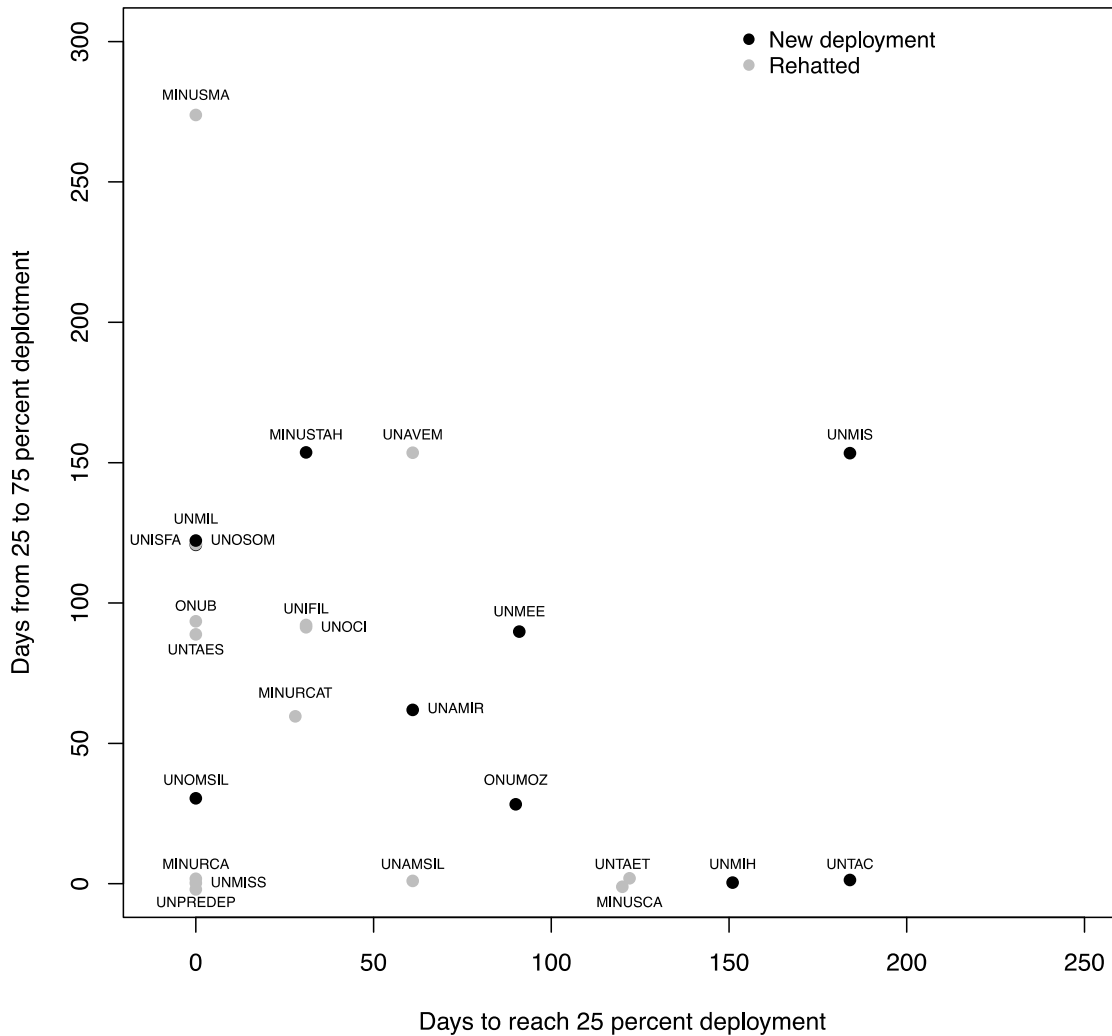


Figure 1: Deployment times by mission

Figure 2 further confirms that rapid initial deployment has not reliably entailed rapid full deployment of UN missions. It presents our data in the form of deployment curves, grouping all missions from the same decade into one curve. We use inverted Kaplan-Meier estimates, which exhibit the share of troops that have deployed at each time interval. One key pattern stands out. Missions in the 2010s – after two decades of UN reforms focused primarily on rapid initial

deployment – were faster to reach the 25 percent threshold than missions in the 1990s and 2000s. Strikingly, however, they were *slower* to reach other deployment thresholds. In other words, more recent missions have been fast to field an initial presence, likely reflecting the increased reliance on re-hatting arrangements, but relatively slow to attain substantial deployment. In contrast, missions authorized in the 2000s took longer to reach initial deployment, but once underway, they (and missions in the 1990s) reached substantial deployment within a shorter time.¹⁵

