FBA Research Brief
Mission Leaders:
An Evidence-based Assessment

By Linnéa Gelot, Chiara Ruffa, Lisa Ekman
Contact Linnea.Gelot@fhs.se

Introduction

This FBA research brief highlights the policy implications based on the findings of a larger study on civil-military relations (CMR) in international conflict management.[1]

The importance of top quality mission leadership for mission coherence is evident in today's increasingly complex, integrated, and variegated mission environments, where mission leaders continuously weigh short-term military and security advances against long-term political and societal aims (Jenne, 2022, p. 4). Research on civil-military relations in contemporary UN 'multidimensional' missions overwhelmingly finds that good civil-military interactions are beneficial to mission coherence and, therefore, effective mission implementation. Strategic mission leaders can employ certain strategies and practices, integrating best practices and organisational principles and guidelines into what they do.

Policy recommendations

1. Provide specific, realistic training contextualized to UN missions.
2. Cultivate adaptive leadership with future-oriented skills.
3. Develop a best practices inventory for prioritizing tasks clearly.
4. Strengthen cohesive civil-military leadership dynamics to boost mission effectiveness.
5. Prioritize flexible, relationship-building traits when selecting mission leaders.
6. Integrate gender mainstreaming sustainably at senior leadership levels.
7. Adapt leadership strategies carefully to conflict-specific local contexts.

This may produce desired behavioural change, yet it is notoriously hard to forecast how at different mission levels specific forms of intra- and interagency relations produce the intended positive outcomes.

FBA

01 Strategic mission leaders: What the evidence tells us

Mission leaders' will and capacity to cooperate is critical: within the context of the mission's mandate, across a range of critical mission interlocutors, and balancing what relations to prioritize within a given set of structural constraints. Global expertise in the area of CMR highlights this as central to the ability of contemporary multilateralism to bring about positive change (Challenges 2014). However, recent scholarship also places these leadership skills in a broader context where explanatory factors include global institutional multi-centredness and pluralism, armed conflict patterns, diversity of interveners in the same locale, strained geopolitics, etc. A recent history of international peace operations gives at hand that short-term security considerations often prevail and have resulted in an overly securitized multi-actor approach to collective security challenges in some cases (Duursma et al 2023). These contextual 'stressors' pose additional challenges to the ability of mission leaders to encourage cooperation.

In the academic literature about CMR in international missions, more attention has been given to civilian mission leaders than military ones. This means that more is known about the civilian top mission leadership strata, more agencies work on coaching and best practices, both policy/practice and research tend to look to distinct traits and roles of such leaders. We want to highlight, based on the research informing this research brief, that in order to explore what fosters mission cooperation in integrated missions, it is important to analyse and contextualise the very relations and social networks themselves. This means that we need to draw more lessons from the vibrant debate among academics and practitioners on how to unpack and 'flesh out' the workings and social processes of institutional designs put in place to enable, precisely, integrated approaches (Ruffa and Newby 2023). Additionally, it would be valuable to draw out best practices from successful examples of when and how strategic civilian and military mission leaders prioritize types of cooperation that strategically improve mission performance. What communicative strategies and what routines in everyday mission life will mediate the frictions and communication challenges that oftentimes hamper strategic-level interactions? In very practical terms, this could involve embedding into leadership curriculums an exercise using a fictitious example to practice this very form of relationship-building along the chain of command. This could also involve initiating a project aiming at canvassing and modelling practical guidance for senior mission leaders, with a specific focus on mediating top civilian-military mission interactions. These could reflect the generally compressed nature of command structures in UN peace operations and be designed to be adapted to mission specific circumstances (non-formulaic). Civilian and military cultures are sometimes perceived as warranting separate schools of leadership training and scholarly approaches (Ford 2018, pp. 202-203). Yet professional senior-level training can and ought to still play a role in conveying best practices of engaging one another in strategic-level interactions to achieve shared mission objectives while recognizing the diversity in backgrounds and organizational cultures that are contributing to tensions in civil-military leadership pairs.

