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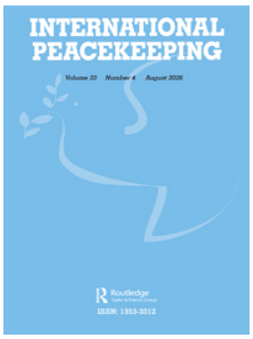

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UNDOF and the Limits of Peacekeeping Reform: Persistence Without Evolution

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ABSTRACT

The United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) has monitored the 1974 Israel–Syria disengagement regime on the Golan Heights for half a century. Its narrow mandate persists largely unchanged despite a profound transformation of its operating environment during and after the Syrian civil war. This article asks why UNDOF endures in its original form, and what its persistence reveals about the limits of contemporary peacekeeping reform. Drawing on the Secretary-General's reporting from 2015 to 2025, it traces how the Syrian state's collapse, non-state armed actors, and Israeli operations inside the area of separation eroded the original regime, culminating in the December 2024 Israeli incursion. To explain why the mission persists yet does not adapt, the article develops the concept of a negative-consensus equilibrium, sustained by institutional inertia, signalling value, and juridical lock-in, and specifies the scope conditions under which it emerges in treaty-bound missions. It then tests the 2025 Berlin Peacekeeping Ministerial's reform agenda against the case, arguing that its core commitments each fail for a different reason: modularity, because the mandate lies beyond the Council's reach; political primacy, because the parties withhold consent; and performance accountability, because the equilibrium decouples fate from results.

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1. Introduction

The United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) is a small, long-standing observer mission supervising the 1974 disengagement regime between Israel and Syria on the Golan Heights.[1] Its mandate is deliberately narrow: unarmed observers monitor the ceasefire, investigate

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[1]UNSC Res. 350 (31 May 1974); Agreement on Disengagement; Rudloff and Diehl, "UNDOF."

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violations, and facilitate liaison between the parties.[2] For the last decade, UNDOF has been operating in an environment very different from the one for which it was created; the Syrian state has fractured and been reshaped by civil war, non-state armed actors have entered and exited the area of operations, and Israel has conducted repeated operations inside the Area of Separation (AoS). All of this notwithstanding, the Security Council renews UNDOF's mandate every six months, almost ritualistically. Both Israel and Syria express support for the decision, even though on the ground, UNDOF is treated as a nuisance that can be bypassed and undermined at every turn. UNDOF's continued renewal under these conditions is not just a curiosity of institutional history. It is a revealing vantage point from which to reconsider the trajectory of the Arab–Israeli conflict, the way the Security Council manages legacy files, and the limits of contemporary peacekeeping reform.

Against this backdrop, the article asks: *why does UNDOF persist in its 1974 design despite a widening mandate–environment mismatch, and what does this reveal about the institutional limits of contemporary peacekeeping reform?*

The question is not whether UNDOF faithfully implements its 1974 mandate, but whether the continued application of that mandate can still be defended under present conditions. UNDOF can be simultaneously 'successful' in the narrow sense of performing the tasks assigned in 1974 and 'obsolete' in the broader sense of failing to address the risks that now define its theatre, where violations of the disengagement regime have become a routine feature of the mission's workload rather than isolated anomalies. Treating longevity or the absence of an interstate war between Israel and Syria as self-validating evidence of effectiveness is, therefore, analytically misleading, for the erosion of UNDOF's relevance is now well documented. Over the past decade, successive Reports of the Secretary-General have described an operating environment in which violations of the disengagement regime are routine, and practical constraints, armed groups, state collapse, airstrikes, and movement restrictions, impede monitoring in ways that a static, predictable observer model is poorly equipped to manage. Comparative work on older, one-dimensional operations[3] suggests that some missions endure precisely because they do less: mandates remain politically tolerable, and routines become institutionalised even as environments change. UNDOF was built for a relatively legible military geometry: identifiable state forces, territorially bounded restrictions, and observable patterns of compliance and violation. The question after 2024 is whether the inherited limitations of that model remain tolerable imperfections or

[2]Protocol to the Agreement on Disengagement Concerning the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force, S/11302/Add.1, Annex B; Agreement on Disengagement, S/11302/Add.1, Annex A, para. E.

[3]Novosseloff, *A Comparative Study of Older One-Dimensional UN Peace Operations*; Di Salvatore and Ruggeri, "Effectiveness of Peacekeeping Operations."

now constitute a deeper mismatch between the mission's methods and the security ecology it confronts.

The article advances two claims. First, UNDOF's persistence is best understood as the product of a negative-consensus equilibrium among key stakeholders. No actor, Israel, Syria, the P5, troop-contributing countries (TCCs), or the Secretariat, regards the current arrangement as optimal. Nevertheless, no one is willing to bear the political or strategic costs of terminating or fundamentally revising it. Renewing UNDOF, by contrast, is low-cost and politically convenient. Second, that equilibrium is sustained by three mutually reinforcing mechanisms: institutional inertia, signalling value, and juridical lock-in. Together, these mechanisms lock the negative-consensus equilibrium in place: the mission endures because its very minimalism makes it tolerable, even as its strategic relevance erodes.

This persistence is not merely a curiosity of institutional history. It runs counter to the current reform consensus on UN peace operations. The Global Alliance for Peace Operations (GAPO) compendia and the DPO-commissioned independent study by Wane, Williams and Kihara-Hunt set out what now constitutes the state of the art in policy thinking on peacekeeping reform.[4] They call for missions that are modular and adaptable, politically primed, partnership-rich, locally anchored, and increasingly attentive to climate-related risks.[5] UNDOF embodies almost none of these aspirations. Its legal and political architecture binds it to a 1974 template that cannot easily be modified without reopening the underlying disengagement agreement.[6]

This framework deliberately treats GAPO and Wane et al. not as a checklist, but as a broad reform horizon against which UNDOF can be read as a boundary case.[7] The GAPO papers crystallise a reform rationality centred on adaptability, modular mission components, stronger political strategies, deeper local engagement, and tighter performance and accountability regimes.[8] Wane et al. map thirty 'future models' of peace operations and associated capability packages, explicitly designed to inform the 2025 Berlin Peacekeeping Ministerial.[9] UNDOF exposes where that reform agenda runs up against structural limits. It is not that the Berlin agenda 'misunderstands' observer missions, but that it offers no theory for missions whose effectiveness, and political acceptability, is inseparable from their restraint.

[4]Wane, Williams and Kihara-Hunt, *The Future of Peacekeeping*; Hansen (ed.), *The Future of United Nations Peace Operations*; Koops and Dal Dosso (eds.), *Compendium of Short Issue Papers*.
[5]Hansen (ed.), *Compendium of Policy Papers*; Wane, Williams and Kihara-Hunt, *Future of Peacekeeping*.
[6]Agreement on Disengagement, S/11302/Add.1, Annex A, paras. B(1)–(5), E; UNSC Res. 350 (1974).
[7]Hansen (ed.), *Compendium of Policy Papers*; Koops and Dal Dosso (eds.), *Compendium of Short Issue Papers*; Wane, Williams and Kihara-Hunt, *Future of Peacekeeping*.
[8]Vermeij et al., "Preparing for the Future."
[9]Wane, Williams and Kihara-Hunt, *Future of Peacekeeping*, 2, 21–22, 22–37.