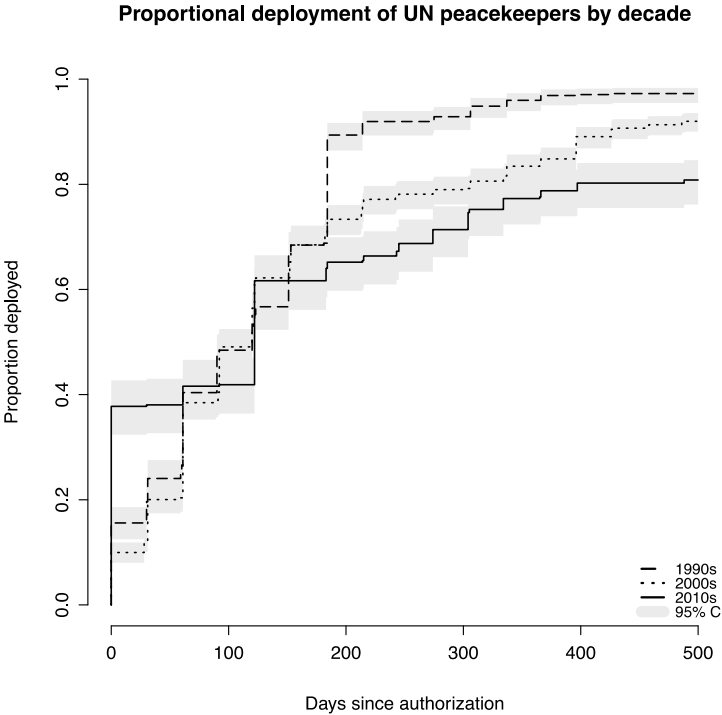


Figure 2: Proportional deployment of UN peacekeepers by days since authorization, by decade (Kaplan-Meier estimates)

¹⁵ These differences do not appear to be driven by variation in mission size. Missions established in the 2010s were smaller, on average, than missions in the 1990s or 2000s. If very large missions from the 1990s such as UNISOM are excluded, the average size of missions from each decade is roughly equal (9,980 troops in the 1990s; 11,667 in the 2000s; and 10,597 in the 2010s).

A Dangerous Gap

An operational-functionalist explanation for the First Brigade Policy Paradigm might still hold if experience suggests that a rapid initial deployment – even in the absence of more rapid full deployment – consistently represents an operational benefit. The more modest version of this argument would suggest that the initial deployment allows the UN to have at least some positive effect, even if the larger mission is slow to materialize. As one UN official put it, “I think that initial operating capability is really important... so you can start to have an impact as quickly as you can, so expectations a little bit are met” (Interview 8). The maximalist version of the argument would be that the initial deployment might be so effective that full deployment is no longer as necessary, explaining the lack of impact on rapid full deployment by a lack of urgency.¹⁶

Two considerations undermine this line of argumentation. First, as noted at the beginning of this article, size matters in peacekeeping missions (Hultman et al. 2013), and a partial deployment does not constitute a comprehensive solution. In none of the missions examined here do we observe that rapid initial deployment led to early reductions of the troop ceiling. Instead, we observe that missions gradually – sometimes very gradually – move towards more substantial deployment, suggesting on-going force generation efforts that are presumably predicated on the mission’s continued need for these units. The UN’s practice of issuing regular updates about current and emerging capability requirements – including in specific missions – also suggests that continued gaps are seen as liabilities.

Second, there is ample historical evidence that a gap between initial and full deployment creates operational risks for UN operations. In Sierra Leone, the “painfully slow” deployment of UN troops led to 500 peacekeepers being taken hostage by the rebels in May 2000. While a British intervention helped free the hostages and a dramatic increase in UNAMSIL’s strength, funding, logistic support, and political backing allowed the mission to recover, the episode put peacekeepers at risk, jeopardized Sierra Leone’s peace process, and humiliated the UN (Hirsch 2004).

In Haiti, MINUSTAH (created in 2004) benefitted from the “re-hatting” of a small Chilean contingent and the quick deployment of a Brazilian “[b]rigade with 1,200 officers” to achieve “one

¹⁶ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this possibility.

of the shortest [initial deployment times] in [UN] history” (Braga 2017, 37-8). After this initial deployment, however, “the UN was excessively slow in obtaining troops from other Member Countries”: MINUSTAH did not reach the full strength for a year and therefore had to “act with far fewer troops than planned at critical moments” (Braga 2017, 38). This incomplete deployment left “a security vacuum” that had “disastrous consequences” (International Crisis Group 2004, i). Supporters of the former Haitian president, who fled the country because of popular protests, “were encouraged by the modest size of the MINUSTAH contingent – initially only 3,000 troops” (Biato 2011, 194) and fomented unrest to enable his return. The disbanded Haitian army occupied abandoned police stations (Johnstone 2006, 42), weakening the legitimacy of the interim government that MINUSTAH supported. MINUSTAH’s inability to stabilize Haiti harmed its relations with the local population, whose “initial open-armed support for the UN troops was affected by the lack of improving conditions” (Biato 2011, 194). Moreover, the delayed arrival of the rest of the force undermined the morale of already deployed MINUSTAH contingents. Brazilian troops, whose area of responsibility was supposed to be only the capital, had to spread to another seven bases across the country, which required “a huge logistical and operational effort” (Vieira Neto 2017, 18) and put “considerable pressure on the Brazilian contingent” (Braga 2017, 38).