Our study has generated one important question where further work is needed. This concerns the transferability of our findings about UN multidimensional missions and the most common mission types today to other non-traditional or emerging international conflict management actors and approaches. The institutional designs meant to enable integration through CMR in peace operations, and the hierarchical logics of civilian and military organizational cultures respectively, will be different when we consider other forms of international conflict management. This means that there are caveats to the transferability of the findings herein and that typologies and comparisons will need to be carefully considered in order to generalize the recommendations in this brief further.

The research study focused on strategic mission leadership defined as senior civilian and military leaders working in field settings who are responsible, in different ways, for mission implementation. Within the UN framework of integrated missions, this term involves leaders at all levels of operations: from the Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) in the role of Head of Mission (HoM), to the Force Commander, and via leadership constellations in Mission Leadership Teams (MLTs) down to regional, national and lower-level leadership and tactical command. This is in contrast to the UN strategic level of command in New York. Strategic mission leadership influences how civilian and military actors across different components and levels form purposive relationships to achieve their objectives.

A concerted effort by civilian, police and military capabilities is assumed to be necessary for the achievement of human security. Here we conceptualise human security as a multi-sectoral approach to security that identifies and addresses widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity of the people. The bedrock normative assumption of a majority of CMR studies, as well as best practices by heavily invested global organisations, is that coordination and cooperation are fundamental to achieve mission objectives, promoting global norms, and creating conditions for sustainable peace (De Coning and Friis 2011).

Photo:
United Nations Photo

02   Policy recommendations

Leadership training must be specific, realistic and contextualized. Leadership in UN peace operations has its unique set of challenges. It requires specific and clearly communicated political, strategic and practical guidance on how leaders' decisions influence appropriate civil-military relations and this in turn can impact on mission effectiveness. Preparatory training to lead in complex and dynamic settings must integrate sound and 'UN-centric' knowledge of UN doctrine, geo-politics of the mission mandate, and scenario-based experiences of the types of moral dilemmas and judgments mission personnel will face. Leadership trainers and mentors need to make sure training objectives reflect UN mission realities (including for instance requirements in partnership peacekeeping) that resonate and can be retained by the participants. Importantly, each senior leader—be it civilian or military—needs in-depth understanding of the civil-military context that the other agencies and stakeholders are embedded in. They also need to be reflexive about her/his/their own positionality and sensitivity in relation to civil-military relations.

Quality of leadership. Mission leaders take better strategic decisions the more they are able to adapt in complex mission contexts. Recruitment and training must strive to nurture leadership skills in connection with long-standing peace operation principles, yet also contain exercises that are future-oriented and seek to train flexibility and adaptivity. Mission leaders require a command over the whole repertoire of UN conflict involvement, due to rapidly shifting conflict dynamics. They also need very strong adaptability and problem-solving skills to lead in times of rapid changes to traditional peacekeeping. Depending on context, the conflict management toolbox involves emerging and innovative actors, instruments, and practices which requires mission leaders to relate these and discern their appropriateness to their mission mandates. Mission leaders must also be creative thinkers to be able to turn diverse and multi-cultural personnel into an asset. Personal styles and postures in leadership concerning civil-military relations should be spelled out and discussed in follow up upon deployment with the objective of transforming critical issues into a mission asset.

The preparation and experience of staff in the MLTs also matter for the prospects of encouraging cooperative CMR. In pre-deployment training of MLT's, there is value in exposing these staff members to diversity so that prior to deployment these staff members have reflected on their own and others' preconceived biases and personal experiences towards others coming from different organisational cultures (Ford 2018; Paananen 2021; Friis 2020).

Leadership characteristics – best practices inventory. Mission leaders have many responsibilities, not least to prioritize among the many tasks and activities prescribed by mission mandates. Leaders govern or direct the many coordination mechanisms and policies enabling intra-agency cohesion and task implementation. This is because often, mandate texts do not provide clear instruction about what civil-military relations to prioritize in the context of a specific mission, or what protection objectives to place first. The work of prioritizing or sequencing some coordination forums over others at various points in a mission cycle is the responsibility of a mission leader. That will work better when a culture of rewarding professionalism characterizes the senior mission staff more generally because mission leaders base their instructions on sound advice and analyses by deputy SRSGs and mission leadership teams. Having a best practices inventory in place about how mission leaders direct the work and set strategic prioritizations could inform selection processes – what qualities and characteristics match well with this requirement placed on mission leaders in contemporary missions? Reviewing the lessons identified across mission contexts, what works and what does not?

