

# ***Why Peacekeeping Operations Failed: Taking AMISOM as an Example***

**Linxi Li**

*Faculty of Arts, Monash University, Melbourne, 3800, Australia*

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**Abstract:** This article investigates the sustained failures of United Nations peacekeeping operations from the perspectives of liberalism and critical international relations theory, with the African Union Mission in Somalia (Somalia) as the main case study. Liberalism emphasizes institutional constraints, coordination issues, and excessive reliance on external support, while critical theory exposes deeper structural issues such as the dynamics of new colonial power, marginalization of local institutions, and global inequality in peacekeeping practices. Analysis suggests that current peace operations often prioritize regional security and donor interests over sustainable peace and inclusive governance. By drawing on local governance experiments in the Kurdish region of Syria, a shift towards a locally led, inclusive, and context sensitive peacekeeping model has been proposed, which emphasizes political legitimacy, cultural diversity, and bottom-up change.

## **1. Introduction**

Since its establishment in 1948, United Nations peacekeeping operations have played a central role in global conflict resolution. The mission of these peacekeeping operations is to maintain international peace and security, aimed at stabilizing war-torn regions, promoting political transition, and protecting civilians. However, despite significant success, peacekeeping operations often struggle in complex and prolonged conflicts, raising fundamental questions about their effectiveness, legitimacy, and sustainability. This article explores the fundamental reasons for the failure of peacekeeping by analyzing the case of the African Union Mission in Somalia (Somalia). Through exposure to liberalism and critical international relations theory, it not only attempts to reveal operational and institutional deficiencies, but also attempts to uncover deeper structural power imbalances and external influences in contemporary peacekeeping practices.

The study ultimately calls for a rethinking of the peacekeeping framework, placing local institutions, political inclusiveness, and transition towards justice above externally imposed stability models.

## **2. Overview of Peacekeeping Operations**

Since its first deployment in 1948, United Nations peacekeeping operations have become one of the core mechanisms for global conflict management and peace maintenance. The United Nations

aims to supervise the implementation of peace agreements, assist in political transitions, and alleviate humanitarian crises by deploying neutral multinational forces. However, although UN peacekeeping operations have achieved certain results in certain regions, their failures in multiple complex conflicts have also sparked widespread questioning from the international community.

These failures not only expose the limitations of peacekeeping operations in terms of implementation, but also reveal the fundamental dilemmas faced by their institutional design, power structure, and values. This study aims to explore the reasons for the failure of United Nations peacekeeping operations, combining liberalism and critical international relations theory to analyze the performance of peacekeeping operations in goal setting, resource allocation, local acceptance, and global power relations from different perspectives.

This study will adopt a comparative case analysis method to explore the applicability of liberal theory in institutional construction and international cooperation logic in peacekeeping operations, and use critical theory to reveal the power asymmetry and legitimacy crisis behind peacekeeping operations.

### **3. The Evaluation of African Union Mission in Somalia**

#### **3.1 A Case Study: African Union Mission in Somalia**

The African Union Mission in Somalia was established by the African Union Peace and Security Council in January 2007. The core of many evaluations is that the complex and multi-level international support architecture established to address the issue of insufficient resources and capabilities in the early stages of the mission has been successful [6], and has also sparked enthusiasm for the potential of establishing a similar, internationally supported, African led mission [12].

Although these arrangements have made positive contributions to the progress made by the African Union Mission in Somalia, these factors have also led to a lack of cohesion within the mission. Specifically, the Support Office of the African Union Mission in Somalia has weakened the authority of the headquarters of the African Union Mission in Somalia. The headquarters finds it difficult to effectively coordinate and command the troops of various member countries, resulting in tactical execution being hindered, especially in situations where rapid response is required. In this situation, the combination of weak headquarters and the influence of the sending country will produce a consistent result, that is, when there are differences, the strategic direction formulated by the force headquarters often gives way to the national interests of the sending country.

At the same time, neighboring Ethiopia and Kenya have had profound and complex impacts on the security situation in Somalia. Both countries have entered Somalia through unilateral military interventions, such as the "Linda Enki" operation. Although they claim their intervention goals are to combat terrorism and stabilize Somalia, their actions are widely seen as tools for seeking geopolitical and economic benefits [2]. The two countries also unilaterally dispatched troops to Somalia in 2011 and 2012 under the pretext of cracking down on Al Shabaab. Although these actions may appear to be counter-terrorism efforts, they actually serve the geopolitical and economic interests of both countries, such as controlling border areas and accessing resources [7]. These interventions have superficially strengthened regional cooperation against Al Shabaab, but have also sparked distrust, political friction, and criticism of the pursuit of national interests under the guise of regional "peace and stability", reflecting that neighboring countries are both "defenders" and "beneficiaries" in Somalia's security affairs.

