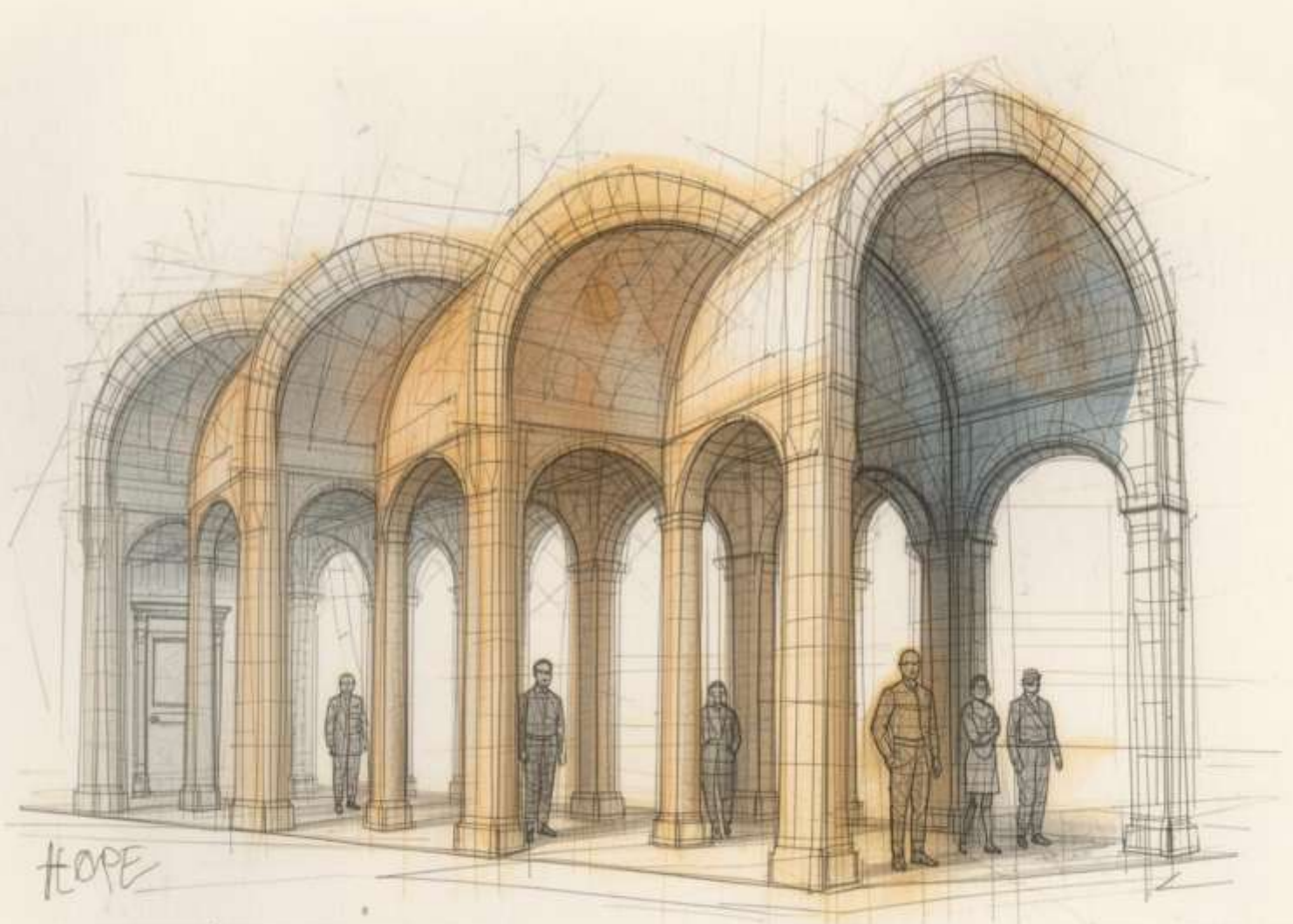


PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS ACROSS INTERNATIONAL

**PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS ACROSS INTERNATIONAL
ORGANIZATIONS: MEASURING ROBUSTNESS AND DESIGNING A
HEMISPHERIC ADAPTATION**

Guilherme De Araujo Grigoli



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ABSTRACT:

This article compares how the UN, NATO, EU, and AU conceptualize and implement the Protection of Civilians (PoC) through the lens of normative robustness. Based on constructivism, four dimensions are operationalized – validity claims, social acceptance, rule-based practice, and implementation – to assess convergences and forms of contestation among organizations. The method combines document review with a search protocol and a structured coding scheme. The findings point to a consolidation of the moral-legal imperative to protect civilians, but variations exist regarding thresholds for the use of force, collateral damage mitigation, mandate design, and learning mechanisms. The UN presents high normative density and mission-level guidelines; NATO emphasizes operationalization in planning and deployment; the EU mainstreams protection in CSDP instruments; and the AU incorporates PoC into regional operations, with heterogeneous capabilities. The conclusion draws implications for the Western Hemisphere such as training, interoperability, and civil-military coordination aiming to strengthen PoC as a norm.

KEYWORDS:

Protection of Civilians; UN; NATO; EU; AU

Citación APA:

De Araujo Grigoli, G. (2025). Protection of civilians across international organizations: measuring robustness and designing a hemispheric adaptation. *Hemisferio*, 11, [06-22]. <https://doi.org/10.59848/hemisferio.84>

Estilo Chicago (Bibliografía)

De Araujo Grigoli, Guilherme. "Protection of Civilians across International Organizations: Measuring Robustness and Designing a Hemispheric Adaptation". *Hemisferio* 11, (2025): [06-22]. <https://doi.org/10.59848/hemisferio.84>

 Fecha de publicación: 18/12/2025

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INTRODUCTION

Protection of Civilians (PoC) has moved from scattered moral and legal intuitions to a cross-cutting expectation that shapes how contemporary operations are conceived and judged. It reflects a broad convergence around the idea that legitimacy, effectiveness and restraint are inseparable when force is used amidst populations. Civilian harm is no longer treated as a residual concern; it is central to political outcomes, mission credibility and long-term stability.¹