Leadership and mission cohesion. Amicable and respectful civil-military relations between SRSG and FC is crucial to create a solid and productive leadership so that a uniform vision of the mission can be produced. Top leadership needs to take responsibility to set good

examples. Engaging one another towards strategic objectives can be responsibly done even when there are differences of views. This can help engender mission cohesion across civilian and military spheres as well as across all levels and across national divides. The dynamics in this leadership pair are central to how tensions can be resolved in ways that are not detrimental to mission effectiveness. In the UN integrated mission context, the SRSG is the political head of mission and this sets a principled frame for the relations. That must remain undisputable, yet at the same time operational realities especially in non-permissive contexts require the civilian and military strategic mission leaders to exercise their authorities with some measure of auto-nomy. This measure of autonomy sometimes places the mission force commander in a delicate position vis-à-vis the political head of mission. This is because UN peace operations operate with compressed command structures and this means that lower-level commanders and soldiers also have a margin of manoeuvre (Ruffa et al., 2013, p. 325) at operational and tactical levels and that variations in mandate interpretations leads to variation in how core tasks and activities are implemented. Additionally, through training and identity formation the military commander is more experienced and competent on usages of force given the fit of the mission objective to the specific security situation. He/she must advice on how best to draw on military capacity within the framework of a UN mission, and in close proximity to the violence await political instruction on what the head of mission directs the mission as a whole to do.

The politics of who can become a strategic mission leader. Specialists in training and preparing senior civilian mission leaders have an awareness that these may be political appointments, and that preparation will be important in helping individuals acquire the appropriate leadership merits and skills. Training agencies and leadership specialists could explicitly recommend that selection of mission leaders value the open-minded leadership style towards interacting with other strategic mission leaders, whether civilian or military. While it is tricky to single out specific personality traits, recent research shows that a mission leaders' ability to form qualitative intra-agency relationships that negotiate agreements and build trust facilitate a shared sense of meaning and a broader menu of

behavioural choices, often referred to as flexibility in handling dynamic situations. Preparatory training must be based on pedagogy and the didactics of socializing (by simulation-based exercise for example)the training audience into their key role, tasks and functions in the mission so as to avoid misunderstanding of responsibilities and expectations at that level. In the training, strategic mission leaders benefit from learning about the structural, contextual and ideational factors that research tells us shape the challenges of CMR in the context of UN peace operations.

Leadership and gender mainstreaming.
The inclusion of women in senior mission positions is itself to a highly gendered process. Initiatives and processes to facilitate and increase gender integration at senior levels in missions need to think longer term, avoid instrumentalizing women, and include forms of follow up or evaluation. Despite progressive initiatives and a steady increase in women leaders in peacekeeping, the gendered mission realities still sometimes have unintended and adverse consequences. For instance, women in leadership roles may become sidelined, offered different (and mostly non-combat) roles and functions than men with similar qualifications, and held to different stereo-typical standards than men.

Conflict zones set the conditions for what leadership strategies will be effective. Mission leaders know that the micro-politics and regional dynamics of peace operations in conflict zones necessitate adjustments in order to implement mandated tasks with a higher level of local support (reducing risks of pushback and (violent) opposition to the peace-keepers). Situational awareness is key, and the civilian affairs officers and CIMIC officers are examples of staff whose social and analytical skills will be key in conveying accurate infor-mation to their team leaders. In turn, the know-how of these lower-level managers play a role for the information to reach further up the mission structure and become actionable. Mission leaders may draw on a variety of techniques to engage host populations and build confidence for the mission mandate, but clearly the kinds of confidence building activ-ities that are advisable will be very different in a political mission and a stabilisation mission in an active conflict zone. DPKO/DFS need to plan missions based on the best available evidence and data about conflict patterns.