Empirically, the article draws on a longitudinal reading of Secretary-General reports on UNDOF from 2015 to 2025, the 1974 Disengagement Agreement and Resolution 350. These sources show, cumulatively, that the mission operates in an environment fundamentally transformed from the one for which it was designed. Syrian state collapse, non-state armed groups operating in the area of separation, recurrent Israeli airstrikes, and direct incursions into the buffer zone have turned violations from exceptional anomalies into a routine feature of UNDOF's reporting.[10] A critical inflexion point came with the 2014 evacuation from the Bravo side under pressure from armed groups, followed by the gradual re-entry after Syrian government forces retook the south in 2018. Throughout, mandate language and renewal practice remained essentially unchanged.

The December 2024 Israeli incursion into the area of separation, in response to regime collapse in Damascus, provides the clearest evidence of mandate–environment mismatch and of the equilibrium that sustains it.[11] Israeli forces established and maintained positions in territory the 1974 Agreement reserves exclusively for UNDOF. Syrian protests in the Council were politically forceful but militarily hollow, and UNDOF could do nothing beyond observing and protesting.[12] The Security Council renewed the mission on identical terms days later.[13] All actors acknowledged the violation, yet none sought to alter the institutional framework. The Council's response illustrates how negative consensus equilibrium operates at the highest political level: it is easier to renew a mission whose legal basis is systematically eroding than to confront the implications of that erosion.

The article proceeds in five steps. Section 2 reconstructs the mandate–environment mismatch between 2015 and 2025, with particular emphasis on the 2014 withdrawal, the 2018 return, and the 2024 incursion. Section 3 develops the analytical framework, integrating institutional persistence and signalling theory to explain the negative-consensus equilibrium and specifying the scope conditions under which it is likely to emerge. Section 4 examines Security Council dynamics and the politics of renewal. Section 5 situates UNDOF within the current reform agenda, using GAPO and Wane et al. as reference points to show how modularity, political primacy, and new capability packages collide with the juridical rigidity of the 1974 regime, before a brief conclusion draws out implications for how peacekeeping reform debates conceptualise legacy observer missions.

The argument is intentionally unsentimental. UNDOF's longevity is politically convenient but analytically ambiguous. It may be the least bad option

[10]SG reports S/2015/930; S/2016/1037; S/2017/230; S/2018/867; S/2019/923; S/2020/1159; S/2021/994; S/2022/887; S/2023/935; S/2025/154; S/2025/784.
[11]S/2015/930; S/2018/867.
[12]S/2025/154, paras. 2, 6–7, 19–21, 40–43.
[13]S/2025/154, paras. 1, 40–43; S/RES/2766 (2024).

available, yet that does not mean it is fit for purpose by the standards that now define the UN's own reform discourse. If peacekeeping is to avoid becoming, in this domain, a museum of missions whose only function is to be renewed, then the limits that UNDOF exposes must be treated not as anomalies but as central parts of the problem.

2. Mandate–Environment Mismatch, 2015–2025

The 1974 Disengagement Agreement is an unusually granular instrument. Negotiated through US shuttle diplomacy, it fixes precise territorial lines (Lines A and B), reserves an Area of Separation (AoS) exclusively for UNDOF, establishes Areas of Limitation (AoL) in armament and forces on each side, and assigns the Force a narrow set of tasks: maintain a presence in the area of separation, supervise the ceasefire, investigate alleged violations, and liaise with both parties.[14] The Protocol annexed to the Agreement provides for inspections at least every fifteen days.[15] The Force has no enforcement powers; its tools are observation, reporting, and protest, and this minimalism was a condition of consent rather than an oversight, since neither Israel nor Syria would tolerate an intrusive deployment.[16] Resolution 350 endorses this bilateral arrangement and establishes UNDOF to implement it, but it does not constitute a flexible mandate the Council can reinterpret at will: the substance of what UNDOF does is fixed by treaty, and adapting it would require reopening the Agreement rather than amending a resolution.[17] The design rests on assumptions that held for three decades and then failed all at once: consolidated state authority on both sides, mutual Israeli and Syrian interest in avoiding interstate war, a legible military geometry of conventional forces observable through inspection and liaison, and an area of separation insulated from intrastate conflict and non-state armed actors.[18] The chronology that follows traces the collapse of each.

The Syrian uprising that began in 2011 eroded these assumptions decisively. By 2013–2014 the conflict had spread into the AoS, where armed opposition groups, including Jabhat al-Nusra and later Islamic State affiliates, established themselves in villages within and adjacent to the zone, while overstretched Syrian government forces lost effective control of parts of the Bravo side.[19] The premise of bilateral state authority collapsed first.

[14]Agreement on Disengagement between Israeli and Syrian Forces, S/11302/Add.1, Annex A, paras. B(1)–(5), E.
[15]Protocol to the Agreement on Disengagement Concerning the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force, S/11302/Add.1, Annex B.
[16]Higgins, *United Nations Peacekeeping 1946–1967*.
[17]Agreement on Disengagement, S/11302/Add.1, Annex A; UNSC Res. 350 (1974).
[18]James, "The United Nations on Golan: Peacekeeping Paradox?" 70–2
[19]S/2015/930; S/2016/1037; S/2017/230.

Its consequences for UNDOF were immediate: in August and September 2014, armed groups attacked UN positions, took Fijian peacekeepers hostage, and besieged Philippine contingents.[20] Under direct threat, UNDOF withdrew from the Bravo side to the Alpha (Israeli-controlled) side, operating from positions around Camp Ziouani.[21] For the first time since 1974 the mission could not maintain the continuous presence in the area of separation that the Agreement envisages, and from 2014 until mid-2018 its capacity to verify compliance on the Syrian side was radically curtailed.

The return after 2018 restored presence without restoring the conditions the mandate assumed. Even after government forces re-established control in the south, SG reports recorded continuing Syrian violations, including heavy weapons and unauthorised forces in prohibited zones; the state that had signed the Agreement no longer existed in the same institutional sense, and its capacity to enforce the regime's terms remained in question.[22] Non-state actors, meanwhile, had become fixtures the mandate could not accommodate. UNDOF's liaison mechanisms were built for state militaries bound by a chain of command, not for armed groups that rejected the Agreement's legal framework and owed nothing under it, so the mission could neither negotiate their compliance nor report on them in the structured terms the 1974 regime presupposes.[23]

Israeli non-compliance intensified across the same period. SG reports document new fortifications encroaching into the area of separation, armoured vehicles and weapons systems in the area of limitation, and recurrent airspace violations; in one reporting period a multiple-launch rocket system was observed in the area of limitation on nine occasions, alongside the continuous presence of Iron Dome and artillery systems within ten kilometres of the ceasefire line.[24] These activities expanded after 2018 as Israel pursued Iranian and Hezbollah assets in Syria, an objective the 1974 regime, premised on static force limitations and observable ground deployments, offered no framework to regulate.

Movement restrictions hardened from episodic inconvenience into structural constraint. The IDF denied UNDOF patrol access through technical-fence gates on 33 occasions in a single reporting period, with the mission withdrawing each time, while Syrian forces restricted movement on a further six occasions in the same period.[25] The cumulative effect reached the Agreement's central verification mechanism: the fortnightly inspections of military positions in the areas of limitation, conducted by Observer Group

[20]S/2014/859 (as cited in S/2015/930).
[21]S/2015/930, paras. 17–19.
[22]S/2019/923; S/2020/1159; S/2021/994.
[23]S/2015/930; S/2016/1037.
[24]S/2020/1159, para. 7.
[25]S/2023/935, paras. 10–11.

