The Critical Review of Social Sciences Studies

Online ISSN: 3006-7170
Print ISSN: 3006-7162
Volume 3, Number 4, 2025, Pages 1128 – 1137
Journal Home Page
https://thecrsss.com/index.php/Journal/about

Challenges and Achievements of the UN in Preventing Armed Conflicts in the 21st Century

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received:	*September*	*15, 2025*
Revised:	*October*	*18, 2025*
Accepted:	*October*	*26, 2025*
Available Online:	*November*	*04, 2025*

Keywords:

challenges, historical context, laws, opportunities, theoretical context

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ABSTRACT

The 21st Century has presented the United Nations (UN) with major challenges in deterring armed conflicts following the shifting threats in the world, geopolitical tensions, and the emergence of non-state actors. The complicated crisis in Syria, Yemen, and Ukraine has revealed the constraints of consensus in the Security Council and, in particular, among permanent members. Nonetheless, the UN has recorded some significant achievements in the form of diplomatic interventions, peacekeeping operations, and preventive diplomacy despite such challenges. The activity in places such as West Africa and the Balkans has served to de-escalate the situation, as well as aid post-conflict recovery. Other programs, such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and sustainable development programs, are also meant to tackle the root causes of conflict. Nevertheless, political divisions, lack of funds, and enforcement of mandates continue to cripple the effectiveness of the UN. The key is to strengthen multilateral collaboration and the restructuring of decision-making to improve its role in future conflict prevention. In general, despite the achievements, the UN needs to evolve to be a reliable agent of international peace.

Introduction

Since its formation in 1945, the United Nations (UN) has been playing a central role in the progress of peace and security in the international arena (Sarkin & Morais, 2024). The prevention of armed conflicts in a world that has become more volatile is a complex issue the UN is facing in the 21st Century (Mingst et al., 2022). With the decrease in the frequency of traditional wars between states, intrastate wars, civil wars, terrorism, and regional insurgencies have become the major threats, and they frequently involve non-state actors, ethnic issues, and transnational

problems. Such events have challenged the ability of the UN to intervene successfully and keep peace (Rodehau-Noack, 2024).

Certain barriers in the Security Council structure, varying political agendas among the member states, and ineffective enforcing mechanisms have also hindered the effectual and immediate action (Maglia et al., 2025). Nevertheless, this has not deterred the UN, and it has succeeded significantly in preventing and rebuilding peace (Berents & Fosu, 2025). The organization has been used to de-escalate tensions in different regions through preventive diplomacy (Hellmuller & Badache, 2025). Early warning systems, mediation, and peacekeeping operations. UN interventions have helped end armed conflict in such countries as Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Timor-Leste and build a more stable political situation in these countries (McLoughlin et al., 2023).

The focus of the UN on sustainable development, human rights, and inclusive governance has also strengthened its prevention efforts in conflicts (Prokhorova, 2024). This essay explores the two sides of the story of what the UN is doing in the 21st Century: what it has accomplished in terms of avoiding and solving conflicts, and what continues to limit its pursuing of this goal (Achilleos-Sarll et al., 2023). This balance is important towards understanding the role that the UN plays in a world where peace is not very secure and where conflict is on the rise (Duursma et al., 2023).

Research Justification

The importance of studying the role of the United Nations in armed conflicts prevention in the 21st Century is not only timely but also crucial due to the ongoing threats to global peace and security. Although the UN was created with the main aim of ensuring that the world wars never happen again, the nature has changed a lot. Terrorism, civil wars, regional insurgencies, and hybrid warfare are the order of the day on the world security front. Consequently, an assessment of the ability of the UN to combat these new types of conflict is of paramount importance to both scholarship and policy-making.