The UN operation in Mali, MINUSMA, provided another example of the risks created by a gap between initial and full deployment. MINUSMA replaced a regional security force, AFISMA, and 6,161 regional troops were re-hatted as UN peacekeepers, representing 55 percent of MINUSMA’s authorized strength (UN 2018). Yet seven months later, the mission still hovered around half its mandated size “in an increasingly volatile security situation” (Lotze 2015, 862). It struggled to establish a presence in northern Mali (Reuters 2014b), and its slow deployment there was blamed for enabling a wave of Islamist attacks: France’s defense minister charged that “Northern Mali has been weakened because MINUSMA was not there at the moment it needed to be” (Reuters 2014a). MINUSMA’s inability to counter this challenge effectively undermined both the mission’s credibility and the authority of the Malian government it supported. MINUSMA has struggled to recover. By 2016, it used more than 80 percent of its military capacity on force protection instead of substantive tasks (International Peace Institute 2016). It nevertheless became

“the UN’s most dangerous mission” (UN 2019c), losing more than 200 peacekeepers by 2019 (UN 2019b).

There is thus evidence that a gap between a rapid initial deployment and slow attainment of full mission strength can undermine peace operations – and UN policymakers and experts have long recognized this danger. In 2004, Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Jean-Marie Guéhenno cautioned, “if we dribble into a mission, then we project an image of weakness, and there is nothing more difficult than to recover from an initial perception of weakness” (Langille 2014, 1). The 2015 HIPPO report concurred: “When a mission trickles into a highly demanding environment, it is dangerously exposed on the ground and initial high expectations turn to disappointment, frustration and anger” (UN 2015, 63).

To be clear, we do not argue that a partial deployment is always less desirable than the absence of *any* action: while posing risks, insufficient deployments can generate short-term benefits, such as providing protection for senior mission leaders who engage in mediation or reassuring a portion of the population in the capital. However, “[t]he problem is... if the situation is really quite dicey, one brigade is just going to be very vulnerable” (Interview 2). Operational experience has demonstrated multiple times that delay between initial and full deployment is risky and debilitating. Once the Security Council authorizes a mission of a particular size, delays in fielding the expected number of troops expose deployed contingents to risk, encourage spoilers, and undermine mission and UN credibility in the eyes of conflict parties and the broader membership. While partial deployment may sometimes be preferable to no deployment, there is no operational-functional reason to focus UN reforms on rapid initial deployment rather than rapid full deployment.

In short, the First Brigade policy paradigm did not emerge because participants in the policy debate absorbed unambiguous lessons about the importance of an early brigade-sized deployment from previous UN peacekeeping experiences. The typical size of UN missions, the fact that rapid initial deployment does not reliably speed up full deployment, and the long-recognized dangers of slow progress from initial to full deployment undermine operational-functional explanations for the paradigm’s existence. Instead, “aiming low” dynamics in UN rapid deployment debates account for the emergence of the First Brigade policy paradigm, as we show below.

Protracted Negotiation Dynamics and the Emergence of the First Brigade Policy Paradigm

While intermittent UN engagement with rapid deployment concerns dates back to at least the 1960s (Macfarlane 2007), the contemporary policy paradigm has more recent roots. As late as 2000, the Brahimi Report on UN peace operations highlighted the absence of an agreed definition of UN rapid deployment – and, in striking consistency with the conceptual discussion above, argued that “enhancing the United Nations capacity for rapid deployment must begin with agreeing upon a standard towards which the Organization should strive” (UN 2000, §88). Towards this end, the report proposed an ambitious goal definition: “the United Nations should develop the operational capabilities to fully deploy ‘traditional’ peacekeeping operations within 30 days of the adoption of a Security Council resolution, and complex peacekeeping operations within 90 days” (UN 2000, §§87-8). Yet the seeds of a much less ambitious focus on the rapid deployment of a first brigade – rather than rapid full deployment – had already been sown in the 1990s. The Brahimi Report represented an attempt to dislodge this emerging consensus. Its failure to do so consolidated the narrower definition, leading to its largely unchallenged adoption by policymakers and analysts in the 2010s.