The roots of this expectation are older than the modern state. The Cyrus Cylinder is often cited as an antecedent of humane governance toward subject people. In the fifth century, St. Augustine articulated *justum bellum* criteria that sought to discipline violence by intent and authority. Early modern jurists such as Francisco de Vitoria and Hugo Grotius elaborated limits grounded in natural

environments where combatants and civilians intermix, authority is fragmented, and harm can result both from deliberate targeting and from the side-effects of necessary action. Urban warfare, the diffusion of precision and loitering munitions, the presence of non-state armed groups and private military actors, and the blurring of physical and cyber/info domain threats complicated distinction, proportionality and precaution. At the same time, global publics, media scrutiny and local constituencies conditioned the legitimacy of mandates on visible efforts to prevent, mitigate and respond to risks faced by civilians.³

In recent years, new challenges such as totalitarian regimes, religious extremism, and criminal organizations have pushed PoC beyond tactical considerations, requiring a political and systemic approach,⁴ Modern conflicts demand a multidimensional strategy to ensure PoC remains

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law and the customs of war, while the Westphalian settlement consolidated state responsibility for the conduct of hostilities. Across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the codification of the Law of Armed Conflict, through the Hague Regulations and successive Geneva Conventions, progressively circumscribed the permissible use of force and strengthened protections for non-combatants. After 1945, the UN Charter's constraints on the use of force, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Fourth Geneva Convention entrenched a legal-moral baseline that would later inform explicit civilian-protection agendas.²

The post–Cold War era transformed these foundations into operational imperatives. Civil wars, fragile transitions and complex emergencies brought international and regional organizations to

effective and aligned with current realities, as shown in Figure I.

Figure I – Timeline - Norms vs. Protection of Civilians (events)



Source: The Authors based in UN Charter and post-1945 IHL/IHRL codification (Hague Regulations; Geneva Conventions); UN DPKO/DPO PoC policy series (2010/2015/2019/2023); NATO PoC Policy (2016) and Human Security materials (2024).

Within this landscape, PoC crystallized as a normative and practical commitment. It spans

¹ Carpenter, "Women, Children and Other Vulnerable Groups: Gender, Strategic Frames and the PoC as a Transnational Issue".

² Guimarães, "A Construção Histórico-Sociológica dos Direitos Humanos"; Evans, "The Responsibility to Protect: Ending Mass Atrocity Crimes Once and for All".

³ Cruz et al., “Improving Security of United Nations Peacekeepers: We Need to Change the Way We Are Doing Business - Cruz Report”.

⁴ Armiñon, "El concepto y el uso de la seguridad humana: análisis crítico de sus potencialidades y riesgos".

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multiple layers: political signaling, legal framing, mission design, rules of engagement, targeting constraints, community engagement, early-warning, movement facilitation, safe-site management, accountability and learning architecture. Yet the content and emphasis of PoC vary across organizations: some privilege legal codification and mission guidance; others prioritize operational planning¹ and harm-mitigation tools; still others embed protection within wider crisis-management or regional peace-support arrangements². Such variation reveals that PoC's strength depends not only on formal texts but also on social recognition, conduct in practice and institutionalization over time.³

Comparing the United Nations (UN), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the European Union (EU) and the African Union (AU) is therefore analytically salient. These organizations differ in membership, instruments and action theaters, yet each has articulated commitments to protect civilians and has accumulated experience across diverse contexts.⁴ Examining convergences and divergences in justificatory frames, thresholds for the use of force, civilian-harm-mitigation measures, mandate design and review/learning mechanisms clarifies where PoC is most consolidated, where it is contested and which organizational features appear associated with greater resilience of the norm.

While our analytical lens is constructivist, the Protection of Civilians (PoC) is anchored in a positive-law framework that spans International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL). In armed conflict, IHL's core principles—distinction, proportionality and precautions—constrain means and methods and prohibit attacks expected to cause excessive civilian harm relative to the anticipated military advantage; in parallel, IHRL continues to inform state conduct to the maximum extent compatible

with the exigencies of the situation. Contemporary organizational PoC policies and guidelines explicitly trace their legal bases to this IHL/IHRL dyad and to Security Council practice, which together shape mandate design, rules for the use of force and harm-mitigation repertoires.⁵

A comparative lens across UN, NATO, EU and AU is also instrumental for deriving policy-relevant insights for the Americas. Many hemispheric operating environments combine urban armed violence, disaster response, cyber-physical risks to essential services, cross-border pressures and mixed civil-military deployments. Translating lessons on justificatory frames, civilian-harm mitigation, mandate design and institutional learning into interoperable training standards, common terminology and coordination practices can strengthen PoC as a workable norm across the Hemisphere, while respecting diverse legal and organizational traditions.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, document-based comparative design to examine how four organizations, the United Nations (UN), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the European Union (EU) and the African Union (AU), conceptualize and enact Protection of Civilians (PoC). The comparison is organized through a common analytical lens, namely normative robustness, which is here operationalized along four connected dimensions that bridge discourse and practice: validity claims, social acceptance, rule-consistent practice (compliance), and implementation through institutions and tools⁶ based on a model presented by Deitelhoff and Zimmermann. Similarities and differences across organizations are treated as tracing mechanisms that

¹ EU, "Council Joint Action 2007/677/CFSP on the European Union Military Operation in the Republic of Chad and in the Central African Republic; EU, "Concept on PoC (PoC) in EU-Led Military Operations".

² Oksamytna, Kseniya; Wilén, Nina, "Adoption, Adaptation or Chance? Inter-Organizational Diffusion of the Protection of Civilians Norm from the UN to the African Union"; Coning, "Peace Enforcement in Africa: Doctrinal Distinctions between the African Union and United Nations".

³ Guzzini, "Uma reconstrução do Construtivismo nas Relações Internacionais"; Deitelhoff and Zimmermann, "Defenses under Challenge: Unpacking the Dynamics of Defense Robustness"; Deitelhoff and

Zimmermann, "Things We Lost in the Fire: How different types of Contestation affect the robustness of international Defenses".

⁴ Dembinski and Schott, "Converging Around Global Defenses? PoC in African Union and European Union Peacekeeping in Africa; Carvalho and Stensland "The PoC in Peacekeeping in Africa: Context and Evolution".

⁵ Gilder, "The UN and the Protection of Civilians: Sustaining the Momentum."

⁶ Deitelhoff and Zimmermann, "Defenses under Challenge: Unpacking the Dynamics of Defense Robustness"; Deitelhoff and Zimmermann, "Things We Lost in the Fire: How different types of Contestation affect the robustness of international Defenses".

illuminate patterns of convergence and contestation along those dimensions.