Despite achieving some military successes, Al Shabaab is still able to launch attacks in Mogadishu and rural areas, demonstrating its considerable combat effectiveness. Somalia has long relied on financial and logistical support from Western countries, making it difficult to operate independently.

At the same time, political divisions within the Federal Government of Somalia and confrontations among local forces have further hindered the country's stability and development.

### 3.2 Overview of Critical Theory

From a critical perspective, people have discussed the evolution of several generations of peace practices, including conflict management, conflict resolution, conflict transformation, and peace building [8]. After measuring the standards of liberalism, critical theory typically argues that these methods often undermine the quality and legitimacy of peace rather than the promised improvement of peace, and the peace solutions they trigger are often built on a persistent basis of local and global inequalities (social, economic, and political), indicating that peace may not achieve justice or sustainability. Compared to liberalism that emphasizes cooperation and institutional design, critical international relations theory focuses on the shaping of international practice by power relations, historical structures, and discourse systems, emphasizing "who defines peace," "who holds governance power," and "whose interests peacekeeping serves. In terms of building, many critics believe that it is destined to fail [9] because it relies on centralization, border control, regional and domestic stability, and capital inflows, which are rarely achieved simultaneously in conflict affected societies.

Critical theory focuses on whether peacekeeping operations fundamentally reproduce global inequality, marginalize local political initiative, and generate Western top-down 'peace'. As critical scholar David Chandler [13] pointed out, contemporary peacekeeping operations often use labels such as "state failure" and "war on terror" to justify deep intervention in southern countries.

### 3.3 Failure from a Critical Perspective

The above points are reflected in the African Union Mission in Somalia. Although the main mission of AMISOM is called "peacekeeping", it has become a highly militarized "anti-terrorism campaign" in practice. Its core goal is not the long-term reconstruction of Somali society, but to curb the expansion of Al Shabaab to maintain regional security. This counter-terrorism first 'strategy constructs Somalia's image as a security threat to others, rather than as a governed and dialogic political community, thus reproducing the global North-South political hierarchy[14].

At the same time, in the strategic planning and resource allocation of the African Union Mission in Somalia, the "rebuilding the country" plan is led by the United Nations Development Programme, the International Advisory Group, and external donors, ignoring Somalia's traditional governance and local consultation mechanisms. Some studies [8] have pointed out that against the backdrop of multiple failed attempts by the African Union Mission in Somalia and the United Nations to promote national reconstruction, the international community has not truly delegated power to local political structures in Somalia, but has maintained its long-term existence and governance legitimacy while maintaining a "limited and effective chaos" situation. Specifically, these factors exacerbate structural divisions as different and sometimes contradictory political forces dominate the African Union in formulating strategic directions [1]. In fact, stability operations are more aggressive than traditional non use of force and can affect their ability to attract troop contributing countries. Because generally speaking, greater risks limit countries willing to deploy troops to neighboring countries with direct national security interests in conflict.

As mentioned above, AMISOM is deployed by Uganda, Burundi, Kenya and other countries, with high military risks, which also increases the possibility of geopolitical conflicts. On the other hand, Western countries maintain remote control by providing funding and intelligence, making African countries agents of Western powers rather than independent peacekeeping forces. For example, the Kenya Defense Force (KDF) is built on the capabilities and confidence established by Kenya as one

of the top ten troop contributing countries to United Nations missions and one of the top six beneficiaries of US counter-terrorism assistance [5]. This phenomenon is known as the "New African Security Governance" system, which points out the systematic weakening of sovereignty and autonomy in the African region behind it. This phenomenon further disperses the cohesion of peacekeeping forces, allowing the interests of external donors to participate in peacekeeping operations[15].

Therefore, from a critical perspective, the fundamental reason for the failure of peacekeeping operations lies in the global unequal structure and the neo colonial discourse rooted in the peacekeeping mechanism itself. In future actions, it is necessary to break the traditional liberal dominated external governance framework and establish a locally centered framework to redefine the relationship between international intervention and local sovereignty.