03   Author biographies

Linnéa Gelot

Linnéa Gelot is Senior Lecturer in War Studies at the Swedish Defence University (SEDU). Gelot leads the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA)-funded project Peacekeeper performance and mission-host society interactions (2023-2025). She is also a co-investigator in the Protection Complexity (PROTEX) project based at the University of Southern Denmark (SDU). Her work has appeared in Contemporary Security Policy, Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding, Conflict, Security & Development, Security Dialogue, and African Security, among others.

Lisa Ekman

Dr. Lisa Ekman is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of War Studies at the Swedish Defence University, where she also serves as the programme director for the Master's Programme in War and Defence Studies. Her research focuses on military duty, civil-military relations, and the dynamics of cohesion during international military deployments. She has published most recently in Armed Forces & Society and Journal of Global Security Studies.

Chiara Ruffa

Chiara Ruffa is a full professor in political-science (specializing in International Relations) at the Centre for International Studies (CERI) at Sciences Po. Her research is about multi-lateralism on the ground, peacekeeping operations, norms, cultures and civil-military relations. Her work has been published in a number of international journals. She is the author of Military Cultures in Peace and Stability Operations, published with the University of Pennsylvania Press in 2018 and of Composing Peace and Mission Composition in UN Peacekeeping with Vincenzo Bove and Andrea Ruggeri, Oxford University Press, 2020.

04   Bibliography

Challenges Forum (2014).
Designing Mandates and Capabilities for Future Peace Operations.
International Forum for the Challenges of Peace Operations.
https://www.challengesforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/DesigningMandates_06FEB.pdf

De Coning, Cedric & Friis, Karsten (2011).
Coherence and coordination: The limits of the Comprehensive Approach. Journal of International Peacekeeping.
15(1/2): 243-272.
https://doi.org/10.1163/187541110X540553

Duursma, Allard, et al (2023).
UN Peacekeeping at 75: Achievements, Challenges, and Prospects, International Peacekeeping,
30:4, 415-476, DOI: 10.1080/13533312.2023.2263178

Ekman, Lisa (2023).
Partnering to Protect? Strategic Mission Leadership and Civil-military Relations in Integrated UN Peace Operations:
A Literature Review. Swedish Defence University at Diva:
https://fhs.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1816592&dswid=6065

Ford, Tim (2018).
Leadership in UN missions. The Use of Force in UN Peacekeeping, pp. 197–220. Routledge.

Friis, Karsten (2020).
Civil-Military Relations in International Interventions: A New Analytical Framework. Routledge.

Jenne, Nicole (2022).
Who leads peace operations? A new dataset on leadership positions in UN peace operations, 1948–2019.
Journal of Peace Research.
https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433221082121

Paananen, Soili (2021).
Sensemaking processes in complex peace operations: A means of adapting to the dynamism
of 'the local'. International Peacekeeping, 28(5): 732-756,
https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2021.1951611

Ruffa, Chiara, Dandeker, Christopher, & Vennesson, Pascal (2013).
Soldiers drawn into politics? The influence of tactics in civil-military relations.
Small Wars & Insurgencies, 24(2): 322-334.
https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2013.778035

Ruffa, Chiara, & Rietjens, Sebastiaan (2022).
Meaning Making in Peacekeeping Missions: Mandate Interpretation and Multinational Collaboration in the UN
Mission in Mali. European Journal of International Relations, 29(1), 53-78.
https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661221104757

Ruffa, Chiara and Vanessa F. Newby (2023).
'Peacekeeping operations and civil–military relations: an emerging research agenda?' pp 219-230 in
Research Handbook on Civil-Military Relations edited by Croissant, Aurel, David Kuehn and David Pion-Berli.
Edward Elgar Publishing Limited: Cheltenham.
https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800889842.00026

Folke Bernadotteakademin (FBA)is the Swedish government agency for peace, security and development. FBA has since 2005 supported research primarily through its international Research Working Groups. These are composed of well-merited scholars from universities and research institutes worldwide who conduct scientific research on issues related to FBA's areas of expertise.