Roots of the First Brigade Focus: Negotiating Rapid Deployment in the 1990s

The 1990s began with considerable optimism about UN peacekeeping, which extended to rapid deployment. In 1992, Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali confidently asserted that “[m]ilitary observers and infantry are invariably available in the required numbers” for UN peace operations (UNSG 1992, §70-3), though he noted logistics and equipment challenges. In this context, he proposed an ambitious definition of rapid deployment: “start-up times to achieve operational self-sufficiency in general should be no more than 10 days to a month for a small mission (e.g. up to 500 personnel), two to three months for a medium-sized mission (e.g. up to 5,000 personnel) and four to five months for a large mission (e.g. above 5,000 personnel)” (UNSG 1994, §4). By 1994, however, UN peacekeeping had descended into crisis. After disastrous developments in former Yugoslavia and Somalia, the UN’s failure to respond to genocide in Rwanda – despite already

having a mission (UNAMIR) in the country – constituted a critical milestone in the policy debate around rapid deployment. It had three key impacts on this debate.

First, advocates highlighted it as definitive proof of the need for a robust UN rapid deployment capacity. Boutros-Ghali (1999, 140) claimed, for example, “if the United Nations’ standby force for rapid deployment that I had proposed two years earlier had been agreed upon, the Rwandan genocide might never have taken place.” While this interpretation of the UN’s failure in Rwanda is contestable – since there was already a mission on the ground, this was arguably not a rapid deployment problem (Interview 2) – its political effects were clear: in the aftermath of the genocide, the rapid deployment debate assumed renewed urgency. As former French UN diplomat François Heisbourg (1998, 195) noted, to make the case for the desirability of a UN rapid-response capacity, “it suffices to cite the case of Rwanda.”

Second, the UN’s failure in Rwanda starkly illustrated the problem of limited state commitment to peacekeeping. Western states had withdrawn their support in the wake of experiences in Somalia and former Yugoslavia. As noted above, none of the governments that had pledged troops under the UN stand-by arrangements were willing to deploy these units when the Security Council finally decided to expand UNAMIR. By 1995 it was clear that the availability of troops had palpably declined as compared with the UN’s needs (UNSG 1995, §43). Against this backdrop, ambitious proposals to improve the UN’s rapid deployment capability appeared utopian. In the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, several proposals for a standing UN rapid reaction capability emerged, championed by Boutros-Ghali (UNSG 1995, §4) as well as scholars, former diplomats and experts (Urquhart 1998; Kinloch-Pichat 2004, 144; Herro 2015, 22). Most envisioned a force of some 10,000 troops, which was already “generally thought to reflect more what is politically attainable than what may be needed operationally” (US Congress 1995, 9). Nevertheless, it was quickly deemed unrealistic (Heisbourg 1998, 198). By 1997, Boutros-Ghali’s successor Kofi Annan conceded that UN member states were “not ready” for a standing UN army (Deen 1997, §19). Italy’s Permanent Representative to the UN succinctly captured how the recognition of resource constraints winnowed down the range of reform proposals given consideration: “Though many proposals have been made, we must... eliminate the ones that are not realistic, attainable, or cost effective” (Fulci 1996, 57).

Third, counterfactual arguments about how the genocide might have been avoided suggested the viability of a less resource-intensive UN rapid response mechanism. UNAMIR Force Commander Dallaire insisted that the genocide might have been prevented with 5,000 troops, or a brigade (Kuperman 2001, 84). The 1999 Independent Inquiry into the Rwandan Genocide even suggested that a “force numbering 2,500 should have been able to stop or at least limit massacres” (UNSC 1999, 30). It was Dallaire’s brigade-size estimate, however, that gained traction. Annan endorsed it in 1998: “I agree with General Dallaire when he says, ‘If I had had one reinforced brigade – 5,000 men – well trained and well equipped, I could have saved thousands of lives’.” (Dorn and Matloff 2000, §3). Human Rights Watch repeated Dallaire’s claim (Des Forges 1999, 22), as did academics (Leurdijk 1995, 6; McCarthy 2000, 140; Herro 2016, 127). Asked in 2019 about the origins of the focus on a “first brigade” capacity in UN rapid deployment debates, former UN Assistant Secretary-General Ramesh Thakur was clear: “that goes back to what Dallaire said about Rwanda, [to] bridge that initial moment” (Interview 9).