### 3.4 Criticism of the liberal peacekeeping model

Although liberal peacekeeping theory emphasizes promoting peace through institutional building, international cooperation, and democratization, its practical application has been questioned in many places. Critical international relations theory points out that this paradigm of "liberal peace" centered on institutional output has not brought true peace in many non-Western societies, but has instead created new structural legitimacy crises [3].

Taking the peacekeeping operation of AMISOM in Somalia as an example, this "top-down" construction process is led by external experts, with local elites and ordinary people excluded from core decision-making, resulting in a lack of legitimacy and identity for peacekeeping operations.

In addition, the development goals set by peacekeeping mechanisms overly rely on external funding and policy leadership, making peace building a technocratic project management rather than a process of political consultation and social reconstruction. This admiration for formal democracy and Western style systems actually obscures the ability to respond to the root causes of local conflicts, such as historical inequality, identity exclusion, and unequal distribution of resources[16].

This top-down peacekeeping operation has also led to the problem of "long-term external dependence weakening domestic construction capabilities". Western countries intervene in the national construction of post-conflict countries through stabilization actions, promoting the transformation of Western-style democratic regimes, and affecting the specific implementation of stabilization actions. Other peacekeeping countries can only passively accept it [4]. This external intervention largely deviates from the principles of peacekeeping operations in terms of goals, content, standards, and methods, presenting colonialist characteristics, which may enhance external legitimacy (especially within Western countries), but at the same time undermine internal legitimacy due to unmet domestic expectations [11].

As critical theory emphasizes, true peace does not mean replicating Western governance models, but rather creating a political space that reflects local demands, repairs relationships, and empowers the people. In Somalia, it is the misplacement of the liberal peacekeeping model that exacerbates the failure of peacekeeping operations and the persistence of conflicts.

## 4. Reflection and Suggestions

The current United Nations peacekeeping mechanism is deeply influenced by the liberal international order in its institutional design, and its core logic still focuses on order maintenance, national reconstruction, and the promotion of formal democracy. However, from the experience of AMISOM, it can be seen that the complex situation formed by the interweaving of local social structure, national capacity, regional relations, and global power is far beyond the capacity of standardized mechanisms to cope with. In this situation, blindly applying Western perspectives to

peacekeeping operations often leads to failure and falls into a cycle of "functional failed states" in maintaining stability: external support maintains the surface operation of the government, but fails to stimulate its ability to construct independently. As Diehl and Richmond pointed out, future peacekeeping research needs to go beyond the traditional "outcome oriented" and "institutional engineering" paths and instead incorporate critical theory research methods.

Firstly, it should be acknowledged that peacekeeping operations are a practice deeply embedded in the international political and development structure, rather than a colonial tool for spreading liberalism. We must re-examine the issue of discourse power behind peacekeeping missions, namely the definition of peace. Critical research reveals that in the current mechanism, local voices are marginalized and recipient countries become governance objects rather than participating entities. Secondly, future peacekeeping operations should no longer rely solely on the governance template of Western countries, but should combine local traditions, non-state actors, and historical governance mechanisms to develop locally embedded peacekeeping designs. And in the process, similar unilateral military interventions and multi-party conflicts of interest under the pretext of combating terrorism should also be avoided.

## 5. Ideal Peacekeeping Model

### 5.1 An Ideal model

In summary, one of the fundamental reasons for the failure of current peacekeeping operations is that they rely on a "template based" institutional output logic, viewing liberal democracy, market economy, and state construction as universal paths to peace. The ideal peacekeeping model should abandon the role of "external governance" and instead build an embedded, collaborative, and socially participatory peacekeeping framework that emphasizes local agency, polycentric governance, recognition of cultural and governance diversity, and transition from conflict management to conflict transformation.

Firstly, from the perspective of local initiative, peacekeeping operations should be designed based on local political, cultural, and social structures. For example, in the case of Somalia, the participation rights of the Presbyterian Church should be respected, or other traditional mechanisms such as tribal mediation should be integrated to establish a local authority system for sustainable peacekeeping.

Secondly, it is important to promote broad participation, from all parties involved in the conflict to civilian communities, women's organizations, and local religious networks, which should be the main actors in the peace process. Simply investing external resources and the military cannot establish communication and balance among multiple stakeholders, so it is necessary to establish a peacekeeping consultation committee to ensure the voice and power balance of all parties.