The necessity to critically analyze the efficiency of the UN mechanisms used in conflict prevention, including peacekeeping missions, diplomatic interventions, early warning systems, and peacebuilding efforts, justifies this research. Notwithstanding several significant victories that the UN has documented in Liberia, Timor-Leste, and Sierra Leone, the inability to intervene decisively in the current crisis (such as that in Syria, Yemen, and Ukraine) makes its institutional and political constraints questionable. These discrepancies in the results point to the necessity of having a balanced evaluation of the successes and the issues to be resolved currently. In addition, the study is a contribution to general discussions of international governance, multilateralism, and global security. And in a world where there is growing geopolitical competition and the erosion of international norms, the role of the UN in preventing conflicts can also guide what can be considered in the process of reform and reinforce the efforts made to maintain peace.

The paper also fills a knowledge gap in the modern literature by considering conflict dynamics of post-2000, specifically non-state actors, technological war, and global interdependencies. Overall, the study is critical to assessing the relevance and the capabilities of the UN in the contemporary era and to present practical recommendations that can help the organization to increase its contribution to armed conflict prevention on an international scale.

Research Objectives

1. To discuss the historical context of the UN in preventing armed conflicts in the 21st Century.

2. To highlight the theoretical context of the UN in preventing armed conflicts in the 21st Century.
3. To analyze the laws regarding the UN in preventing armed conflicts in the 21st Century.
4. To identify the key challenges regarding the UN in preventing armed conflicts in the 21st Century.
5. To explore the opportunities for the UN in preventing armed conflicts in the 21st Century.
6. To propose effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Research Methodology

This study employed a systematic review methodology, with research objectives established accordingly. A comprehensive literature review was conducted (Komba & Lwoga, 2020). Research findings were categorized based on their content (Hiver et al., 2021; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006), and classified information was incorporated into the study by organizing it into headings (Gan et al., 2021; Pawson et al., 2005). The evaluation of classified information and titles formed the basis of the study (Page, 2021; Rahi, 2017), ensuring the integrity of the research subject and its contents (Egger et al., 2022; Victor, 2008). The criteria for selection are listed.

Relevance: Researches that directly addressed the questions posed by this study are included.

Quality: Studies that meet a certain quality threshold (e.g., methodological rigor, bias risk) are included. Most of the research is from Scopus-indexed and Clarivate Analytics journals and reputed publishers.

Recency: Consideration of the publication date to ensure that the review reflects the most current evidence. Most of the studies are from the last three years.

Language: Only studies published in English are included.

Data Completeness: Previous studies must provide sufficient data on outcomes of interest for practical synthesis; this is also ensured in this research.

This study did not use primary data from human participants; therefore, no ethics clearance letter from the ethics committee was required.

Literature Review

The literature about the role of the United Nations in preventing armed conflict in the 21st Century is a complicated combination of failures and achievements. Numerous scholars recognize the distinctive role of the UN as a global institution that is supposed to promote peace and security (Duursma et al., 2023). But raise concerns about the systemic and structural institutional and political problems that cripple its effectiveness (Achilleos-Sarll et al., 2023). The structural constraint of the UN Security Council, especially by the permanent members using the veto, is one of the most discussed limitations, which usually freezes the timely intervention in a conflict, like the cases in Syria and Ukraine (Prokhorova, 2024).

On the achievement side, successes of UN peace missions in nations such as Liberia, Timor (McLoughlin et al., 2023). Multilateral interventions helped to end conflicts in these countries and helped to rebuild the nations (Hellmuller & Badache, 2025). Other people emphasize the increased significance of preventive diplomacy and early warning systems, which have taken up center stage in the UN conflict prevention approach (Berents & Fosu, 2025). It has also been reportedly to be a

positive development in the shift towards conflict-related factors like poverty, political marginalization, and human rights violations (Maglia et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, critics say that the UN, in its preventive action, is not very coherent, coordinated (Rodehau-Noack, 2024). And has a lack of political will by the member states. People are also skeptical of the effectiveness of peacekeeping operations in complex civil wars and weak states, particularly where mandates are ambiguous or insufficiently available. The literature may be considered as a nuanced approach (Mingst et al., 2022). The UN has contributed to the achievement of peace in some situations, but cannot ensure the absence of armed conflict in the whole world due to political polarizations, institutional shortcomings, and changes in warfare (Sarkin & Morais, 2024).