Dallaire’s assessment provided a rationale for a pragmatic policy solution: a brigade-size rapid deployment capability was more politically feasible than larger rapid reaction forces (Heisbourg 1998, 198). This helped brigade-centric proposals gain traction. In 1994, the Netherlands proposed a permanent “UN Rapid Deployment Brigade” outside the UNSAS system (SHIRBRIG 2009, 5). In 1995, Canada proposed a “Vanguard Concept” for a 5,000-strong multi-functional rapid reaction force, explicitly citing Dallaire’s analysis of Rwanda (1995, 5). In 1996, Denmark presented a proposal for a “Multinational United Nations Stand-by Forces High Readiness Brigade” (UN 1996a), which was implemented and declared operational in January 2000 (SHIRBRIG 2009, 6-7).

Failing to Reverse the First Brigade Focus: The Brahimi Report and its Aftermath

The Brahimi Panel’s proposal to define rapid deployment in terms of the full authorized force challenged the “first brigade” focus emerging in the late 1990s. Significantly, the Panel was in a position to push back against the resource-constraint lessons gleaned from negotiations in the 1990s. It could not ignore considerations of political feasibility, as Annan had reminded its

members: “He said, ‘Look, you’re free... to say whatever you want. But you need to understand, I am not interested in a theoretical document that sounds nice, I need you to give me something that actually has a chance of being implemented” (Interview 5). However, the Panel convened during a resurgence of UN peacekeeping: its report “was being written against the backdrop of four new missions: Sierra Leone, Kosovo, DRC, and Timor-Leste... obviously you need to learn from Rwanda and Srebrenica and that has to factor, but it wasn’t the only thing” (Interview 5). The panel argued that one recent operational experience – UN peacekeepers having been taken hostage in Sierra Leone – fundamentally contradicted the first-brigade approach: “UNAMSIL would probably not have faced the difficulties... had it been provided with [stronger] forces... The Panel is convinced that NATO military planners would not have agreed to deploy to Sierra Leone with only the 6,000 troops initially authorized” (UN 2000, §106). As an independent body, moreover, the Panel had leeway to strategically push beyond the established consensus: “You pitch further out and you drag everybody along and you get a little bit further, but you don’t get fully to the point that you articulated. ... [Y]ou push for something you think is in the universe of possible, you want to be ambitious and you push for it, but you also recognize that you’re being ambitious” (Interview 5). The Secretariat, which was closely involved in the Panel’s work, had hoped that ambitious proposals would be more acceptable to member states coming from a group of independent experts than from UN officials (Weinlich 2014).

The Brahimi Report’s proposed focus on rapid full deployment reflected this ambition. To reach this policy goal, the Panel recommended that UNSAS “be developed further to include several coherent, multinational, brigade size forces and the necessary enabling forces.” (UN 2000, xi). These should be “available for full deployment to an operation within 30 days in the case of traditional peacekeeping operations and within 90 days in the case of complex operations” (UN 2000, §115). The report acknowledged SHIRBRIG as a model but explicitly sought to expand the UN’s rapid deployment capacity beyond it.

However, the Brahimi Panel’s efforts to refocus the policy debate on rapid full deployment failed. Its timelines proved seminal: the 30/90-day timeframes were endorsed by the Secretary-General (UNSG 2000, §§67-8) and the Security Council (UNSC 2000, 4), and became the (aspirational) standard against which UN deployments were measured (Langille 2014, 1-2) until the PCRS introduced a standardized 60-day rapid deployment window in 2015. However, the

timelines were rapidly divorced from the focus on rapid full deployment, which did not gain traction. Within two months of the report's release, the UN Secretary-General – having gauged initial state reactions – deemphasized the “coherent brigade-size forces” proposal: “I do not anticipate that the Panel expects this recommendation to be fully implemented immediately” (UNSG 2000, §85). While promising further consultations, he focused on less ambitious Brahimi recommendations for improving UNSAS (UNSG 2000, §§77-90). In December 2000, the UN's Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations endorsed modest UNSAS improvements but did not comment on the “coherent brigade-size forces” proposal. It also omitted the word “fully” from the Brahimi timelines, identifying “the goal of being able to deploy peacekeeping operations within 30 days... and to deploy complex peacekeeping operations within 90 days” (UNGA 2000, §§15-22).

Subsequent reforms cemented this distancing from rapid full deployment as a policy goal. In July 2002, UNSAS gained a Rapid Deployment Level for resources to be deployed within the Brahimi Report's 30/90-day timeframes. The Level's size was not specified, but it was deemed “unlikely that all of the required contingents for either a traditional or complex UN PKO [would] be fielded from the RDL”: the concept was for “some RDL units/resources [to] be deployed thereby enhancing the UN's ability to more rapidly initiate a mission” (UN 2003). Initial hopes that SHIRBRIG nations would join the RDL (Durch et al. 2003, 72) failed to materialize, as did the “coherent Brigade Units” invited from other sub-regional organizations (UNDPKO 2003, 10-11). By 2010, only four states had pledged resources: “two infantry companies, a special force platoon and five water treatment plants” (UNOIOS 2010, 11). Even as UN peacekeeping surged, with troop deployments skyrocketing from 30,000 in early 2000 to 80,000-90,000 in the 2010s, available resource commitments for rapid deployment appeared minimal.