The recognition of diversity can be seen as a new "justice orientation", that is, peacekeeping should not only serve to "end the war", but should also include the repair of historical wounds and the elimination of structural inequalities. The United Nations (UN) should shift the peacekeeping mechanism from simply copying liberalism to respecting the culture and ideology of the host country.

Thirdly, peacekeeping authorization also needs to have a dynamic adjustment mechanism and establish channels for self reflection and feedback. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) should promote the establishment of an independent monitoring mechanism for UN peacekeeping missions, conduct regular performance and legitimacy evaluations, in order to avoid the escalation of geopolitical conflicts similar to the case of Somalia.

### 5.2 Syria as a Case Study

Although Syria is not recognized as a successful UN led peacekeeping case, some localized



reconstruction areas, such as the "self governance zone" in the Kurdish region, provide inspiration for the peacekeeping model mentioned in this article.

The Kurdish region in northeastern Syria (commonly known as "Rojava") has implemented a governance model based on "Democratic Confederation". Rojava's governance model is based on a democratic confederation system, emphasizing grassroots democracy, decentralization of power, and direct community participation in the decision-making process. This model promotes local autonomy and implements collective governance structures that emphasize inclusivity, diversity, and representativeness [10]. The multi-level governance structure composed of local councils, community committees, and communes operates together to ensure the participation of various ethnic and religious groups.

External forces, such as international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), have provided technical assistance and training in northeastern Syria to help local autonomous institutions (such as AANES) enhance their governance capabilities. The Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) is a coalition of Syrian multi-ethnic political parties, associations, civil society organizations, and local activists. SDC believes that decentralization should become a model for other regions of Syria and be reflected in the new national constitution. The Constitution protects the right of all people to believe and worship, and stipulates that every political position in regional governments, local councils, and villages must be held by individuals from two different cultural and/or religious backgrounds. The SDC and AANES Councils also actively seek positions as representative of the non-mainstream camp and seek their guidance and participation.

Significant progress has been made in cultural and linguistic rights in Kurdish regions. The Kurdish people are one of the largest stateless ethnic groups in the world, and they feel that they have some control over their lives, hoping that the new government can make this control permanent. Kurdish is used in education and media, traditional festivals such as Nowruz are openly celebrated, and children can register using Kurdish names. These changes signify the formal recognition of Kurdish cultural and linguistic rights, helping to protect multiculturalism and avoid the suppression of ethnic minorities by a unified national narrative.

The ideal peacekeeping mission should use the example of "Syrian style local governance" as a case study to design a dual track peacekeeping system that can be recognized by international law while respecting local mechanisms. That is, international peacekeeping forces are responsible for external security guarantees, while local governance mechanisms are responsible for internal governance and social restoration. The two operate in coordination and jointly build a peaceful ecology.

## 6. Conclusion

As an important tool for the international community to maintain peace and security, United Nations peacekeeping operations have had complex and diverse impacts in different regions since their inception. This article uses the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) as a case study and combines critical international relations theory to reveal the structural contradictions commonly present in current peacekeeping practices. Factors such as external intervention dominance, marginalization of local societies, and instrumental participation of regional states constitute important root causes of the failure of contemporary peacekeeping operations. The United Nations peacekeeping mechanism has maintained surface order in many cases, but has failed to stimulate the political reconstruction and social repair capabilities of recipient countries themselves, instead promoting the continued existence of "functionally failed states".

To address the aforementioned challenges, this article proposes an ideal peacekeeping operation model for the future based on critical analysis. This model emphasizes that peacekeeping operations

should be led by local political forces, integrate local governance traditions and cultural diversity, and avoid transforming peacekeeping into a tool for institutional output and discourse hegemony.

The partial governance practices in the Kurdish region of northeastern Syria provide a practical basis for the construction of this model. Although the overall situation in Syria remains volatile at the macro level, the Kurdish led "Rojava" region exhibits a governance form centered on democratic consultation, autonomous community security management, and external forces providing technical support rather than decision-making control.

Although this governance system faces issues such as insufficient external recognition, resource scarcity, and geopolitical pressures, its underlying logic embodies the critical theory's advocacy of local agency, pluralistic consultation, and justice reconstruction. These practices have shown that even in highly unstable conflict environments, local societies can still establish an endogenous framework for peace, as long as external forces intervene with support and collaboration as the core, rather than substitution and control.

In summary, the future reform of United Nations peacekeeping operations should not be limited to operational adjustments, but should return to their political and moral mission, reconstruct power structures and governance methods.

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