The evidentiary corpus privileges primary organizational materials such as policies, doctrines, guidance documents, directives, mission and operation reports, communiqués, training standards, after-action reviews and lessons-learned notes complemented by authoritative peer-reviewed syntheses. For each organization, the corpus encompasses mandate-setting instruments and policy guidance at headquarters level, as well as mission- or operation-level documents that evidence how PoC is translated into planning, conduct and review.

The temporal scope runs from 2010 to 2025, with a final verification conducted in August 2025 to capture recent consolidations and updates. English is the working language throughout; Portuguese and Spanish sources are incorporated when official or substantively necessary, and French is used for AU/EU materials whenever English versions are unavailable. Foundational texts that predate the window are retained where indispensable to interpret current practice.

Searches were conducted in organizational repositories, such as the UN Digital Library and departmental policy pages, NATO standardization and policy portals, EUR-Lex and Council/EEAS repositories for the EU, and AU Peace and Security Council communiqués and PoC/PSO pages, as well as in academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science and relevant publisher platforms. Boolean strings combining the terms “Protection of Civilians” or “PoC” with policy, doctrine, guidance, planning, CSDP or PSO, and with each organization’s name or acronym, were adapted to each portal’s syntax.

Inclusion rested on three substantive conditions: the document must be an official primary instrument or a peer-reviewed synthesis directly addressing PoC; it must specify or illuminate mandates, tasks, planning and targeting constraints, civilian-harm-mitigation measures, or learning and review mechanisms; and it must fall within the temporal scope or be foundational to the interpretation of current practice. Media commentary without primary backing, superseded

versions where a consolidated update exists, and duplicates were excluded unless older versions were needed for process-tracing.

We translate the robustness construct into indicators and a 3-level ordinal scale (Low / Moderate / High) for each dimension. Each rating must be evidence-justified by at least one primary document plus, when useful, a secondary synthesis. Documentary evidence was coded deductively against the four dimensions and their indicators (D1–D4), using a three-level ordinal scale (Low/Moderate/High). For each cell, at least one primary instrument (policy, doctrine, mandate or guidance) and, where pertinent, one peer-reviewed synthesis was triangulated; discrepant signals were resolved in support of the most recent consolidated instrument, with justifications preserved in a coding log and pinpoint citations recorded in the matrix.

D1 – Validity claims (justificatory frames)

Indicators: explicit moral-legal rationale for PoC; linkage to IHL/HRL; articulation in strategic/mandate-level texts.

Low: sporadic or implicit references; Moderate: explicit but narrow or context-bound; High: consistent, formalized rationale across core documents.

D2 – Social acceptance (recognition/uptake)

Indicators: endorsement by key stakeholders (member states, commands, component HQs); integration into training curricula; references by partner organizations.

Low: limited constituency; Moderate: recognized within select communities of practice; High: broad, recurring recognition in organizational format and partner dialogues.

D3 – Rule-consistent practice (compliance/behavior)

Indicators: translation into planning cycles (e.g., OPP/OPP-like), ROE/ROA constraints, targeting and CHM measures, tasking orders; presence of reporting PoC incidents/responses.

Low: ad hoc or incidental conduct; Moderate: partially embedded in planning/ROE/CHM; High: consistently embedded with feedback loops to operations.

D4 – Implementation (institutions/tools)

Indicators: dedicated policies/guides; institutional roles (PoC advisers/focal points); data systems;

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AAR/LL mechanisms; evaluation/review requirements.

Synthesis takes two complementary forms. A 4×4 matrix presents the cross-sectional ratings for organizations by dimension, each cell containing a one-sentence justification and a pinpoint citation. A narrative comparison then discusses, for each organization, the strongest and weakest dimensions and the mechanisms plausibly associated with those ratings – such as planning doctrine, civilian-harm-mitigation systems, mandate design and lessons-learned cycles – while noting where assessments hinge on context-specific mandates or mission-level variance.

Limitations arise from uneven public availability of doctrinal and planning materials – particularly where targeting and harm-mitigation

LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE CONCEPT OF POC AND THE CONSTRUCTS ESSENTIAL TO THE DEBATE

Situated within a constructivist understanding of international politics¹, this article treats Protection of Civilians (PoC) as a set of expectations whose meaning and force emerge from social practices and shared understandings rather than from material capabilities alone. Foundational constructivist work underscores that ideas and norms shape interests and behavior, providing action-guidance beyond instrumental calculation². In this register, PoC is best approached as a normative complex whose content and practical salience are historically contingent and socially produced.³

“Civilian harm is no longer treated as a residual concern; it is central to political outcomes, mission credibility and long-term stability”

guidance is not openly released –, from heterogeneity across missions and operations within each organization, from publication lags between policy change and online dissemination, and from language coverage where authoritative versions exist only in non-English languages. These constraints are mitigated by strict version control, source triangulation and explicit citation of the most recent accessible instruments. The research relies exclusively on publicly available documents and involves no human subjects, personal data or operationally sensitive information beyond what organizations have chosen to publish.

For analytical clarity, we adopt the tripartite view of norms as comprising: (i) a problem they purport to address; (ii) a declared value that gives them ideational direction; and (iii) prescriptions that orient behavior consistent with that value⁴. This framing enables us to identify the elements implicated when PoC is invoked, debated, or operationalized, and to distinguish disagreements about problems, values, or prescriptions in concrete settings.

Contemporary PoC governance unfolds amid **overlapping** temporal trajectories, social constituencies and issue domains, in which multiple organizations claim authority or act de facto within partially shared spaces. Such nesting and overlap complicate both conceptual consolidation and

¹ Critical perspectives have long interrogated the humanitarian field's entanglements with power and coloniality, cautioning that PoC/R2P framings may reproduce hierarchies or marginalize local agency. Recent contributions revisit these critiques in light of contemporary practice, including debates on decolonizing aid, the politics of humanitarian design and the localization agenda, and postcolonial readings of intervention and R2P. Actual articles to increase the debate: Clarke et al., “Decolonising humanitarian health,” *Conflict and Health* (2024); Keshavarz, “The obscured racialisation of humanitarian design,” *Third World Quarterly* (2025);

Khoury, “Power and humanitarian response in the Syrian war,” *World Development* (2024).

² Wendt, “Social Theory of International Politics”.

