know intimately that they are engaging in exactly the kind of “bottom-up peace-building efforts” that Autesserre finds lacking. In Mali, I visited a farm near the city of Gao where UN peacekeepers have installed an irrigation system, turning formerly arid acres into a green oasis. There, young people learn to farm, an alternative to joining the extremist groups that surround the area, and families grow food for themselves and for local markets. Other UN agencies, particularly the World Food Program, are also taking a bottom-up approach in Mali. The WFP works in more than 40 communities throughout Mali, partnering with local people who determine themselves what their most critical needs are. Working together with the people, the WFP helps build the projects the communities have identified as essential.

But what struck me most about Autesserre’s article was that some of her criticisms have also been made by UN Secretary-General António Guterres. In fact, they form the basis of his reform plan, Action for Peacekeeping, which has been endorsed by 151 member states. Autesserre writes that “UN peacekeepers often fail to meet their most basic objectives”; after the secretary-general suggested “re-centering” peacekeeping on more realistic expectations, member states agreed to “commit to clear, focused, sequenced, prioritized and achievable mandates.” She also claims that the UN “has a cookie-cutter approach that begins with international best practices and tries to apply them to a local situation”; Guterres’ reform plan commits member states “to support tailored, context-specific peacekeeping approaches to protecting civilians.” She
argues that “empowering average citizens” is one path to peace; Guterres’ plan addresses this point directly, pledging “the inclusion and engagement of civil society and all segments of the local population in peacekeeping mandate implementation.”

Although I disagree with her assessment of the UN’s track record, Autesserre is right on several points. Peacekeeping surely is one of the hardest jobs in the world. The ratio between the number of peacekeepers and the size of the population or territory they oversee is often wildly out of whack. Finally, we agree that peacekeeping is imperfect, in need of improvement, and invaluable. That is the driving force behind the UN’s efforts to reform it.

PETER YEO
President, Better World Campaign

Autesserre replies:
I agree with Peter Yeo that UN peacekeeping missions serve U.S. interests (as well as the interests of other countries) and that the UN itself is an essential tool in the search for a better world. But Yeo’s argument rests on several mischaracterizations and misconceptions.

The research on peacekeeping is hardly as unanimously positive as Yeo argues. There is in fact a huge debate among experts about the track record of peacekeeping missions. Estimates of the rate of failure vary by the source from 15 percent to 75 percent; it all depends on the definitions of “peace” and “success” that the researchers use.

As far as elections go, the scholarly literature shows that countries transitioning from autocracy to democracy
are more prone to war than either established democracies or established dictatorships. Statistically speaking, promoting democracy in places recovering from conflict increases the risk that they will return to violence, rather than helping them on the road to stability.

In terms of Guterres’ reform plan, it is just that: a declaration of intention, of the kind that has already been seen many times over the past few years. (For instance, the report that the UN’s High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations released in 2015 made the same points.) What matters is not what leaders say but whether their pledges are actually implemented. And as of now, all these plans remain in the realm of declarations, talks, reports—good intentions, but not real actions on the ground.

There are indeed plenty of examples of the kind of bottom-up peace efforts that I advocate in my article, but they remain rare within UN peacekeeping missions. A case in point: of the two examples that Yeo gives, one is actually implemented by the WFP—a UN development agency, but not a peacekeeping body. In fact, the vast majority of the successful bottom-up peace initiatives that I’ve found, and that I am analyzing in my forthcoming book On the Frontlines of Peace, are led by non-UN groups.

It is true that certain peacekeepers do try to support grass-roots efforts—in eastern Congo and in the Central African Republic, for instance. Some of them, there and elsewhere, also challenge the common idea that outsiders know best and try to put local actors in the driver’s seat. But such people remain a minority both among UN peacekeepers as a whole and within their own missions. Worse, the peacekeepers who do try to implement locally led initiatives face countless impediments from their colleagues and superiors, who argue that the UN’s only legitimate role is to interact with national governments and elites, building peace from the top down.

FOR THE RECORD
An article by Jill Lepore (“A New Americanism,” March/April 2019) misidentified the U.S. president who began building the liberal international order after World War II. It was Harry Truman, not Franklin Roosevelt.

An article by Henri Barkey (“The Kurdish Awakening,” March/April 2019) gave the wrong date for the election in which the Kurdish-dominated Peoples’ Democratic Party won 102 municipalities. The elections took place in March 2014, not July 2016.

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