Golan, have not been facilitated by either party since 8 December 2024.[26] The Golan had by this point ceased to be a front line between two state armies and become entangled in a wider confrontation involving Iran's deployments in Syria, Israeli efforts to deny them, and transnational jihadist networks, none of which the Agreement was designed to address.[27]

The Secretary-General's language registered this accumulation without converting it into institutional consequence. Reports note repeatedly that the presence of armed groups, the use of heavy weapons, and movement restrictions remain of serious concern and continue to affect the Force's ability to implement its mandate, yet the characterisation hardens over time: where reports from 2015 to 2023 refer to 'several violations', S/2025/154 opens with 'multiple significant violations'.[28] The intensity of the description rises; the institutional response does not.

2.1. The December 2024 Incursion and its Aftermath

The December 2024 Israeli incursion is the clearest single illustration of the mismatch and of the equilibrium that sustains it. The trigger was the collapse of the Syrian regime in Damascus on 7 December 2024, which generated acute uncertainty over authority on the Bravo side.[29] Within days, Israeli units crossed Line A and began establishing positions, checkpoints, berms, and fixed posts inside the area of separation and the Syrian area of limitation.[30] This was not a fleeting tactical move: as at 18 February 2025 the IDF had constructed ten positions in the area of separation and occupied two houses in the area of limitation.[31] The Agreement is unambiguous that all Israeli forces will be west of Line A and that the area between Lines A and B is reserved for UNDOF, with no provision for Israeli positions east of Line A; the presence of IDF positions in the area of separation is therefore a categorical breach of the Agreement's territorial core.[32]

Israel justified the move as a temporary, defensive measure to deny non-state armed groups the vacuum left by the regime's collapse.[33] The rationale reflects the transformed threat environment, the primary concern being no longer Syrian armour but hostile non-state consolidation on the Golan, but it clashes directly with a 1974 framework that provides no mechanism for adjusting territorial dispositions to such contingencies: invoking

[26] S/2025/154, para. 27; S/2025/784, para. 21.
[27] Phillips, "The International System and the Syrian Civil War," 362–70.
[28] S/2020/1159; S/2022/887; S/2023/935; S/2025/154.
[29] S/2025/154, paras. 2, 4–7, 23.
[30] S/2025/154, paras. 4–7.
[31] S/2025/154, para. 7.
[32] Agreement on Disengagement, S/11302/Add.1, Annex A, paras. B(1), B(3); the quoted phrases are from para. B(1) ("west of the line designated as Line A") and para. B(3) ("the area between Line A and the line designated as Line B will be an area of separation").
[33] S/2025/154, para. 21.

self-defence against non-state threats sidelines the Agreement's prescriptive content.[34] Syria protested through letters to the Council demanding immediate withdrawal to the 1974 lines, but the protests lacked coercive backing.[35] A decapitated and fragmented state could neither challenge the IDF on the ground nor mobilise decisive international action; its appeals marked the normative stakes without altering the operational reality. UNDOF, for its part, informed the IDF that its actions were inconsistent with the Agreement and recorded the violations in its reporting, but beyond protest through liaison channels it had no tools.[36] The function it was designed to perform, keeping the area of separation free of the parties' forces, could not be discharged once a party chose to ignore the rule.

The Council's reaction epitomised the negative-consensus equilibrium. Days after the incursion it adopted Resolution 2766, renewing the mandate for six months in language substantively identical to previous renewals; no resolution condemning the violation was tabled, no emergency debate convened, no adjustment to the mandate attempted.[37] The subsequent Secretary-General report expressed concern at the continuing Israeli presence, recalled that actions inconsistent with the Agreement are unacceptable, and called on the parties to comply, but recommended no change to UNDOF's mandate or posture. The legal basis for the mission's presence continued to be cited as valid and binding even as its territorial core was violated in a manner all actors recognised and none moved to remedy.

The equilibrium held through 2025, and the Israeli presence was reconfigured rather than withdrawn. As at 3 November 2025 the IDF maintained ten positions on the Bravo side, by then eight in the area of separation, including a temporary hospital, and two in the area of limitation.[38] The IDF had installed nineteen swing gates in the area of separation, several close to UN positions, one of them a locked gate restricting an evacuation route between UN positions, and movement was restricted on six occasions in the reporting period; the fortnightly inspections remained suspended.[39] The Council renewed the mandate once more on substantively identical terms, with both Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic consenting to the extension.[40]

This decade of transformation set against an unchanged mandate supports three conclusions central to the argument that follows. UNDOF's operating environment has changed in ways the 1974 mandate did not anticipate

[34]Boms and Cohen, "Israel and Syria," 31–51
[35]Syrian letters to the Security Council, December 2024–January 2025, S/2024/887.
[36]S/2025/154, paras. 7, 15, 42–44.
[37]S/RES/2766 (2024).
[38]S/2025/784, para. 5.
[39]S/2025/784, para. 9.
[40]S/2025/784, para. 43.

and cannot address. The mission has suffered documented mandate failures, the 2014 withdrawal and the 2024 incursion, not because personnel performed poorly but because the institutional architecture no longer fits the problem. And the Council and Secretariat have met this mismatch not by adjusting the mandate but by preserving it through increasingly ritualised renewal: the system absorbs evidence of its own inadequacy without converting it into pressure for reform, documenting violations meticulously while declining to translate them into proposals for change.[41] It is this persistence in the face of acknowledged inadequacy, distinct from the mere fact of survival, that the next section sets out to explain.

3. Explaining Persistence and Non-Adaptation: The Negative-Consensus Equilibrium

The empirical record from 2015 to 2025 shows a mission operating in a radically altered environment with an unchanged mandate and institutional design. This section explains why. Two distinct outcomes require explanation, and conflating them obscures what is unusual about UNDOF. The first is persistence: the mission is renewed rather than terminated. The second is non-adaptation: the mandate is preserved unaltered rather than modified to fit its transformed environment. These are separable. Most long-running missions persist precisely by adapting, acquiring new tasks, revised rules of engagement, or altered force postures as conditions change. UNDOF persists without adapting, and it is the conjunction that demands explanation. The argument is that a single configuration, which the article terms a negative-consensus equilibrium, produces both outcomes at once, and that three mechanisms sustain it: institutional inertia and juridical lock-in, which principally explain non-adaptation, and signalling value, which principally explains persistence, with juridical lock-in operating across both. The section develops the concept, specifies the three mechanisms, and sets out the scope conditions under which such an equilibrium emerges.

3.1. From Path Dependence to a Negative-Consensus Equilibrium

The question of why international organisations persist beyond the point of effectiveness predates this study. Susan Strange asked why international organisations never die; Julia Gray's work on IO vitality answers in part by identifying a category she terms 'zombie' organisations, which maintain semi-regular operation but make no meaningful progress toward their mandates, persisting in some form rather than disbanding.[42] Barnett and

[41] S/2020/1159, para. 19; S/2023/935, para. 18.
[42] Strange, "Why Do International Organizations Never Die?"; Gray, "Life, Death, or Zombie?" 3.