³ Guzzini, “Uma reconstrução do Construtivismo nas Relações Internacionais”; Tannenwald, “Ideas and Explanation: Advancing the Theoretical Agenda,” 15

⁴ Fehl, C.; Rosert, E., “It's Complicated: A Conceptual Framework for Studying Relations and Interactions between International Defenses”.

practical coordination, a point long recognized in literature on regime complexity and norm interaction¹.

Because international norms are frequently ambiguous, and because heterogeneous audiences interpret them differently, implementation tends to proceed through contestation that clarifies, stretches, or reaffirms meaning in practice. In IR scholarship, contestation is not an aberration but a constitutive modality through which compliance is argued over and, paradoxically, sometimes strengthened².

Against this backdrop, we rely on the model presented by Deitelhoff and Zimmermann which defines the normative robustness model to structure the comparison. Robustness, in this usage, connects two overarching properties – validity (the breadth and resilience of social acceptance) and facticity (the extent to which a norm guides conduct) – and becomes tractable when unpacked into four linked dimensions that bridge discourse and practice³.

The model thus invites attention to justification, social uptake, rule-consistent behavior and the density of institutional implementation, allowing variation in PoC to be understood as a pattern rather than a puzzle. To study the robustness of norms, this article adopts the model by examining four dimensions, as presented in Figure 2.

Robustness is shaped by contestation in two analytically distinct registers. Application contestation targets how a norm should be used in contexts without disputing its core; validity contestation challenges that core itself. Distinguishing the two helps explain why PoC may be widely affirmed yet unevenly enacted across mandates and theaters. As developed in the contestation literature, this distinction links

everyday argumentative practice to the maintenance or erosion of a norm's standing among relevant audiences⁴.

Wiener⁵ (2014) later emphasizes the need to advance the practice of contestation from merely highlighting legitimacy gaps to adopting a principle of contestation, which facilitates regular access to challenge norms and avoids legitimacy gaps. The goal is to move actors from negligence, denial, or disregard to a more explicit approach based on arbitration⁶, deliberation⁷, justification⁸ and containment^{9 10}.

Figure 2 – Assessing trends in norm robustness.

	Discourse-based dimensions		Practice-based dimensions	
	Concordance (acceptance in discussions and treaties)	Third-party reactions	Compliance	Implementation
Strengthening	High acceptance for the subject of legal norms; Highlighting number of ratifications, low number of opt-out clauses	Addressees almost universally sanction violations—discursively and/or practically	Compliance is (nearly) universal	High implementation on more than one level (e.g., domestic, regional, international)
	Widespread acceptance for the subject of legal norms; Moderately rising number of ratifications, moderate number of reservations	Most addressees sanction violations—discursively and/or practically	Compliance is widespread	Moderate implementation on at least one level
	Rare acceptance for the subject of legal norms; Considerable number of reservations; engage in interpretive warring	Addressees passively react to violations	Compliance is rare	Little implementation on any level
Weakening	No acceptance for the subject of legal norms; Low/ratifying number of ratifications, high number of opt-out clauses	Addressees appeal violations	Very little/no compliance	No implementation on any level

Source: Model presented by Deitelhoff & Zimmermann (2019; 2020).

In the specific case of PoC, the normative complex spans legal and customary elements and has diffused through international and regional organizations that differ markedly in membership, instruments and political economies. Regional bodies – most notably the African Union – have

¹ Alter and Meunier, "Nested and Overlapping Regimes in the Transatlantic Banana Trade Dispute"; Fehl, C.; Rosert, E., "It's Complicated: A Conceptual Framework for Studying Relations and Interactions between International Defenses".

² Wiener, "Contested Compliance: Interventions on the Defenseative Structure of World Politics".

³ Deitelhoff and Zimmermann, "Defenses under Challenge: Unpacking the Dynamics of Defense Robustness"; Deitelhoff and Zimmermann, "Things We Lost in the Fire: How different types of contestation affect the robustness of international Defenses"; Wiener, "A Theory of Contestation"; Lenz and Söderbaum, "The origins of legitimization strategies in international organizations: agents, audiences and environments".

⁴ Deitelhoff and Zimmermann, "Defenses under Challenge: Unpacking the Dynamics of Defense Robustness"; Deitelhoff and Zimmermann, "Things

We Lost in the Fire: How different types of contestation affect the robustness of international Defenses"; Wiener, "A Theory of Contestation".

⁵ Wiener, "A Theory of Contestation".

⁶ Arbitration is the legal way in which the pros and cons are evaluated as part of a legal process.

⁷ Deliberation is most likely identified as the political mode, where transnational regimes deal with rules and regulations.

⁸ Justification is the moral way in which the principles of right and wrong are questioned.

⁹ Containment reflects the social way in which rules are critically engaged in non-formal settings.

¹⁰ Zähringer, "Taking Stock of Theories around Defense Contestation: A Conceptual Re-Examining of the Evolution of the Responsibility to Protect".

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become salient arenas for defining and operationalizing civilian-protection tasks, while international organizations function as spaces of identity formation and norm diffusion, where states internalize shared ideas about protection as part of their security practices¹.

Recent comparative work reinforces these points by showing both convergence around a moral-legal imperative to protect and persistent divergences in thresholds for the use of force, harm-mitigation tools, mandate design and learning architectures. Such findings motivate an organization-sensitive account of PoC's robustness that treats similarities as family resemblances rather than strict equivalences across the UN, NATO, EU and AU.

COMPARISON OF THE ACTUAL CONCEPT OF POC FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE MAIN INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Read through the four dimensions of normative robustness – validity claims, social acceptance, rule-consistent practice, and implementation density – the United Nations (UN), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the European Union (EU) and the African Union (AU) exhibit a recognizable family resemblance around the moral-legal imperative to protect civilians, while maintaining distinctive profiles in the way they justify, internalize, enact and institutionalize Protection of Civilians (PoC). The comparative picture that emerges confirms convergence in core principles alongside persistent divergence in thresholds for the use of force, the embedding of civilian-harm mitigation (CHM) in planning and conduct, and the maturity of review and learning architectures. These patterns are consistent with recent comparative insights on multilateral practice².