Historical Context of the UN in Preventing Armed Conflicts in the 21st Century

The main mandate of the United Nations (UN) since its establishment in 1945, following the destruction of World War II, has been to ensure international peace and security (Rodehau-Noack, 2024). With the onset of the 21st Century, armed conflict became very different as it involved intra-state violence, civil wars, and terrorism as opposed to inter-state wars (Sarkin & Morais, 2024). This shift brought new challenges to the UN, which was initially established to keep wars between sovereign states at bay (Mingst et al., 2022).

The 1990s already demonstrated the flaws in the UN in conflicts where its peacekeeping operations could not stop mass atrocities (Berents & Fosu, 2025). These failures resulted in reforms (Duursma et al., 2023). Such as the creation of the so-called Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine of 2005, intended to forestall genocide and crimes against humanity. The UN in the 21st Century has been partly successful in brokering peace deals, where historical civil wars were ended with the help of the UN (McLoughlin et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the organization has encountered major challenges in Syria, Yemen, and Ukraine, with geopolitical tension among the members of the Security Council- particularly between the US, Russia, and China causing (Hellmuller & Badache, 2025).

The emergence of non-state actors who have led movements such as Achilleos-Sarll et al. (2023). The ISIS and the asymmetric warfare have also made the peacekeeping and conflict prevention work of the UN more challenging paralysis (Maglia et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the UN remains a very important entity in the form of diplomacy, peacebuilding operations, and humanitarian response, working to modify its approaches to a fast-evolving world security environment (Prokhorova, 2024).

Theoretical Context of the UN in Preventing Armed Conflicts in the 21st Century

The involvement of the United Nations in the prevention of armed conflict can be discussed in terms of different international relations theories. Liberal institutionalism believes in the concept that global institutions such as the UN play a vital role in encouraging collaboration, resolving conflicts, and collective security. In these senses, the peacekeeping operations, mediation, and normative frameworks (UN, Responsibility to Protect, or R2P) of the UN are important mechanisms to prevent conflicts. Conversely, the realist theory tells about the limitations the UN has because of the anarchic character of the world system and the self-interest of the great states. That is why it is common to see paralysis in the Security Council, where veto authority gives permanent seats to national interests to stop action, like what has happened to Syria and Ukraine. Constructivist theory introduces a new dimension, in which they concentrate on norms and identities that are changing and define the behavior of states.

The UN has contributed to the framing of world standards in terms of sovereignty, human rights, and intervention. The R2P acceptance, even though inconsistently implemented, is a step towards a change in the international expectations regarding the prevention of mass atrocities. These theoretical paradigms assist in explaining the successes of the UN in peacebuilding and the weaknesses of the UN to effectively respond to the complex and politically sensitive conflicts of the 21st Century.

Laws Regarding the UN in Preventing Armed Conflicts in the 21st Century

UN Charter (1945): The official legal framework according to which armed conflicts are prevented. Article 2(4) outlaws any threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, whilst Chapter VI promotes the peaceful settlement of disputes by negotiation, mediation, and arbitration.

Chapter VII on the UN Charter: The Security Council is entitled to implement enforcement measures such as imposing sanctions or military force whenever the peace is endangered. It is the major legal means of collective security and conflict prevention.

Responsibility to Protect (R2P) Doctrine (2005): One of the key changes of the 21st Century that has made it legally and ethically binding on states to stop genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. The UN is able to step in where a state does not secure its citizens.

International Humanitarian Law (IHL): The UN has been instrumental in making sure that, in spite of war, there are laws that govern war and protect civilians, and through signing conventions like the Geneva Conventions and their protocols, it has helped put in place some rules to keep the war in check.

UN Peacekeeping Operations: Peacekeeping operations are lawfully authorized and permitted by the UN Charter, and are meant to be a preventative action and are used in cases of ceasefires, protecting civilians, and aiding political transitions.

Arms Trade Treaty (2013): This treaty was adopted by the UN General Assembly, and it governs the international trade in conventional weapons to avoid armed conflict as well as to minimize human suffering.