Finnemore make the underlying theoretical objection explicit, rejecting the assumption embedded in much rationalist scholarship that states will pull the plug on any IO that does not perform.[43] By Gray's taxonomy, UNDOF is a zombie peacekeeping mission: it convenes, patrols, and renews, but its strategic contribution to the threats that now define its theatre bears little relationship to what contemporary effectiveness standards would require. Identifying the phenomenon, however, is not the same as explaining it. Gray attributes zombie status primarily to bureaucratic capacity failure, and Barnett and Finnemore trace IO dysfunction to bureaucratic culture, to organisations becoming obsessed with their own rules at the expense of their primary missions. Neither internal account fits UNDOF: the mission performs its narrow tasks competently, and its stasis is driven by constraints external to it, political and legal rather than organisational. The explanation must therefore be located in the configuration of interests and rules surrounding the mission, not in pathologies within it.

Institutional theory offers a starting point, though not a sufficient one. Pierson's account of increasing returns and path dependence highlights how institutions, once established, generate self-reinforcing dynamics that make reversal more costly than continuation.[44] UNDOF exhibits the four sources of increasing returns that Pierson, following Arthur and North, applies to political institutions: the 1974 regime required intense diplomatic investment; the mission has accumulated operational expertise; states, militaries, and bureaucracies have coordinated around its presence for decades; and regional actors plan on the assumption that UNDOF will remain on the Golan.[45] Yet path dependence explains why institutions are sticky, not why they persist when stakeholders recognise that their instrumental effectiveness has eroded.

Mahoney and Thelen sharpen the problem. They argue that path-dependent lock-in is in fact rare, and that institutions more commonly evolve through gradual, endogenous processes that conventional theory overlooks.[46] They delineate four modes of such change: displacement, layering, drift, and conversion.[47] At the level of description, one of these resembles UNDOF's predicament. Drift, in their definition, is the changed impact of existing rules due to shifts in the environment, occurring when actors choose not to respond, so that inaction itself alters the institution's effect.[48] This captures the outcome on the Golan: the 1974 mandate remains formally identical while its real-world significance erodes, not

[43]Barnett and Finnemore, "The Politics, Power, and Pathologies of International Organizations," 701.
[44]Pierson, "Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics," 251–3.
[45]Pierson, "Increasing Returns," 254, 258.
[46]Mahoney and Thelen, "A Theory of Gradual Institutional Change," 3.
[47]Mahoney and Thelen, "A Theory of Gradual Institutional Change," 15–16.
[48]Mahoney and Thelen, "A Theory of Gradual Institutional Change," 17.

because anyone has reinterpreted it, but because no actor will act to revise it. The resemblance, however, is to drift's outcome, not its mechanism, and the distinction matters for what follows.

Mahoney and Thelen organise their typology around two questions: whether the political context affords defenders of the status quo strong veto possibilities, and whether the targeted institution affords actors discretion in interpretation or enforcement. In their schema, strong veto possibilities combined with low discretion produce layering, the gradual attachment of new rules alongside old ones, while drift requires high discretion, since its mechanism depends on an implementing authority choosing not to update an institution it has the latitude to update.[49] UNDOF affords no such latitude. Its lines, force limitations, and inspection modalities are fixed by treaty rather than by administrative practice, leaving no actor with room to drift through neglect in their specific sense. Nor has UNDOF undergone layering: no party has attached new rules, protocols, or supplementary arrangements to the 1974 regime to address non-state armed actors, the Syrian state's collapse, or the December 2024 incursion. The mandate has not accumulated amendments; it has simply persisted, unaltered, while its environment changed beneath it. UNDOF, therefore, occupies a configuration that Mahoney and Thelen's fourfold typology does not anticipate: strong veto possibilities and low discretion that produce neither the layering their table predicts nor any other named mode, because the same political dynamics that block formal revision also foreclose the lower-cost option of incremental amendment. The result resembles drift in its outcome, formal stability paired with an eroding effect, without drift's mechanism.

Filling that gap is the work the present concept aims to do. Persistence and non-adaptation are distinct phenomena, and an adequate explanation must account for both. An institution can persist while adapting its mandate; it can also persist while its mandate remains frozen and its effects drift. UNDOF does the latter, though by a route Mahoney and Thelen's typology does not supply. The article, therefore, proposes a specific concept: a negative-consensus equilibrium. An institution is in a negative-consensus equilibrium when all relevant stakeholders prefer the continuation of the status quo to any available alternative, not because they regard it as optimal, but because they disagree on what should replace it. Each fears that change would produce a worse outcome from its own perspective. The equilibrium is 'negative' in that it is sustained by mutual vetoes and risk-aversion rather than by shared enthusiasm or demonstrated effectiveness. It produces both outcomes at once: persistence, as no actor will bear the costs of termination, and the drift-like erosion identified above, as no actor will pay the political price of even incremental amendment. The concept is not a fifth mode of

[49]Mahoney and Thelen, "A Theory of Gradual Institutional Change," 19, table 1.2.

change alongside Mahoney and Thelen's four. It specifies the conditions, in treaty-bounded peace operations meeting the scope conditions set out in Section 3.5, under which strong veto possibilities and low discretion produce neither layering nor any other named mode, leaving inertia to generate drift's effects by a different route. Built on Pierson's path-dependence framework and on the organisational literature on IO dysfunction, but specifying the political mechanisms these accounts leave open, the concept identifies three mutually reinforcing mechanisms: institutional inertia, signalling value, and juridical lock-in. Together, they make renewal the path of least resistance, even as the mandate–environment mismatch grows.

3.2. Institutional Inertia: Costs, Learning, and Coordination

UNDOF illustrates Pierson's four sources of institutional inertia with particular clarity, and each operates here to resist change to the mission rather than to guarantee its survival; inertia is, in the first instance, a mechanism of non-adaptation. The setup costs of the 1974 regime were substantial: intensive US shuttle diplomacy, sustained UN engagement, and considerable political capital secured the Agreement's detailed lines, force limitations, and inspection modalities.[50] Those costs are sunk. Terminating or fundamentally revising the regime would require a new round of high-risk diplomacy with no guarantee of success, forfeiting the returns on the original investment. Learning effects have accumulated over five decades: successive contingents and mission leaderships have developed deep familiarity with the terrain, the liaison patterns, and the political sensitivities of both sides, so that even though the formal tasks have not evolved, the practice of implementing them has produced expertise that would be costly to replicate under a different arrangement.[51]

Coordination effects are the most consequential. UNDOF is embedded in a dense web of complementary arrangements: the Disengagement Agreement, semi-annual Council renewals, budgetary lines, TCC deployment cycles, and regional military postures calibrated around the existence of the area of separation.[52] Altering one element reverberates through the others, so that changing the mandate or terminating the mission would require re-coordinating all of them under more contentious conditions than those that first produced them. Adaptive expectations compound this. Israel, Syria, and neighbouring states plan on the assumption that UNDOF will continue to provide at least a minimal buffer and liaison channel; TCCs treat it as a low-risk deployment; and the mission itself maintains and rehearses standing contingency plans for reinforcement and

[50]Agreement on Disengagement, S/11302/Add.1, Annex A; Pierson, "Increasing Returns," 258.
[51]Pierson, "Increasing Returns," 254.
[52]S/2025/784, paras. 5, 9, 21, 34, 43.

evacuation on both sides of the line.[53] On their own, these features favour stickiness. They do not explain why persistence remains attractive once the mission's relevance is contested and its core functions cannot reliably be fulfilled. For that, the analysis turns to signalling value and to the legal architecture that underpins it.