The UN trajectory shows a stepwise consolidation from the *Operational Concept* of 2010³ to successive *Policies* in 2015⁴, 2019⁵ and 2023⁶. Across these iterations, justificatory frames increasingly foreground the host state's primary responsibility while authorizing missions, within capacities and mandates, to employ "all necessary means, up to and including deadly force" to prevent or respond to threats against civilians⁷. Mission-level guidance emphasizes integrated action by civilian, police and military components and the articulation of PoC strategies and directives that translate mandate language into operational tasks. This combination anchors high validity (clear legal-moral grounding), sustained social uptake across UN components, and high implementation density through mission strategies, even as compliance necessarily varies with mandate design, posture, and local threat environments. The literature on UN component integration corroborates the centrality of whole-of-mission arrangements to sustain PoC effects in practice⁸.

NATO crystallized its approach with the 2016 *Policy for the Protection of Civilians* and subsequent implementation guidance⁹. The policy frames PoC as encompassing all efforts to avoid, minimize and mitigate adverse effects of NATO and NATO-led operations on civilians and, where applicable, to protect civilians from violence by other actors through the establishment of a safe and secure environment¹⁰. The emphasis on operational planning, targeting constraints and CHM methods yields a comparatively strong compliance profile, while institutionalization has advanced through guidance and engagement but remains uneven across the breadth of activities and partner contexts¹¹. This profile reflects high validity and acceptance among Allies, robust practice in planning and conduct, and implementation density that is improving but still contingent on the functional area.

¹ Dembinski and Schott, "Converging Around Global Defenses? PoC in African Union and European Union Peacekeeping in Africa; Carvalho and Stensland "The PoC in Peacekeeping in Africa: Context and Evolution."; Oksamytna, Kseniya; Wilén, Nina, "Adoption, Adaptation or Chance? Inter-Organizational Diffusion of the Protection of Civilians Norm from the UN to the African Union".

² IPI, "Protection of Civilians in Partnership Peacekeeping"

³ UN DPKO, "Operational Concept on the PoC in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations", 10.

⁴ UN DPKO, "Policy - The PoC in United Nations Peacekeeping", 5.

⁵ UN DPO, "Policy for The PoC in United Nations Peacekeeping", 6.

⁶ UN DPO, "Policy for The PoC in United Nations Peacekeeping", 6.

⁷ UN DPO, "Policy for The PoC in United Nations Peacekeeping", 6. UN DPO, "Policy for The PoC in United Nations Peacekeeping", 6.

⁸ Weir, "The Integration of Civilian, Military, and Police Components in Peace Operations: Lessons from the UN Experience"

⁹ NATO, "NATO Policy for the Protection of Civilians"; "Preparing to Protect: Advice on Implementing NATO's Protection of Civilians Policy".

¹⁰ NATO, "NATO Policy for the Protection of Civilians".

¹¹ NATO, "NATO Policy for the Protection of Civilians"; "Preparing to Protect: Advice on Implementing NATO's Protection of Civilians Policy".

Within the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), PoC has been treated as crosscutting to executive and non-executive missions and operations, with substantive alignment to the IASC understanding of protection as securing full respect for rights under IHL, HRL and refugee law¹. The case of EUFOR Chad/CAR under UNSC Resolution 1778 illustrates how PoC considerations were embedded in mission design and conduct in an executive posture, whereas advisory or monitoring mandates have tended to mainstream PoC through planning and liaison rather than through direct protective use of force². Taken together, these features indicate moderate-to-high validity and acceptance, variable compliance conditioned by mandate type, and implementation density that has grown through concepts and mission practice without a single canonical definition.

The AU articulates PoC through its Constitutive Act-derived commitments and draft guidelines developed since 2012, embedding the protection of civilians within peace-support operations and linking it to regional human-rights instruments³. Mission experience – particularly AMISOM and its successor ATMIS – has included proactive authorizations to use force under Chapter VII-based UN Security Council resolutions and AU Peace and Security Council decisions, combining the protection of civilians and humanitarian actors with operations designed to reduce the threat posed by Al-Shabaab; these mandates expressly authorize the use of “all necessary measures,” including jointly planned and targeted operations, to create conditions for civilian security and humanitarian assistance⁴.

Two implications arise from these organization-specific discussions. First, thresholds for the use of force constitute the sharpest line of divergence: the UN codifies “all necessary means” within mission capabilities and mandates; AU practice has at times authorized proactive measures to forestall anticipated attacks; NATO integrates protection effects into planning while calibrating

action through targeting and CHM constraints; the EU differentiates between executive and non-executive postures for translating PoC into operational design. Second, differences in institutional architecture – advisers and focal points, guidance suites, reporting channels, and learning loops – largely explain why acceptance can be high while implementation density and compliance remain uneven across theaters. Both observations are borne out in the policy corpus and in comparative syntheses.

Expanding the cross-cutting analysis clarifies additional regularities. There is a strong correlation between the maturity of review and learning mechanisms and the stability of implementation arrangements: where mission-level strategies and directives are complemented by documented after-action reviews and codified lessons-learned products, practice exhibits greater consistency over time; where such architectures are thin, implementation tends to be reactive and episodic. Whole-of-mission integration of civilian, police and military components is a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for translating mandate language into coordinated tasking, a point highlighted by the UN's repeated insistence on integrated PoC strategies and by practitioner literature on UN peacekeeping integration⁵. Conversely, organizations that rely more heavily on targeted planning tools and CHM methods tend to demonstrate higher practice coherence at the tactical and operational levels, albeit sometimes with slower diffusion into broader institutional structures. Inter-organizational diffusion – especially across overlapping memberships – continues to drive convergence in justificatory frames and vocabulary without erasing differences in instruments and mandate authorities, which sustains diversity in compliance and implementation profiles.

A further transversal point concerns the relationship between host-state responsibility clauses and operational authority. UN policy language that emphasizes acting “without prejudice to the primary responsibility of the host state”

¹ IASC, “Protection: Definition and Guidance Overview”;

² Churrua “EUFOR Chad / CAR Mission on the PoC: A Distinctive EU Way to Peace Operations”; EU, “Guidelines on the Protection of Civilians in CSDP Missions and Operations (ST 17488/10)”; UNSC, “Resolution 1778 - Adopted by the Security Council at its 5748th meeting.”

³ AU, “African Peace and Security Architecture”; “Draft Guidelines for the PoC in African Union Peace Support Operations”.

⁴ UNSC, “Resolution 1744”; “Resolution 2628”; AUPSC, “Communiqué of the 69th meeting of the PSC”.