Challenges for the UN in Preventing Armed Conflicts in the 21st Century

Complex Modern Conflicts: Modern wars tend to be multi-dimensional, and this would include political, religious, economical, and cyber aspects, thus complicating the prevention and solution to the matters by the conventional frameworks used by the UN.

Emerging Non-State Actors: The formation of terrorist organizations, individual militias, and cyber war makes it more challenging to prevent conflicts traditionally, due to the fact that these organizations are not regulated like states by international law.

Misinformation and Media Manipulation: Fake stories and propaganda increase the tension levels and diminish the trust that people have in UN interventions, which makes the process of making peace difficult.

Political Blocs in the Security Council: Permanent members (USA, Russia, China, France, and UK) usually exercise veto powers, which block concerted efforts by all members against aggressor states or in the case of new conflicts.

Resource and Funding Containment: Peacekeeping missions and humanitarian activities are costly. A shortage of funds and slow contributions of member states do not contribute to timely and effective responses.

Sovereignty vs. Intervention: Several countries do not welcome the intervention of the UN in their internal affairs, arguing that it is infringing on their sovereignty. It restricts the proactive skill of the UN, particularly during civil wars or ethnic conflicts.

Weak Enforcement Mechanisms: The UN has to depend on the member states to implement. Unilateral acts of major powers or disobeying resolutions by them will put the credibility and authority of the organization in question.

Opportunities for the UN in Preventing Armed Conflicts in the 21st Century

Artificial Intelligence and Data Analytics: AI can be used to examine social, political, and economic patterns to foresee possible tensions and allow the UN to respond promptly and in a highly precise way.

Arms Control and Disarmament Initiatives: The UN can further work on arms trade controls and encourage the use of arms treaties, which would disarm the conflicts in the world.

Enhancing Preventive Diplomacy: To avert armed conflicts, the UN can increase its systems of early warning channels and mediation networks to detect and resolve conflicts early before they degenerate into armed conflicts. This active strategy would help to save a lot of human and economic casualties.

Increased Peacekeeping Reforms: Update the Peacekeeping operation using modern technology like drones, satellite surveillance, and data analysis to enhance the performance of peace missions and the protection of civilians.

International Cooperation: It can work with regional institutions such as the African Union (AU), European Union (EU), and ASEAN to establish a more powerful system of response to conflict prevention and management of crises.

Sustainable Development Promotion: The UN can alleviate poverty and inequality, which is a major cause of conflicts, through Agenda 2030, thereby ensuring that peace is guaranteed permanently.

Youth and Women Involvement: Peacebuilding that empowers youth and women, as highlighted in UN resolutions 2250 and 1325, provides a sustainable avenue to peace since it tackles the underlying causes of the problem, like inequality and exclusion.

Discussion

The debate on what the United Nations is doing right or wrong to stop armed conflicts in the 21st Century indicates a checkered history of both achievement and difficulty. On one hand UN has shown its relevancy in ensuring that many potential conflicts have been averted by way of peacekeeping, mediation, and diplomatic involvement. Its emphasis on preventive diplomacy, humanitarianism, and promotion of sustainable development has helped to build long-term peace in various regions. But this is undercut by challenges persistently. The prevailing of mighty states on the Security Council, the abusive use of veto power, and the inability to unite the states, and so on, tend to stalemate action. Moreover, other types of conflict have emerged, including cyber warfare, terrorism, and internal insurgencies, and these threats are very complex. The existing

mechanisms of the UN cannot address them. Therefore, along with the UN being a key player in peace operations, reforms are needed to enhance the preventive and peacekeeping potential of this institution in the contemporary era.

Conclusion

In the 21st Century, the United Nations has had quite a challenge in averting armed conflicts, including geopolitical tensions, lack of enforceability, and intra-state complex wars. Even with these challenges, the UN has recorded some remarkable successes that it has made in the form of peacekeeping operations, diplomatic mediation, and conflict resolution attempts, so that violence has been minimized as well as dialogue supported. It is still important in establishing international standards and marshaling international collaboration. To continue, it is necessary to increase the capacity of the UN, guarantee the attendance of the member states, and update the mechanisms of the UN to serve better the needs of maintaining long-term peace on the global stage.