3.3. Signalling Value: Political Utility Without Effectiveness

UNDOF continues to provide political signalling benefits to multiple stakeholders even where its operational impact on contemporary security risks is limited, and it is this mechanism that most directly explains persistence as distinct from non-adaptation: the mission is renewed because its continuation is useful to those who could end it. The signalling value is distinct from, though related to, the mission's original stabilising function. For Israel, UNDOF signals continued international recognition that the Golan front is a distinct and sensitive theatre warranting special arrangements, while imposing minimal constraint on Israeli freedom of action. The mission's inability to prevent or reverse violations, including Israeli ones, is precisely what makes it politically tolerable: it does not obstruct Israel's evolving security practice towards Iran, Hezbollah, or Syrian actors. Terminating UNDOF would force Israel either to assume sole and explicit responsibility for buffer-zone management, further entrenching its de facto control, or to negotiate a new mechanism under less favourable conditions. Maintaining the mission preserves ambiguity. For Syria, UNDOF preserves, at least symbolically, the framework of the 1974 Agreement and international recognition that the Golan is not an uncontested extension of Israel. Even a weakened or fragmented Syrian state can invoke the Agreement and UNDOF's presence to support sovereignty claims and to frame Israeli actions as violations of a still-valid regime; termination would risk being read as acquiescence in annexation, with little compensating gain.

The strength of this configuration is visible not in what the parties say about UNDOF but in what they continue to do. Consent to a peacekeeping mission is not passive toleration; under the 1974 framework UNDOF's deployment depends on the active and repeated assent of both host parties, and that assent has been forthcoming without interruption across a decade in which the Agreement's territorial core has been openly breached. The most demanding test came in December 2024. Within weeks of the fall of the Assad government, with Israeli forces having crossed Line A and established positions inside the area of separation, the incoming Syrian caretaker authorities stated that Syria honoured the terms of the 1974 Agreement, and the Secretary-General recorded that both parties continued to

[53]S/2020/1159, para. 30; S/2023/935, para. 28.

express commitment to it.[54] By late 2025, with ten Israeli positions still in place on the Bravo side and the inspection regime suspended, the pattern held: the Secretary-General reported that the Syrian Arab Republic had given its assent to the mission's extension and that Israel had expressed its agreement.[55] A successor government sharing no continuity with the regime that signed the Agreement, facing a live violation of it, nonetheless defaulted to consenting to the mission's continuation. This is the clearest evidence of the equilibrium's robustness on the local-actor side: consent survives both chronic non-compliance and a complete rupture in one party's domestic order, because for each party the alternative is worse. For Syria, withdrawing consent would concede the Agreement's irrelevance and surrender the legal frame for contesting Israel's presence; for Israel, it would dissolve the ambiguity the mission sustains.

For the P5, UNDOF offers a low-maintenance way of signalling that the Council remains engaged with the interstate dimensions of the Arab–Israeli conflict even as attention shifts elsewhere. The mission imposes minimal financial and political costs, rarely attracts media scrutiny, and does not require difficult consensus-building to renew; in a context of heightened Council polarisation on other files, it is a rare site of routine agreement. For TCCs, UNDOF is attractive as a relatively safe mission offering experience and prestige without the risks of more robust operations, allowing states to demonstrate commitment to UN peacekeeping and to build their profile within the organisation. These benefits are compatible with modest or declining effectiveness. UNDOF's presence demonstrates concern and continuity; its reports provide an official narrative of events on the Golan; its liaison structures offer a channel between parties that maintain no formal relations. These functions retain political value even when the mission cannot address the regional dynamics driving Israeli airstrikes or proxy deployments.

The negative-consensus equilibrium captures this paradox. UNDOF's modesty and limited impact protect it from contestation: because it neither threatens core interests nor demands significant resources, stakeholders can afford to let it persist even when they privately doubt its strategic relevance, and efforts to reform or terminate it would be far more politically salient than its quiet continuation.

3.4. Juridical Lock-In: Treaty-Bounded Mandates and the Golan Question

UNDOF's mandate rests on two distinct legal foundations, and the distinction is the source of its rigidity. Resolution 350 establishes the Force and

[54]S/2025/154, paras. 21, 42.
[55]S/2025/784, para. 43.

provides for its renewal, but the substance of what UNDOF does, the lines it monitors, the area of separation it occupies, the areas of limitation it administers, and the inspection regime it carries out, is fixed by the 1974 Disengagement Agreement, a bilateral instrument between Israel and Syria, rather than by the Council.[56] Because that substance lives in a treaty rather than a resolution, it cannot be altered without the consent of both parties. This is the mechanism that most directly explains non-adaptation: where other missions can be reshaped through Council action, UNDOF's operational core can be revised only by reopening a bilateral agreement neither party will renegotiate.

Amending the Agreement would, moreover, reopen the Golan question in the Council: the legality of Israel's annexation, the implications of US recognition of Israeli sovereignty in 2019, and the broader territorial settlement between Israel and Syria.[57] None of the P5 has an interest in triggering that debate. For the United States, it would raise questions about its own position; for Russia and China, it would invite scrutiny of their stances on territorial disputes elsewhere; for European members, it would expose divisions between legalistic and strategic approaches to the conflict. The path of least resistance is therefore to treat the Agreement as formally valid even as its core provisions are violated. Juridical lock-in thus interacts with institutional inertia and signalling value to foreclose incremental reform: where other missions can be adapted through Council action, UNDOF is held in its original legal form unless the parties themselves agree to change it. The Council can vary the duration of renewals and the size of the force; it cannot, in practice, rewrite the architecture without confronting the Golan's final status.

The three mechanisms converge most visibly in renewal practice. Since 2011 the Council has been deeply divided on Syria, yet UNDOF renewals have remained consensual throughout, because extending the mission requires no position on regime change, on the legality of Israeli strikes, or on the status of the Golan, whereas blocking renewal would force members to take precisely those positions and to declare whether they regard the Disengagement Agreement as defunct. Renewal is the collective enactment of the equilibrium: the moment at which institutional inertia, signalling value, and juridical lock-in are discharged through a single low-cost decision. Section 4 examines that dynamic, and its limits, in detail.

3.5. Scope Conditions: When Does a Negative-Consensus Equilibrium Emerge?

The negative-consensus equilibrium is not unique to UNDOF, but neither is it universal across peace operations. It emerges when four scope conditions

[56] Agreement on Disengagement, S/11302/Add.1, Annex A, paras. B(1)–(5), E; Protocol, Annex B; UNSC Res. 350 (1974).
[57] Cavari, "Trump and Israel," 160–5

coincide, and together these conditions translate the abstract configuration identified in Section 3.1, strong veto possibilities combined with low discretion, into observable features of a mission and its political environment.[58] Where the conditions hold, formal revision is blocked from without while incremental adaptation is foreclosed from within, and the mandate persists unchanged as its environment moves beneath it.