⁵ Weir, “The Integration of Civilian, Military, and Police Components in Peace Operations: Lessons from the UN Experience”

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coexists with authorizations to use all necessary means in the face of imminent threats, requiring missions to calibrate protective action in ways that maintain host-state consent while delivering timely protection effects. NATO’s formulation, by contrast, places systematic weight on anticipating and mitigating harm produced by its own actions as well as by third parties in its area of operations, aligning planning and targeting with CHM logics; EU instruments have historically translated PoC through mandate design and planning in executive missions, with non-executive activities leaning on liaison and mainstreaming; AU missions have balanced proactive authorizations with constraints emanating from capabilities and complex operating environments. These contrasts map closely onto the four-dimension robustness lens and explain why organizations may rate similarly on validity and acceptance yet diverge on compliance and implementation.

The final transversal observation concerns the

“PoC’s strength depends not only on formal texts but also on social recognition, conduct in practice and institutionalization over time”

role of guidance suites and focal-point systems in sustaining institutional memory. Where policies are accompanied by clear implementation updates, designated advisers, and routinized reporting, the institutionalization of PoC exhibits durability and supports iterative improvement; where such elements are partial or uneven, organizations remain dependent on individual missions or commands to sustain practice. The documentary record indicates that the UN and NATO have progressively consolidated such features, the EU has expanded mainstreaming across CSDP practice while preserving mandate-type differentiation, and the AU has formalized guidelines while navigating resource-driven heterogeneity at the mission level¹. In line with the ordinal scale defined earlier (Low / Moderate / High), the table below presents organization-by-dimension ratings derived from the foregoing analysis. Each rating corresponds to

documentary evidence cited in this section and should be retained as part of the results display.

Table I – Organization-by-dimension ratings

Organization	Validity (justificatory claims)	Social acceptance (recognition/ uptake)	Rule-consistent practice (compliance)	Implementation (institutions/ tools)
UN	High	High	Moderate-High	High
NATO	High	High	High	Moderate-High
EU	Moderate-High	Moderate-High	Moderate	Moderate
AU	High	High	Moderate	Moderate

Source: The authors based on comparative syntheses cited in the text.

The ratings for the UN reflect explicit policy authorizations and integrated mission-level guidance; NATO’s profile emphasizes planning, targeting and CHM methods; the EU’s profile captures mandate-conditioned variation between executive and non-executive postures alongside alignment with IASC notions of protection; the AU’s profile combines strong regional commitments with heterogeneous implementation across theaters. The sources supporting these judgements are the UN PoC policy series

(2010/2015/2019/2023), NATO’s 2016 policy and subsequent implementation material, EU CSDP practice as illustrated by EUFOR Chad/CAR and definitional alignment to IASC, and AU guidelines and AMISOM/ATMIS practice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE.

Strengthening Protection of Civilians (PoC) in the Western Hemisphere is best pursued through institutions that already convene defense, public-security and civil-protection communities – principally the Organization of American States (OAS) and its technical arms, including the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB) and the Inter-

¹ UN DPO, “Policy for The PoC in United Nations Peacekeeping,” 6; NATO, “Preparing to Protect: Advice on Implementing NATO’s Protection of Civilians Policy”; CSDN, “PoC: Key International Debates and the Role

of the EU”; EU, “Concept on PoC (PoC) in EU-Led Military Operations”; AU, “Draft Guidelines for the PoC in African Union Peace Support Operations”.

American Defense College (IADC). Read considering the comparative findings, three levers recur across settings in the Americas: a common justificatory baseline that travels across audiences; constituency-building through integrated doctrine and training; and rule-consistent conduct in dense urban theaters backed by durable implementation architectures. Substantive alignment with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's understanding of protection – as securing full respect for individuals' rights under IHL, HRL and refugee law – offers a workable definitional anchor for mandates, plans and public communication in the Hemisphere and facilitates coordination with humanitarian counterparts (see Table 2, Validity).

The first avenue for adoption is the recalibration of justificatory language in hemispheric instruments. UN policy wording that requires action “without prejudice to the primary responsibility of the host state” while preserving the authority to employ “all necessary means” within the mandate provides a template that both affirms state primacy and enables timely protective action against imminent threats¹. Transposed into OAS-endorsed guidance, this formula reduces political contestation over perceived over-reach and clarifies for operational commands how protection authority coexists with host-state consent. In practice, such language belongs not only in high-level mandates but also in planning directives, legal annexes and public information lines of effort (see Table 2, Validity).

A second avenue is constituency-building through integrated doctrine and training. Comparative experience shows that whole-of-mission arrangements – mission-wide PoC strategies, component-specific task matrices and common reporting cadences – are practical enablers of robust protection rather than administrative preferences. The IADB/IADC ecosystem can translate those lessons into joint curricula and operational playbooks designed for mixed deployments across the Americas, ensuring that civilian, police and military components co-own planning, tasking and

reporting cycles². Practitioner analyses of UN peacekeeping underline that institutionalized integration sustains protection effects beyond episodic initiatives, a finding directly applicable to OAS-facilitated exercises and refresher modules³ (see Table 2, Social acceptance).

A third avenue concerns rule-consistent conduct in urban and peri-urban theaters. CHM repertoires – weapon-selection constraints, collateral-damage estimation (CDE) methods, no-strike lists and tactical directives constraining the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects near concentrations of civilians – reduce incidental harm and protect mission legitimacy⁴. The evidence based on risks posed by such weapons in populated areas supports early integration of CHM into planning and the routinization of incident reporting capable of triggering rapid adjustments in conduct. NATO's experience with tactical directives shows how to operationalize these repertoires; regionally adapted limits and procedures, socialized via OAS/IADB training and legal guidance, would raise baseline performance across the Hemisphere without importing institutional templates wholesale⁵ (see Table 2, Rule-consistent practice).

Implementation durability requires architectures that outlive rotations and political cycles. Where advisers or focal points have clear remits, reporting lines are routine, and after-action reviews (AAR) and lessons-learned products are mandated and circulated, protection outcomes improve and learning loops become self-reinforcing. The UN policy series demonstrates how repeated codification and mission-level guidance can create enabling conditions; an OAS-centered approach can scale this logic by promulgating minimalist reporting formats, sequencing joint scenario-based exercises (urban crisis; disaster response with security externalities; cyber-physical disruption) and issuing periodic protection summaries aggregating national inputs for decision-makers. Comparative work on multilateral practice suggests that overlapping memberships and institutional borrowing can be harnessed to align justificatory

¹ UN DPO, “Policy for The PoC in United Nations Peacekeeping,” 6.