The First Brigade Paradigm as Axiomatic

Contemporary UN policymakers and experts tend to dismiss out of hand the possibility of focusing on rapid full deployment as a policy goal: “I haven't heard anyone talk about, ‘Let's get an entire mission up and running in three months.’ ... I mean, people think it's extremely ambitious

to deploy any units within sixty days, so to think we could have the whole thing up and running... within three months, I think you would get laughed out of the room” (Interview 6). Another expert confirmed, “The whole mission, I don’t think we’ll see that done by the UN” (Interview 4). As former Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Jean-Marie Guéhenno explained, “the pros of a rapid deployment of the whole mission are very strong of course... [But] you have to be realistic based on what is feasible and what isn’t” (Interview 7). Strikingly, the very fact that the Brahimi Report focused on full deployment appears to have been forgotten. The first brigade focus has thus become the unquestioned default approach. As noted above, it is accepted by advocates of all three key proposed mechanisms for UN rapid deployment. The 2015 creation of the PCRS highlights its largely axiomatic nature.

The PCRS was largely designed by UN Secretariat officials, in the context of a strong, United States-led push to reinvigorate UN peacekeeping that culminated in the September 2015 Leaders’ Summit on Peacekeeping co-chaired by President Obama in New York: “you have to remember this all happened during the summit year, so the political momentum and the political buy-in and support was enormous. And the United States in particular had also said... ‘We’re extremely keen for us to have a system in place where the new pledges could be registered and a system that was a bit more serious than UNSAS’” (Interview 6). For PCRS architects, the need for a rapid deployment level was obvious: “The fact that we added the RDL on top of that was kind of a natural thing to do... because we know we have needs that need to be met quickly” (Interview 6). The RDL’s size also elicited strikingly little debate. Asked why it comprises one brigade, one PCRS architect replied,

That’s a good question. ... They were developing this Vanguard Brigade concept when I arrived at the UN... We just kind of latched onto it. ... To be honest, there hasn’t been a lot of discussion about whether that’s the right size or not. I think there was some initially when it was presented. Once the brigade-sized RDL was accepted legislatively, there hasn’t been further discussion on its size. (Interview 3)

Another PCRS architect confirmed, “To do anything bigger than that, people would have probably questioned our sense of realism. It seemed like the right size, I don’t know. There wasn’t a huge amount of debate about the total size of it” (Interview 6).

Once questioned about the RDL's size, UN officials typically defend it. One defense is that a brigade is a logical size: "I guess it was seen to be kind of the minimum size operating force to insert into a country in a semi-permissive or non-permissive environment. You wouldn't want anything smaller than that" (Interview 3). Yet this does not preclude attempting to secure multiple rapidly deployable brigades, as the Brahimi Report recommended. Focusing rapid deployment efforts on a single brigade is thus also defended on capacity grounds: "there are those of us who worry about even being able to deploy just a brigade rapidly, because of our limited ability to move quickly and do things" (Interview 3). There is also the potential of Level 3 of the PCRS, which has begun to include more units, acting not only as a backstop to the RDL but as a more substantial supplement facilitating deployment of a second wave of units after the first element of the mission arrives. As of November 2019, however, the RDL and Level 3 jointly included 5 pledged infantry battalions, which represents 4,250 troops (UNDPKO 2017) compared to 27 battalions at Levels 1 and 2 (UNDPO 2019c). Fundamentally, however, the RDL's size is linked to political feasibility considerations. One consideration is financial: "It was about what member states were willing to [support] – because we pay for these units, we do reimburse these units who are on the RDL" (Interview 3). Put differently, "everything is driven by money. I mean, just getting the RDL to get one quarter of their maintenance costs for the year, that was a huge fight" (Interview 4). Indonesia's (2017) proposal to extend modest readiness reimbursements to Level 3 units failed to gain support. Another consideration was troop availability: "maybe just by experience, the ability to get more than one brigade proved impossible in those timeframes" (Interview 5). In short, "If you want to mobilize twenty thousand troops, the commitment of member states is just not there for such undertakings. There is no appetite for that. So, if you shoot for the moon, you will not get the smaller prize that you are aiming for" (Interview 7).