The first condition is juridical rigidity, the institutional dimension that holds discretion low. The mandate must be embedded in a treaty or political agreement that specifies substantive operational detail and cannot be modified by the Council alone. UNDOF and UNMOGIP, anchored in the 1974 Disengagement Agreement and the 1949 Karachi Agreement respectively, fit this category; missions such as UNTSO or UNFICYP, which derive their parameters primarily from resolutions, can adapt through practice and reinterpretation.[59]

The second condition is the low political salience of the underlying dispute, which keeps the high veto possibilities inherent in the treaty structure from ever being tested. Rather than describe such a dispute as 'frozen', a term implying a settlement process merely suspended, three observable indicators specify low salience: the absence of active interstate military confrontation between the signatory states; the absence of any live diplomatic process aimed at resolving the underlying territorial question; and the Council's treatment of the file as routine rather than as a recurring object of emergency deliberation.[60] The Golan front meets all three. Direct hostilities between Israel and Syria have not recurred at scale since 1974; indirect negotiations lapsed after 2008 and have not resumed under UN auspices; and UNDOF's renewal is conducted as administrative business. This contrasts with Western Sahara, where MINURSO's mandate and the surrounding political process remain contested and are periodically revisited, repeatedly drawing the arrangements back into question.

The third condition is minimal intrusiveness and cost. The mission must impose low sovereignty costs on host states and limited financial burdens on major contributors. UNDOF's light footprint, narrow tasks, and modest budget, appropriated at $69.6 million for 2025/26, make it easier to sustain than large, multidimensional operations; costlier missions with intrusive mandates generate greater pressure for reform or closure.[61] The fourth condition is residual political utility: the mission must provide signalling or symbolic benefits to key stakeholders even when its operational impact is limited. As argued above, UNDOF signals continuity, concern, and a refusal to normalise annexation, and it offers liaison channels and a framework for voicing

[58]Mahoney and Thelen, "A Theory of Gradual Institutional Change," 18–19.
[59]Shucksmith and White, "UNMOGIP," 204
[60]Hilding Norberg et al., *United Nations Truce Supervision Organization*.
[61]S/2025/784, para. 34

legal claims. A mission supplying neither operational effectiveness nor political utility presents a much stronger termination case, even under path dependence.

These conditions also establish the rationale for comparing UNDOF with other long-running observer missions, a comparison that is not a controlled test but a structured contrast: holding the minimalist observer model roughly constant, it varies juridical rigidity and political salience to show which configurations produce the equilibrium and which do not. The relevant universe is first-generation, consent-based observer missions with narrow monitoring mandates, the category to which UNDOF, UNTSO, UNFICYP, and UNMOGIP all belong; the comparison asks why, within that shared model, some have adapted and others have not. UNTSO shares UNDOF's minimalist model but lacks comparable juridical rigidity and has evolved into a flexible support platform for other missions in the region, an instance of the conversion that becomes available when discretion is higher.[62] UNFICYP, though long-running, has adapted informally to changing conditions on Cyprus and operates alongside an active political process, so the salience condition does not hold.[63] UNMOGIP resembles UNDOF closely: its mandate is tied to a specific ceasefire agreement in a low-salience interstate dispute, its operations are constrained by host-state consent, and its persistence reflects a similar mix of inertia, signalling, and legal rigidity rather than demonstrated effectiveness.[64] UNDOF is, in this sense, the paradigmatic case: maximum juridical rigidity, low political salience, minimal intrusiveness, and clear residual political utility. Under these conditions the negative-consensus equilibrium is robust, because no single actor has both the incentive and the capacity to force reconsideration, and all can live with the status quo even if none regards it as satisfactory. The framework's reach is not confined to observer missions. Any operation whose operational core is fixed in an instrument the Council cannot amend on its own authority, and whose underlying dispute has settled into low salience on the three indicators above, would meet the conditions, and the model predicts the same conjunction of persistence and non-adaptation wherever that configuration obtains.

4. The Security Council as the Equilibrium's Arena

If the negative-consensus equilibrium has a principal arena, it is the Security Council chamber, and the mechanism is renewal. Section 3 identified renewal as the equilibrium's collective enactment; this section examines

[62]Salama, "UNTSO After Resolution 2803," 3–10
[63]Asmussen, "UNFICYP," 205
[64]Shucksmith and White, "UNMOGIP," 207

how that enactment actually works, and what makes it possible on a file where the Council agrees on almost nothing else. The interesting question is not that the Council renews UNDOF, which the framework predicts, but how a body deadlocked on Syria for over a decade has nonetheless produced uninterrupted consensus on a mission embedded in the same conflict. The answer lies in the procedural insulation of the file, and it is this insulation, rather than any judgment about the mission's performance, that the renewal record reveals.

The Council has learned to treat UNDOF as a low-salience technical file quarantined from its broader disagreements over Syria. Renewals are adopted in short, largely procedural sessions, with minimal textual change negotiated at an expert level rather than contested in substantive debate.[65] This routinisation is itself a political accomplishment, not an absence of politics. It allows members to signal continuity of engagement on the Golan and to sustain the working premise that the 1974 regime remains intact, without obliging any of them to take a position on regime legitimacy, the conduct of the war, or the legality of Israel's annexation. In the scholarship on Council dynamics over Syria, where division, vetoes, and paralysis are the dominant themes, UNDOF barely registers, precisely because it is the one element of the file on which members can still agree to hold the status quo.[66] The mission's depoliticised mandate is what makes this possible: there is nothing in a renewal text that forces a member to reveal its position on the questions that divide the Council elsewhere. Renewal is consensual because, by design, it commits no one to anything contested.

The strength of this arrangement is clearest when it should have broken. In December 2024, when Israeli forces crossed into the area of separation and established positions in territory reserved for UNDOF, the Council had a full range of options: an emergency session, a demand for clarification, a presidential statement or resolution recording the violation, or a mandated review of the mission's future. It exercised none of them, renewing the mandate on substantively identical terms in Resolution 2766.[67] The point is not that the Council failed to act but that inaction was the active choice, because confronting the violation would have reopened the very questions the equilibrium exists to suppress: the Golan's status, the implications of the 2019 United States recognition of Israeli sovereignty, and the trajectory of the Syria file. The pattern held through 2025: Resolution 2782 extended the mandate once more on identical terms, even as the Israeli positions remained on the Bravo side, eight inside the area of separation and two in

[65]See, for example, the renewal resolutions adopted with minimal textual variation across the period, including S/RES/2131 (2013), S/RES/2330 (2016), S/RES/2766 (2024), and S/RES/2782 (2025).
[66]Gifkins, "The UN Security Council Divided"; Martini, "Debating Syria in the Security Council."
[67]S/RES/2766 (2024); S/2025/154, paras. 1, 17, 40–43.

the area of limitation, and the Agreement's central inspection mechanism stayed suspended.[68]

This record has implications for how the persistence of peace operations is theorised. Council decisions to extend, adapt, or terminate missions are frequently read as responses to performance; effective missions are rewarded with continued support, failing ones are reconfigured or closed.[69] The UNDOF renewal record cannot be read that way. By every contemporary metric, relevance to current threats, capacity to prevent violations, and contribution to regional stability, the mission's performance has declined across the decade, while Council support has held perfectly steady. What renewal tracks is not an assessment of what UNDOF accomplishes but apprehension about what altering or removing it might unleash. This decoupling of performance from fate, examined further in Section 5, appears here from the side of the actor that does the renewing: in the Council's handling of UNDOF, the variable that explains persistence is not performance but the avoidance of political cost, and the renewal vote is the procedural form that avoidance takes.