² OAS, “Statutes of the Inter-American Defense Board (AG/RES. I (XXXII-E/06))”; (IADC). “Regulation of the Inter-American Defense College”.

³ UN DPO, “Protection of Civilians (POC) — Implementing Guidelines for the Military Component”, “The Future of United Nations Peace Operations — Issue Paper Compendium”.

⁴ UNODA, “Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas”.

⁵ NATO. “AJP-3.19 Allied Joint Doctrine for Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC)”; “NATO Policy for the Protection of Civilians”; OAS. “Annual Report 2023 of the Inter-American Defense Board (CP/49506)”.

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frames and vocabulary while preserving diversity in instruments and authorities – an alignment task well suited to OAS fora¹ (see Table 2, Implementation).

Several initiatives can carry these levers into practice. Adopted models include the UN PoC policy series and mission-wide integration practices that can be adapted to inter-American guidance notes and training syllabi, as well as NATO-style tactical directives constraining effects near civilians, which can inform doctrinal limits in urban policing-military coordination. In progress, the IADC’s curricular capacity and the IADB’s doctrine/lessons-learned cells are natural hubs for a hemispheric PoC module that couples legal framing with CHM repertoires and incident reporting. Prospectively, an OAS-endorsed “PoC guidance note” could fix common terminology, minimum mitigation standards and reporting baselines; a lightweight, region-wide incident-reporting schema could standardize data across agencies; and a semi-annual “hemispheric protection summary” could consolidate trends to inform training calendars and planning assumptions. These initiatives are consistent with the definitional anchor provided by IASC, the prudential case for EWIPA constraints, and the codification/learning logic present in UN guidance.

In Haiti, where stabilization efforts confront fragmented armed actors and dense urban terrain, a PoC package anchored in host-state primacy and necessary-means authority would clarify the legal-moral space for action while preserving consent. Integrated training lines – co-owned by Haitian authorities and hemispheric partners – would translate that framing into tasking and reporting for mixed police–military deployments. CHM repertoires would prioritize restrictions on explosive effects near civilians, CDE routines proportionate to the threat environment, and incident-reporting drills enabling rapid tactical adjustments. The UN policy series provides the codification logic for such architecture; practitioner work on UN integration supports the need for whole-of-mission arrangements to sustain

protection effects in Port-au-Prince’s dense neighborhoods² (see Table 2, Social acceptance; Rule-consistent practice).

In the Venezuelan humanitarian crisis, where mass displacement generates cross-border protection needs, a non-executive, coordination-heavy translation of PoC is indicated. A shared working definition aligned with IASC would stabilize vocabulary across border agencies, police, civil-protection bodies and humanitarian actors. Minimalist incident-reporting mechanisms would document protection-relevant events – attacks on migrants, obstruction of humanitarian assistance, disruption of essential services – feeding joint planning and review cycles. Training calendars could prioritize cross-border liaison procedures, safe-movement corridor design and information-sharing triggers. The prudential case for constraining area-effect munitions remains salient for contingency planning in populated corridors; meanwhile, UN-style codification of roles and reporting would enhance predictability and social acceptance on both sides of borders³ (see Table 2, Validity; Implementation).

Table 2 – Hemispheric Adaptation Matrix (OAS-integrated)

Robustness dimension	Concrete action lines (Hemisphere)	Proposed lead institutions (OAS & partners)	Example indicators (minimum set)	Illustrative hemispheric initiatives (adopted / in progress / prospective)
Validity (justificatory framing)	Fix a common PoC definition aligned with IASC; merge UN host-state “all necessary means” clauses in mandates, OPLANs and legal annexes; standardize public-communication phrasing.	OAS General Secretariat (legal & security branches); Ministries of Foreign Affairs/Justice; IADB legal cell; national legal advisers.	OAS guidance note issued; % plans citing host-state/necessary-means clauses; public communications using harmonized phrasing.	Adopted: UN PoC policy series as template. In progress: IADC legal/operational modules. Prospective: OAS “PoC guidance note” fixing terminology and legal language.
Social acceptance (constituency & training)	Institutionalize whole-of-mission planning/reporting; embed PoC modules in joint curricula; appoint PoC focal points across civilian, police and military components; convene OAS humanitarian dialogue.	IADB/IADC; national joint staff colleges; police academies; humanitarian coordination cells.	# personnel trained/quarter; # organizations with PoC focal points; % operations with integrated PoC annex and shared reporting cadence.	Adopted: UN integration practices. In progress: IADC joint PoC course. Prospective: OAS yearly PoC exercise series (urban crisis / disaster response / cyber-physical disruption).
Rule-consistent practice (compliance)	Mainstream CHM repertoires (targeting constraints, CDE, no-strike lists); issue tactical directives limiting EWIPA near civilians; standardize incident reporting with rapid-adjustment drills.	Defense/general staffs; OAS security branch; operational commands; legal advisers/oversight offices.	% ops with CDE documented; # tactical directives issued/updated; median time incident–initial report; % incidents with mitigation follow-up.	Adopted: NATO-style tactical directives; ICRC EWIPA guidance. In progress: IADC CHM SOP at IADB doctrine cell. Prospective: OAS incident-reporting schema for police/armed forces/civil-protection.
Implementation (institutions/tools)	Issue standing guidance suites; assign advisers/focal points; mandate AAR and lessons-learned notes.	OAS/IADB doctrine & lessons-learned cells; national policy.	# guidance updates/year; % operations with AAR ≤30 days; # lessons.	Adopted: UN codification and mission-level guidance. In progress:

Source: The Authors
Abbreviations: IASC = Inter-Agency Standing Committee; IADB = Inter-American Defense Board; IADC = Inter-American Defense College; PoC = Protection of Civilians; CHM = Civilian-Harm Mitigation; CDE = Collateral-Damage Estimation; EWIPA = Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas; AAR = After-Action Review.

¹ IACHR/CIDH. “Report on Citizen Security and Human Rights (OEA/Ser.L/V/II)”;

Oksamytna, Kseniya; Wilén, Nina, “Adoption, Adaptation or Chance? Inter-Organizational Diffusion of the Protection of Civilians Norm from the UN to the African Union”

² UNSC, “Resolution 2699”; BINUH/OHCHR, “Quarterly Report on the Human Rights Situation in Haiti: October–December 2024”; OHCHR,

“Situation of human rights in Haiti — Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights”.