Thus, once alerted to the first brigade policy paradigm, experts and officials defend it less on operational merits than on grounds of political feasibility, as demonstrated by accumulated negotiation experiences. A former top UN official succinctly captured the dynamics of paradigm emergence in the face of intractable policy problems: "All these other objectives are attempts to find intermediary steps to get faster. I don't think you can see more into these evolving goals than the realization that it can't be done" (Interview 1).

Conclusion

When large, heterogeneous IOs attempt to address difficult policy issues, reform negotiations are often protracted, extending over decades and multiple rounds. When they produce institutional solutions that fail to resolve the underlying problem, one diagnosis is deficient political will, masked by organized hypocrisy (Brunsson 1989) or “empty institutions” (Dimitrov 2019). In this article, we have highlighted a different dynamic, suggesting that protracted negotiations can give rise to international policy paradigms that prevent even committed advocates from developing fully effective ways of addressing challenges.

International policy paradigms structure debate among national diplomats, IO officials, and independent experts by providing shared issue and policy goal definitions that negotiators accept even as they disagree on the optimal choice of policy instruments. We thus foreground a role for ideas in IOs that reaches beyond the relatively small, homogeneous groups of actors susceptible to groupthink or organizational culture.

Indeed, drawing on the multilateral negotiations literature, we conceptualized the emergence of policy paradigms where existing scholarship least expects it: in large, heterogeneous IOs. The complexity of negotiations in these settings raises the risk of negotiation failure. International policy paradigms emerge and are valued because they help avert organizational paralysis by preventing continuous return to definitional debates. These origins differ significantly from the cognitive consensus highlighted by Hall (1993) and subsequent work on policy paradigms in Comparative Politics and, to a lesser extent, International Relations. However, the resulting paradigms are not necessarily less robust. An issue definition representing a mutually acceptable basis for negotiation in heterogeneous institutions is not lightly discarded, and over time may become taken for granted.

Yet because these international policy paradigms emerge primarily from the dynamics of protracted IO negotiations, rather than close operational analysis of the policy problem at hand, they also pose a risk. What is politically achievable at any given time is not necessarily what is required to fully address a policy problem. Pragmatic decisions to focus on one aspect of the issue become problematic when they lose their temporary quality. International policy paradigms that

emerge from these decisions, entrenching partial (though mutually acceptable) issue definitions and policy goals, divert policymakers' attention from the larger policy problem and thus create the potential for suboptimal effects.

The persistent challenge of UN rapid deployment provides a striking illustration of this dynamic. There is broad consensus on the importance of deploying peacekeeping operations quickly, and considerable debate about how to enhance the UN's rapid deployment capacity. Underlying this debate, however, is a remarkable consensus: rapid deployment is consistently interpreted narrowly as quickly establishing an initial, usually brigade-sized UN presence. The alternative goal definition of rapidly deploying the entire authorized mission – last advocated in the 2000 Brahimi Report – is typically ignored or dismissed out of hand. Thus, contemporary debate about UN rapid deployment takes place within a “First Brigade” international policy paradigm.

This policy paradigm cannot be attributed to shared operational experiences or lessons learned. UN missions are routinely larger than one brigade. Delays between initial and full deployment are well understood to generate significant operational challenges. The empirical evidence does not support optimism that a rapidly deployed initial presence reliably speeds up the arrival of the remainder of the peacekeeping force. Indeed, we have shown that the association between rapid initial deployment and rapid deployment of the entire force is not only weak but also weakening over time. Instead, the First Brigade policy paradigm emerged because its focus is politically acceptable: it establishes an important but relatively achievable goal that resource-conscious member states can endorse. Rooted in the UN peacekeeping crisis of the 1990s – especially in Rwanda – and confirmed with the defeat of the Brahimi definition in the early 2000s, the paradigm now provides a largely unquestioned framework within which diplomats and experts debate the relative merit of standby arrangements, standing capabilities, and UN/regional partnerships as rapid deployment mechanisms. Unfortunately, however, quickly establishing an initial presence is at best a partial solution to the UN's rapid deployment challenge. The First Brigade policy paradigm obscures the problem of rapidly reaching full mission strength, which Security Council resolutions identify as required for mandate implementation. The immediate policy implication of our findings is thus that the contemporary UN rapid deployment debate should expand its focus.

Efforts to further enhance initial deployment mechanisms should be complemented by renewed consideration of the broader challenge of quickly deploying whole peacekeeping missions.

