



UN Peacekeeping and the 2017 Election

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While it seems unlikely that any decisive bloc of British voters will be swayed in their vote on 8 June by the competing parties' pledges on UN peacekeeping, a survey of the various party manifestoes reveals a resurgence of commitment to such operations. Whereas in 2015, only the Greens made explicit mention of peacekeeping in their manifesto, in 2017 all six major parties except the Greens reference peacekeeping. Buried in the detail, there are at least four potentially big ideas to influence future UK involvement in peace support operations.

Why peacekeeping matters in 2017

How to explain this apparent resurgence of UK multilateralism in the age of populist unilateralism? Last year, David Curran and Paul D. Williams made an eloquent [case](#) for the enlightened mutual interest of greater UK engagement in UN Peace Operations that bears revisiting. ORG would certainly hope that various parties responded to their detailed recommendations. In cruder terms responding to the political exigencies of 2017, five more immediate explanations might be offered.

The first is that the US told us to do it, and we are doing more of it. David Cameron's apparently personal commitment to double the number of UK blue berets came hot on the heels of President Obama's hosting of a [UN summit on peacekeeping](#) in September 2015. This secured [pledges](#) of 40,000 additional peacekeepers, not quite 1% of them British and none of them American.

Theresa May's incoming government honoured Cameron's commitment to host a follow-up [UN Peacekeeping Defence Ministerial](#) a year later and has kept to

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his pledges. In the past two years, British peacekeeper contributions to UN operations have risen from 288 to 528. While the highest level since 2004, this pushes the UK only from 53rd to 42nd in world rankings, equal to Ireland and less than half leading European contributor Italy's 1,272 peacekeepers. Further pledged deployments in South Sudan and Somalia should bring the British total to around 700, comparable to French, German and Spanish contributions.

The second, perversely, is that UN Peacekeeping now appears critically endangered by the US administration, with the Trump administration's first budget threatening an estimated \$1 billion cut to its annual contribution to the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) \$7.9 billion budget. At least for some opposition parties, Washington's latest retreat from multilateralism is seen as an opportunity for 'Global Britain' to step up.

The third, on the same theme, is the desperate search for an internationalist cause that the UK can rally to as the country severs its ties to the EU. Given the disproportionate and growing role of the security sector in UK foreign policy, it should not be surprising that peacekeeping is a natural rallying point.

Fourthly, there is perhaps simply a lot of armed conflict and instability to be seen to be doing something about in 2017. This was true also in 2015 but last year's Chilcot Report has also cemented the idea among many voters that the UK's gung ho approach to overseas interventions is unethical and counter-productive.

Finally, there is the question of when peacekeeping is really peace-keeping. On the one hand, one can distinguish between UN-badged operations run by DPKO and UN-mandated operations run by others like NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, or NATO's ostensibly civilian-protecting

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operation that helped change Libya's regime in 2011. On the other, there are UN-run peace enforcement operations of increasingly offensive character, actively pursuing designated 'terrorist' opponents. MINUSMA in Mali is a good example. So when parties talk of 'peacekeeping' they are neither necessarily talking of UN peacekeeping nor of keeping the peace.

What the manifestoes say

The most radical of the ideas in the manifestos is the Labour Party's almost offhand statement that "Labour will commit to effective UN peacekeeping, including support for a UN Emergency Peace Service." Commitment to UN multilateralism is writ large throughout the manifesto, but whether Labour HQ understands that the UNEPS concept is of a supranational standing army (albeit of very limited size and offensive capability) under UN command is unclear. This also seems to have escaped the government and media, which have entirely failed to pick up on it.

Most consistent of the approaches is perhaps the Liberal Democrats commitment to "support the UN principle of Responsibility to Protect, focusing on conflict prevention." In light of the Libyan fiasco and the humiliating imbroglio of Syria, R2P has rather gone out of fashion in favour of the more counter-terrorism-oriented 'stabilisation' concept. Surprisingly, the party's manifesto shies away from overtly making the connection between R2P and UN peacekeeping, implying that the UK should be prepared to mount unilateral humanitarian interventions if necessary. A whiff of New Labour's liberal interventionism thus clings to the Liberal Democrats, if not to Labour itself.

Peacekeeping has also crept into the [Scottish National Party's](#) manifesto, albeit only as a chapter heading: Defence, Security and Global Peace-Keeping. Scotland's main UN-focused peace [initiative](#) is to train female Syrian peace-makers in negotiation and communication skills. The SNP proposes to expand this commitment to the UN's landmark Security Council [Resolution 1325](#) on Women, Peace and Security. There is not yet an overt SNP military commitment to peace operations. Currently 8% of British peacekeepers are women, about double the [global average](#).

On the right, both the [Conservatives](#) and [UKIP](#) are newly keen to include peacekeeping explicitly in a suite of military capabilities to be maintained. For the former, the armed forces must “maintain the ability to conduct strike operations, peacekeeping, security missions and the deployment of a joint expeditionary force.” For the latter, they must have “the capability to defend simultaneously Gibraltar and the Falklands Islands, contribute to one major theatre operation and several peacekeeping missions.” In essence, both parties are pledging to continue the current commitment and orientation.

However, both manifestoes contain more challenging ideas of relevance to peace support operations in their chapters on international development. For UKIP this is the pledge to replace [RFA Argus](#), the Navy's lightly armed Primary Casualty Receiving Ship with an unarmed 500-bed hospital ship to serve as flagship for British humanitarian missions like the recent [response](#) to the Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone. Currently, only the US Navy operates any vessels of such size and type, and rarely in a humanitarian capacity. Ostensibly, such a vessel could be put at the service of UN peace operations, although UKIP is notably light on mentions of the UN or multilateralism.

For the Conservatives, the devil in the detail is on how it can spend not its defence but its development budget, the world's second largest. The manifesto commits to working "with like-minded countries to change the rules [on development spending] so that they are updated and better reflect the breadth of our assistance around the world. If that does not work, we will change the law to allow us to use a better definition of development spending, while continuing to meet our 0.7 per cent target."

While the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) already [changed its rules](#) under British pressure in 2016 to allow greater use of development budgets to fund peacekeeping, some military humanitarian aid delivery, some training and controversial [countering violent extremism \(CVE\)](#) activities, the May government appears to be pushing for even greater leeway to allocate the 0.7% of national income legally allocated to international aid to the military instrument. Many such activities are central to the MoD's "[international by design](#)" mantra, as embodied in February's [International Defence Engagement Strategy](#).

This probably is neither good nor bad news for UN peacekeeping, since the UK's [assessed contribution](#) to DPKO is already set. However, as with UKIP's hospital ship proposal, it potentially allows the Department for International Development to subsidise the Ministry of Defence to the detriment of more obvious poverty alleviation activities.

As for the [Greens](#), the omission of peacekeeping from their very brief Green Guarantee in contrast to the 2015 commitment to focusing peace and defence policy on "genuine peacekeeping" may be an oversight occasioned by brevity. At the least, unlike in the US, no major party is advocating a retreat from UN peacekeeping in 2017. The post-Brexit momentum appears to be in favour of

greater engagement with international peace support operations, with the major caveat that not all such operations necessarily build sustainable peace and security.

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Image credit: [United Nations Photo/Flickr](#)

About the Author

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