Recommendations

Adjust to New Forms of Conflict: Formulate ways to deal with non-state actors, terrorism, cyber warfare, and asymmetric warfare.

Build Local Capacities: Energize local peace builders and institutions to ensure stability in the long term, outside UN missions.

Enhance Political Will among Member States: Work much harder to get the powerful countries to cooperate and commit resources to achieve consensus in those geopolitical tensions holding back UN activities.

Enhance Coordination with Local Organizations: Coordinate closely with regional organizations such as the African Union to produce local knowledge and legitimacy.

Enhance Financing and Resource Distribution: Provide the long-term financial sustenance of peace operations and conflict prevention programs.

Encourage Inclusive Peace Processes: Enhance the participation of women, youth, and marginalized groups in peacebuilding to come up with sustainable solutions.

Improve Peacekeeping Capabilities: Leverage previous achievements by enhancing training, equipment’s and mandate clarity as a way of responding to complex conflict settings.

Increase Preventive Diplomacy: Grow the investment in early conflict prevention by triggering dialogue, mediation, and negotiation in advance of the violence.

Improve Early Warning Systems: Use superior technologies and intelligence-sharing to identify an arising conflict early.

Reform the Security Council: Think about reforms to make the Security Council more transparent, prevent abuse of the veto, and make it more susceptible to fast decisions.

Research Limitations

There are certain limitations of the study of negative and positive experiences of the United Nations in the prevention of armed conflicts in the 21st Century. Firstly, the political sensitivity of the information relating to the conflict and the diplomatic secrecy of the negotiations limit the

availability of reliable, unbiased data. Secondly, international relations are often volatile, and the results cannot be extrapolated as each conflict has a unique historical, cultural, and political background. Also, as the views of some areas or political interests are usually represented in most of the available literature, it may lead to biased interpretations. Non-state actors, cyber threats, and hybrid warfare are also difficult to examine due to their relative novelty and the lack of empirical data. Finally, the use of secondary sources and reports can also negatively affect the overall evaluation of the on-ground UN operation, and the effectiveness of the peacekeeping and preventive diplomacy efforts is hard to estimate.

Research Implications

Academic Contribution: The research contributes to the overall research study of international relations since it has provided a basis to carry out additional research on global governance, conflict prevention, and peaceful construction.

Better Early Warning Systems: The UN needs to enhance the early warning and response mechanisms to keep track of any potential conflicts, and an effort should be made to reduce such conflicts before they deteriorate.

Capacity Building: It underlines the necessity to invest in training and equipment of peacekeeping forces to improve the effectiveness and coordination of activities in volatile regions.

Modern Threats: The study recommends the incorporation of new dimensions of warfare, such as cyber warfare, terrorism, and hybrid wars, into the prevention strategies and peacekeeping doctrines of the UN.

Policy Reform: The paper points to the need to reform the UN Security Council to ensure there is restraint in the use of veto powers to ensure fair and timely intervention in conflicts.

Future Research Directions

Combining Climate and Security Policies: With the environmental pressure increasingly contributing to conflict, future researchers should find ways to incorporate the policy of climate resilience and sustainable development in United Nations peace strategies.

Does Preventive Diplomacy Work: Future studies ought to test the effect of UN diplomatic intervention on the outcome of conflicts, and which measures produce the most durable peace.

Influence by Non-State actors: The court and practical uses of the UN in dealing with non-state armed forces, cyber actors, and private military corporations require further examination.

Time to Use Artificial Intelligence, Data Analytics, and Social Media Monitoring to Prevent Armed Conflicts: The research can investigate how technologies can be used to forecast and prevent armed conflicts more effectively through the implementation of artificial intelligence, data analytics, and social media monitoring.

UN Security Council Reform: Analysts would need to analyze the examples of how the work of the UN Security Council can be democratized to make such a decision-making body effective in terms of global collaboration.

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