5. UNDOF Within the Peacekeeping Reform Horizon

The 2025 Berlin Peacekeeping Ministerial and its supporting studies, the two GAPO compendia and the independent study commissioned from Wane, Williams and Kihara-Hunt, set out what now passes for the shared reform horizon for UN peace operations.[70] These documents are largely prescriptive. They advance claims about what peace operations should be able to do and about what makes them legitimate and effective, organised around four recurring commitments: modular and adaptive mission design, political primacy, performance and accountability, and partnerships. This section treats those commitments as propositions to be tested rather than aspirations to be endorsed, and uses UNDOF as the test case. The aim is not to show that an old observer mission falls short of a modern agenda, which would be unsurprising and uninteresting, but to establish what the agenda's own claims silently presuppose. Read against UNDOF, each commitment turns out to rest on an unstated condition, and, revealingly, the conditions fail for different reasons. The reform agenda is not so much mistaken as unscoped: it generalises from the missions reformers find interesting and is silent about the boundary of its own applicability. Legacy treaty-bound observer missions sit precisely on that boundary, and UNDOF marks where it runs.

[68]S/RES/2782 (2025); S/2025/784, paras. 5, 9, 21, 32, 43.
[69]Howard, *Power in Peacekeeping*, ch. 1; Fortna, *Does Peacekeeping Work?* ch. 6.
[70]Vermeij et al., "Preparing for the Future"; Koops and Dal Dosso (eds.), Compendium of Short Issue Papers; Wane, Williams and Kihara-Hunt, *The Future of Peacekeeping*.

5.1. The Four Commitments

The reform literature converges on adaptability as the defining criterion of contemporary mission legitimacy. The introductory GAPO policy paper argues that current pressures on the multilateral system require peace operations to refocus on strategic political coherence, operationalise modular approaches, integrate and pool resources, and expand partnerships, and it states that legitimacy and credibility are the two most important factors in the effectiveness of peace operations, both of which it ties to a mission's capacity to adapt.[71] Wane et al. translate the adaptability principle into a portfolio of thirty models spanning prevention, monitoring, protection, transition support, and specialised tasks, to be tailored to context and assembled, reconfigured, or scaled as situations change.[72] Political primacy is the second commitment. The GAPO papers treat strategic political coherence as a recurring requirement and insist that operations be anchored on a coherent political strategy; Von Billerbeck et al. argue that sustained engagement with local political dynamics is what renders peacekeeping more successful, cost-effective and sustainable; and Wane et al. press the claim to its limit, extending the requirement of a guiding political strategy even to monitoring and observation models.[73] Performance and accountability form the third commitment: measurable frameworks with clear lines of accountability between the UN and troop contributors, on the premise that consistent underperformance, once remedial measures are exhausted, should lead to removal.[74] Partnerships form the fourth: peace operations conceived as platforms for pluralistic cooperation, undergirded by multi-actor compacts and with partnership built into mission design rather than added ad hoc.[75] The three sections that follow take modularity, political primacy, and performance in turn; partnerships are treated alongside political primacy, because UNDOF's near-total absence of partnerships follows from the same dynamic that forecloses a political role.

5.2. Modularity: An Unstated Precondition

Modularity is offered as a general design principle. Peace operations are to be built from distinct, interoperable components assembled, reconfigured, or scaled as conditions change, in place of standardised fixed models. The premise, which the papers do not state because they do not need to for the

[71] Vermeij et al., "Preparing for the Future."
[72] Wane, Williams and Kihara-Hunt, *Future of Peacekeeping*, 2, 21–22, 22–37.
[73] von Billerbeck, Bardalai, Goswami, Russo and Sharma, "Local Politics and Perspectives."; Wane, Williams and Kihara-Hunt, *Future of Peacekeeping*, 22.
[74] Wane, Williams and Kihara-Hunt, *Future of Peacekeeping*, 48–49; Vermeij et al., "Preparing for the Future."
[75] Vermeij et al., "Preparing for the Future," 5–7

missions they have in view, is that the operational detail to be reconfigured resides in instruments the Council and Secretariat control, so that adding or removing a component is a matter of design choice. UNDOF violates that premise. As Section 3 established, its territorial remit, inspection modalities, and authorised activities are fixed in the 1974 Disengagement Agreement, a bilateral instrument the Council cannot alter without renegotiation between Israel and Syria. The consequence is not that modularity is hard to apply to UNDOF but that it is inapplicable in kind: even a modest reconfiguration such as a new observer location or the integration of drone surveillance risks being read as a de facto amendment to the Agreement, requiring bilateral consent that is politically unobtainable. The test therefore yields a finding about the framework, not merely about the mission. Modularity is not a universal property of peace operations but a property of operations whose mandates the Council can configure; where the mandate lives in a treaty, the lever the agenda reaches for is not stiff but absent. The contrast with UNTSO makes the point. Not embedded in a single detailed bilateral framework, UNTSO has been able to evolve into a flexible support platform through practice and Council guidance, and the GAPO short paper on military and civilian observers builds its proposals for a rapid-deployment vanguard capacity and a centre of excellence precisely on UNTSO's demonstrated adaptability.[76] UNDOF sits at the rigid end of that spectrum, and the more modular one wishes it to become, the harder it collides with the 1974 architecture. The implication for reform is uncomfortable: where mandates derive from detailed disengagement agreements that hard-wire operational detail, modularity is not a technical option but a legal and political problem the Berlin agenda largely brackets.

5.3. Political Primacy: A Claim that Inverts

The second commitment fails a more demanding test, and the result is not silence but contradiction. The agenda treats political embeddedness as a near-universal prerequisite for legitimacy, and Wane et al. press it to the thin end of the spectrum, extending the requirement of a guiding political strategy to the very observer models designed to do least.[77] UNDOF is the case that should confirm the claim if it holds anywhere among minimalist missions. It inverts it. UNDOF sits not in an active conflict or a live peace process but in a quarantined territorial dispute whose central question, sovereignty over the Golan, is a non-starter for both parties: Israel annexed the Golan in 1981 and treats it as sovereign; Syria maintains its

[76]Hilding Norberg et al., "Taking UN Peace Operations to the Next Level," 3–7
[77]Wane, Williams and Kihara-Hunt, *Future of Peacekeeping*, 22.

claim and refuses any arrangement that would compromise it. The 1974 Agreement was built to quarantine that dispute behind a monitored buffer without prejudicing either position. Injecting a political role would collide with the quarantine from a direction the modularity problem never reaches. The obstacle is not the Council's inability to amend the treaty but the parties' active refusal of consent: for Israel, political engagement risks legitimising challenges to its de facto control and drawing attention to annexation; for Syria, it risks normalising the status quo or diluting its claim. The mission's depoliticisation is therefore not a deficiency the agenda could remedy but the condition of the parties' continued consent, the same consent Section 3 identified as the equilibrium's foundation. Here the framework does not merely under-specify; for an entire class of missions it has the sign wrong. The political role the agenda treats as the route to legitimacy is, for quarantine cases, the route to withdrawn consent, and the very absence the agenda reads as a deficiency is what keeps the mission alive. Partnerships fail by the same logic and need no separate test: a mission designed to insulate a dispute cannot build the multi-actor coalitions the agenda prizes without reopening the dispute it exists to contain.