In more conceptual terms, our findings suggest paying more attention to how policy paradigms may emerge and become entrenched even in large and heterogeneous IOs. There is no shortage of protracted IO negotiations in which international policy paradigms may emerge. Climate change provides one key example; migration management another. Closer to our own focus, we observe a focus on rapid deployment of a brigade-sized force in other crisis management organizations as well. As discussed above, both the African Standby Force and the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crisis focus on brigade-sized deployments. NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force is 5,000-strong.¹⁷ The EU's initial bold ambition of deploying up to 60,000 troops in sixty days, known as the 2003 Helsinki Headline Goal, has been "well-nigh forgotten" (Biscop 2016, 436): today, the organization has two battalion-sized (approximately 1,500 troops each) battlegroups on stand-by. The new, unspoken consensus on this less ambitious goal may be another example of international policy paradigm emergence, which deserves a separate study. The fact that the focus on a 3,000-5,000-strong rapidly deployable force emerged in several IOs simultaneously, regardless of their distinct crisis management approaches and needs, is also worthy of investigation. One question is whether, and if so how, policy paradigms may travel between IOs. Another research direction is analyzing the roles of different actors in sustaining policy paradigms: for example, IO officials, due to the practical and psychological need to highlight successes, often seek to legitimize suboptimal approaches in their own eyes and vis-à-vis their counterparts (von Billerbeck 2020a). Like policy paradigms, self-legitimation discourses enable IOs' action but detract from its effectiveness (von Billerbeck 2020b).

Finally, our findings raise a caution about incremental reforms, especially in large, heterogeneous international organizations. Limited goals initially identified as plausible first steps to a larger end may become entrenched as capturing the entire policy issue – rather than merely a more manageable subsection of it – through the emergence and consolidation of an international policy paradigm.

¹⁷ The 48-hour deployable Very High Readiness Joint Task Force is part of a larger, 40,000-strong NATO Response Force.

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Appendix

Table A.1. *Interviews conducted*

Designation	Date	Interviewee
Interview 1	26 February 2019	Former diplomat and top UN official. Remarks not for closer attribution.
Interview 2	17 April 2019	Prof. Michael W. Doyle, Columbia University. UN Assistant-Secretary-General for Policy Planning and Special Advisor to Secretary-General Kofi Annan (2001-2003).
Interview 3	23 April 2019	Adam Smith, Team Leader, Strategic Force Generation Cell, Department of Peace Operations.
Interview 4	30 April 2019	Michael Hanrahan. Consultant. Director of Mission Support for MINUSCA (2014-2015). Senior official in UNSOA (2012-13) and UNAMID (2009-2010). Military Advisor for Canadian mission to UN, 2002-2006.
Interview 5	1 May 2019	Salman Ahmed. Senior fellow, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. UN official (1992-2008), including as secretary of the Panel on UN Peace Operations (“Brahimi Report”). High-level US official and diplomat (2009-2016).
Interview 6	3 May 2019	Oliver Ulich. Senior Officer, Policy and Best Practices Service, Department of Peace Operations.
Interview 7	8 May 2019	Jean-Marie Guéhenno. UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations (2000-2008).
Interview 8	17 May 2019	UN official. Remarks not for closer attribution.
Interview 9	25 May 2019	Ramesh Thakur. Vice Rector and Senior Vice Rector of the UN University and Assistant UN Secretary-General (1998-2007). Senior Advisor on Reforms to Secretary-General Kofi Annan (2002).

Table A.2. *Missions, mission characteristics, and deployment speed*

Mission	Start	Region	Type¹	T₂₅	T₇₅
MINURCA	1998	Africa	Rehatted	0	0
MINURCAT	2009	Africa	Rehatted	28	89
MINUSCA	2014	Africa	Rehatted	122	122
MINUSMA	2013	Africa	Rehatted	0	274
MINUSTAH	2004	Americas	New	31	184
MONUC	1999	Africa	New	426	610
ONUB	2004	Africa	Rehatted	0	92
ONUMOZ	1992	Africa	New	90	120
UNAMID	2007	Africa	Rehatted	61	639
UNAMIR	1993	Africa	New	61	123
UNAMSIL	1999	Africa	Rehatted	61	61
UNAVEM	1995	Africa	Rehatted	61	214
UNIFIL	2006	Middle East	Rehatted	31	122
UNIKOM	1993	Middle East	New	337	-
UNISFA	2011	Africa	New	0	122
UNMEE	2000	Africa	New	91	181
UNMIH	1995	Americas	New	151	151
UNMIL	2003	Africa	Rehatted	0	123
UNMIS	2005	Africa	New	184	337
UNMISS	2011	Africa	Rehatted	0	0
UNOCI	2004	Africa	Rehatted	31	122
UNOMSIL	1998	Africa	New	0	30
UNOSOM	1992	Africa	New	0	122
UNPREDEP	1995	Europe	Rehatted	0	0
UNTAC	1992	Asia	Rehatted	184	184
UNTAES	1996	Europe	Rehatted	0	90
UNTAET	1999	Asia	Rehatted	120	120
<i>All</i>				<i>31</i>	<i>184</i>