³ R4V. “Movements Report: First Quarter 2025”; R4V/UNHCR. “Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela — Figures”.

MAIN CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE POC NORMATIVE COMPARISON

This article argued that Protection of Civilians (PoC) travels across organizations as a normative complex whose robustness turns on the coherence of justificatory frames, the breadth of social acceptance, the regularity of rule-consistent practice and the density of implementation arrangements. Read through that lens, the trajectories of the United Nations (UN), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the European Union (EU) and the African Union (AU) display a recognizable family resemblance anchored in a moral-legal imperative to protect, while preserving distinctive profiles that follow from their mandates, instruments and theaters of action. The comparative analysis has shown durable convergence on baseline commitments together with patterned divergence in thresholds for the use of force, CHM repertoires and the maturity of review and learning architectures¹.

Two contributions stand out. First, the

“Protecting civilians matters”

robustness framework affords an integrated way to connect texts to conduct, avoiding both purely doctrinal readings and purely operational inventories. By tying justificatory claims to evidence of uptake, behavior and institutionalization, the approach clarifies where PoC is consolidated and where it remains contingent. UN policy’s articulation of action “without prejudice to the primary responsibility of the host state” together with authority to use “all necessary means” within mandate and capabilities has proved consequential for calibrating legitimate, timely protection effects in complex settings². Second, a focus on implementation density draws attention to enabling architectures, advisers and focal points, mission-wide strategies and directives, routinized reporting, and lessons-learned products, whose presence correlates with more stable protection performance over time. Practitioner analyses of whole-of-mission

integration reinforce this link between form and function³.

The translation of these findings to the Western Hemisphere underscored the value of a shared definitional baseline aligned with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) understanding of protection. Such alignment reduces lexical fragmentation across defense, public-security and civil-protection institutions and facilitates coordination with humanitarian actors. In urban and peri-urban theaters typical of the region, a prudential approach to explosive weapons with wide-area effects – bounded by tactical directives, weapon-selection constraints and CDE – emerges as both a legal expectation and a political necessity for sustaining legitimacy⁴.

At the organizational level, the analysis highlighted how overlapping memberships and inter-organizational exchange generate diffusion without erasing necessary differentiation. This has practical implications for hemispheric governance: regional venues can be used to align justificatory

frames and vocabulary while preserving mandate-specific instruments. The OAS/IADB/IADC ecosystem offers a natural scaffold for doctrine, training and data standards capable of carrying UN- and NATO-derived good practice into inter-American settings without importing institutional templates wholesale. The Hemispheric Adaptation Matrix (Table 2) distilled these lines of effort into concrete action lines – terminology and legal framing; constituency-building and training; CHM/targeting/incident reporting; and advisers/focal points/lessons-learned – with proposed lead institutions and minimum indicators. If useful to readers, a compact visual summary of this matrix could be added; otherwise, the discursive treatment herein is sufficient for publication.

The illustrative applications to Haiti and to the Venezuelan humanitarian crisis were chosen to

¹ IPI. “Protection of Civilians in Partnership Peacekeeping”

² UN DPKO, “Operational Concept on the PoC in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations,” 10; UN DPO, “Policy for The PoC in United Nations Peacekeeping,” 6. UN DPO, “Policy for The PoC in United Nations Peacekeeping,” 6.

³ Weir, “The Integration of Civilian, Military, and Police Components in Peace Operations: Lessons from the UN Experience”

⁴ IASC. “Protection: Definition and Guidance Overview.”; ICRC. “Explosive Weapons with Wide Area Effects: A Deadly Choice in Populated Areas.”; NATO. “Preparing to Protect: Advice on Implementing NATO’s Protection of Civilians Policy.”.

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show how a single set of principles adapts to executive and non-executive contexts. In Haiti, where stabilization efforts confront fragmented armed actors in dense urban terrain, the host-state/necessary-means pairing clarifies the legal-moral space for action while preserving consent; integrated planning and CHM repertoires raise the probability of timely, legitimate protective effects in Port-au-Prince's neighborhoods¹. In the Venezuelan displacement emergency, a coordination-heavy translation of PoC – common terminology, minimalist incident reporting and cross-border liaison procedures – can stabilize expectations and improve review cycles without relying on coercive authority².

Limitations should be acknowledged. Public availability of planning and targeting guidance is uneven; mission-level heterogeneity persists within each organization; and publication lags may obscure recent adjustments. These constraints were mitigated by version control, triangulation and preference for consolidated instruments, but they nonetheless bound the generality of some claims.

Future work can deepen measurement, linking incident registers to planning decisions and public reporting; map mission-level variance within organizations more finely and evaluate interoperability gains from harmonized terminology and CHM repertoires in hemispheric exercises³. Each strand speaks directly to the review and learning architectures that, in our comparison, distinguish settings where PoC has become practice rather than promise⁴.

In sum, the article proposes a way of seeing PoC that preserves its normative core while making its practice tractable. By holding together validity, acceptance, compliance and implementation, the framework makes visible the institutional work through which protection becomes actionable. Comparative evidence suggests that this work is cumulative and teachable. In the Americas, where

complex emergencies sit at the intersection of public security, defense and civil protection, that conclusion invites a practical agenda: consolidate language, train together, constrain effects near civilians, and learn systematically – the four moves captured in Table 2 – thereby converting shared commitments into repeatable protection outcomes.

¹ UN DPKO, "Operational Concept on the PoC in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations", 10; UN DPO, "Policy for The PoC in United Nations Peacekeeping", 6; UN DPO, "Policy for The PoC in United Nations Peacekeeping", 6; Weir, "The Integration of Civilian, Military, and Police Components in Peace Operations: Lessons from the UN Experience"; ICRC. The applicability of international humanitarian law to modern conflicts."

² IASC, "Protection: Definition and Guidance Overview."

³ UN DPO, "The Future of United Nations Peace Operations — Issue Paper Compendium"

⁴ UN DPKO, "Operational Concept on the Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations", 10; UN DPO, "Policy for the Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping", 6; UN DPO, "Policy for the Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping", 6; Weir, "The Integration of Civilian, Military, and Police Components in Peace Operations: Lessons from the UN Experience"; ICRC. The applicability of international humanitarian law to modern conflicts."

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