5.4. Performance: A Decoupled Variable

The third commitment assumes that performance drives institutional fate, that underperformance, once identified and unremedied, should trigger adaptation or removal.[78] UNDOF tests whether that link is general and finds it severed. On narrow metrics, maintaining a liaison channel, documenting violations, sustaining a buffer presence, the mission performs adequately; against the strategic objectives the agenda privileges, reducing violence, protecting civilians, supporting political processes, it is close to irrelevant. Yet its fate is wholly uncoupled from that assessment. It cannot be held to account for failing to prevent violations it has no authority to prevent, cannot be measured against mandate-implementation benchmarks when the mandate is intentionally minimalist, and cannot be redesigned to do more with less when doing less is the condition of its political sustainability. The negative-consensus equilibrium insulates it from the accountability logic entirely. The framework assumes a performance-fate link; UNDOF marks a class of missions in which the two are decoupled, and in which strategic irrelevance is the stable equilibrium rather than a trigger for change. A performance regime calibrated to reward adaptation and penalise failure has no purchase on a mission whose persistence is unrelated to either.

[78]Wane, Williams and Kihara-Hunt, *Future of Peacekeeping*, 48–49.

5.5. The Agenda's Unstated Scope

The three tests converge on a single conclusion, and the convergence is more informative than any test taken alone, because the commitments fail for different reasons. Modularity fails because the mandate lies beyond the Council's reach; political primacy fails because the parties withhold consent from any political role; performance accountability fails because the equilibrium decouples fate from results. Two distinct veto points are at work, the treaty above and the parties' consent below, and the reform agenda registers neither, because it is built on an implicit universe of missions that are Council-configurable, politically embeddable, and subject to a performance-fate link. UNDOF demonstrates that this universe has an unstated boundary and that legacy treaty-bound observer missions fall outside it. The objection that comparing such a mission with a reform agenda aimed at large multidimensional operations is a category error misreads the exercise: identifying where a framework stops applying is not a misuse of it but a test of its scope, and UNDOF is the case that locates the edge. The stakes are not marginal. A significant share of current operations are long-standing legacy missions with narrow mandates, low budgets, and deep path dependence, yet reform energy is directed at large multidimensional operations and the design of new models, passing this category by. A framework that cannot account for missions like UNDOF or UNMOGIP is not merely incomplete in coverage but unequipped in concept: it lacks a category for missions that persist by resisting the very reforms it prescribes. The negative-consensus equilibrium sustaining UNDOF is not a pathology the agenda can correct but a form of institutional politics it must learn to theorise, if it is to offer a realistic account of what future peace operations can and cannot achieve.

6. Conclusion

UNDOF's persistence is not a puzzle of success but of institutional politics. The mission endures despite a widening gap between its mandate and its environment because it sits at the intersection of three mutually reinforcing mechanisms, institutional inertia, signalling value, and juridical lock-in, which together produce a negative-consensus equilibrium: a configuration in which every relevant actor prefers the continuation of an increasingly obsolete arrangement to the political costs of changing it, not because any regards it as optimal but because none can agree on what should replace it.

The article has made two arguments. The first concerns the case. UNDOF persists, and persists *unchanged*, because two distinct outcomes that are usually run together, survival and adaptation, come apart here. Most long-running missions persist by adapting; UNDOF persists precisely by not

adapting, and the same equilibrium explains both. No stakeholder will bear the cost of terminating it, which secures its survival; and no stakeholder will pay the political price of even incremental amendment, which freezes its form. The 1974 Disengagement Agreement hard-wires operational detail the Security Council cannot modify without bilateral Israeli-Syrian consent, a political impossibility given Israel's annexation, Syria's sovereignty claim, and P5 divisions over the Golan's status, so the mission's minimalism becomes self-protecting: its very limitations shield it from contestation, and it is sustained through ritualised renewal even as its strategic relevance erodes. The concept that names this, the negative-consensus equilibrium, is not borrowed from the institutionalist literature but built on it. It draws on Pierson's account of increasing returns and on Mahoney and Thelen's typology of gradual change, yet it names a configuration their fourfold scheme does not anticipate: strong veto possibilities combined with low discretion, which on their own account should produce layering, here produce neither layering nor any other named mode, but a mandate held formally constant while its effect drifts. Filling that gap is the article's theoretical contribution.

Stated in terms of the theory the article has used, the case does three different things. It confirms Pierson: the four sources of increasing returns operate on the Golan much as his account predicts, and nothing in the evidence requires amending them. It extends Mahoney and Thelen: their two variables are retained intact, but the case occupies a cell their fourfold typology leaves empty, and naming what sits there is the contribution. And it complicates the literature on institutional survival in international organisations. Gray locates zombie status in bureaucratic capacity failure and Barnett and Finnemore locate dysfunction in bureaucratic culture, both of them internal accounts; UNDOF performs its assigned tasks competently and is held rigid from outside, by a treaty it cannot amend and by parties whose consent depends on its restraint. The case therefore suggests that the sources of institutional persistence beyond effectiveness are not always to be found within the organisation, and that where they are external the remedies implied by those accounts, better capacity or a less inward-looking culture, will not reach the problem.

The second argument concerns the reform agenda. The 2025 Berlin Ministerial and its supporting studies converge on four commitments, modularity, political primacy, performance accountability, and partnerships, and UNDOF satisfies none of them. What makes the case analytically useful is not that it fails on all four but that it fails on each for a *different* reason. Modularity presupposes a mandate the Council can reconfigure, and UNDOF's lives in a treaty beyond the Council's reach. Political primacy assumes engagement with political dynamics enhances legitimacy, yet UNDOF's legitimacy with the parties depends on the *absence* of a political role, an inversion, not a shortfall. Performance frameworks assume that results

drive institutional fate, yet UNDOF's fate is decoupled from its performance entirely. Read together, these failures reveal two distinct veto points the reform agenda registers neither of, the treaty above and the parties' consent below, and an unstated scope condition: the agenda generalises from missions that are Council-configurable and politically embeddable, and is silent about those that are neither.

The policy implication is not that UNDOF must be reformed at any cost but that reformers must differentiate. Legacy observer missions embedded in treaty-bound regimes form a category of their own and warrant their own expectations. Where juridical rigidity and a negative-consensus equilibrium prevail, the realistic menu is narrow: incremental operational adjustment, candid reporting of the mandate–environment mismatch, and recognition that ritualised renewal is what the equilibrium produces, rather than performance rhetoric implying more is within reach. If the Council chooses continuity over coherence, as it did in renewing UNDOF days after the December 2024 incursion, it would do better to do so explicitly than under the appearance of routine.

For scholarship, the case unsettles two assumptions: that persistence is a proxy for success, and that reform is primarily a problem of technical design. Mandate renewal is itself a political strategy, and in UNDOF's case it manages conflict by stabilising an institution that no longer fits its environment. Any adequate theory of peacekeeping reform must treat missions like UNDOF and UNMOGIP not as anomalies to be bracketed but as cases that reveal how the UN copes with the hardest boundary conditions of its own legal and political order. Some missions survive precisely because they cannot be reformed; recognising this is more honest, and more useful, than the alternative. The Berlin agenda describes the future of peacekeeping for missions that can adapt, and the institutional politics traced here describes the present of peacekeeping for those that cannot, and a serious reckoning with UN peace operations has to hold both in view.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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