



# The Political Practice of Peacekeeping

HOW STRATEGIES FOR PEACE  
OPERATIONS ARE DEVELOPED  
AND IMPLEMENTED

*By*

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## About the Project

This project aims to provide the UN and its partners with clear, evidence-based approaches for facilitating political resolutions to conflict and a rigorous methodology for assessing the impact of political interventions. United Nations University Centre for Policy Research and the Stimson Center, with the support of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, undertook this project to translate the core political commitments of Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) into a set of viable, effective policies and practices. This is the first joint project between United Nations University Centre for Policy Research and Stimson Center and draws on reviews of peace operations, interviews with key stakeholders and a comparison across different settings, to describe how mission leaders have translated broad political language into political engagement strategies, Mission Concepts, and approaches across the UN family in-country, with recommendations and resources for decision-making. Drawing on existing methodologies in the social sciences and the development fields, the project has also developed an Assessment Tool with key metrics for peace operations to evaluate their political engagement.


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# The Political Practice of Peacekeeping

The 2018 Action for Peacekeeping Declaration (A4P) commits UN peace operations to pursue political objectives based on integrated strategies and solutions. This emphasis on political solutions echoes the widely-accepted mantra of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO), which proposed that peace operations undergo a fundamental shift towards the primacy of politics.<sup>1</sup> While there is broad agreement on the need to place political outcomes at the centre of peacekeeping, there is little consensus on what “politics” means in practice. This is in part because political engagement is by nature elusive and often opaque, done behind closed doors or within a constellation of other actors. Lacking a common understanding, the UN and its partners have tended to accept the notion of political primacy without interrogating what it means in practice. As a result, the ways in which the UN develops and implements politically-led strategies are poorly understood.

This policy paper was supported by the Government of the Netherlands, developed in consultation with the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO), and refined during an expert roundtable event in June 2020.<sup>2</sup> It examines the **political practice of peacekeeping**, the ways in which missions, the UN Secretariat and the Security Council work to articulate mandated political objectives at a strategic level. Drawing on the internal strategies of peace operations, interviews with senior UN officials involved in peacekeeping, and in-country research of the authors, the paper compares the practices of the five major peacekeeping missions today (the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo – MONUSCO; the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic – MINUSCA; the United Nations Mission in South Sudan – UNMISS; the

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United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali – MINUSMA; and the United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur – UNAMID).<sup>3</sup> It describes how strategies have been developed amongst the Security Council, the UN Secretariat, and mission leaders. On this basis, it offers evidence-based recommendations for improved mandating by the Council, more effective strategy development by UN Headquarters and missions, and greater impact in the implementation of peacekeeping mandates in the field.<sup>4</sup>

The paper is divided into four sections. First, it proposes a working definition of “political solution,” a surprisingly slippery term in the context of peace operations, but necessary as a baseline to analyse mission strategies. Second, it describes the mission mandating process, outlining the current guidelines for translating Council mandates into strategies. Third, based on a cross-mission comparison, it identifies key conflict trends that have shaped how the Security Council, the Secretariat, and missions envision the work of peacekeeping today. Drawing on the five case studies in this report, the final section offers lessons for how Security Council members, policymakers, and mission leadership can improve the political practice of peacekeeping.



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# Defining “Political Solution”

The UN has no formal definition of the terms “political” or “political solution.” In fact, the Preparatory Commission for the UN Charter effectively begged the question, giving the Secretary-General “a role to play as a mediator and as an informal advisor ... to take decisions which may be justly called political.”<sup>5</sup> This so-called “Good Offices” function of the Secretary-General has never been formalized and, according to Teresa Whitfield, can mean “almost anything – from a well-timed telephone call by the Secretary-General, to exploratory conversations, or a full-fledged mediation effort conducted in his or her name.”<sup>6</sup> Ian Johnstone has offered an equally broad definition of the Good Offices role of the Secretary-General, as “everything the UN can do of a diplomatic nature to help prevent, manage or resolve conflicts.”<sup>7</sup>

In the first decades of the UN, the Secretary-General employed the Good Offices role to address a wide range of political crises, including the 1950 invasion of South Korea by North Korea, the 1956 Suez crisis and repeated efforts to resolve the Greek/Turkish dispute over Cyprus.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, the Good Offices

role has not been restricted to the Secretary-General, but is delegated to the various special representatives and envoys, including the heads of peace operations.<sup>9</sup> Today, the 13 peacekeeping missions and 24 special political missions of the UN all possess, either explicitly or implicitly, the Secretary-General’s Good Offices function.<sup>10</sup>

What it means to exercise that political function, however, is a difficult question lacking a clear doctrine or practice within the UN.<sup>11</sup> In 2015, the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) offered a partial definition, largely by opposing politics to military and technical activities:

Lasting peace is not achieved nor sustained by military and technical engagements, but through political solutions. The primacy of politics should be the hallmark of the approach of the United Nations to the resolution of conflict, during mediation, the monitoring of ceasefires, assistance to the implementation of peace accords, the management of violent conflicts and longer-term efforts at sustaining peace.<sup>12</sup>

Here, the HIPPO report adds a range of activities that embody the primacy of politics, including dialogue with parties, exploration of alternatives to violence, promotion of human rights, crafting solutions for conflicts, and supporting peace processes.<sup>13</sup> It concludes that “[t]he main effort of any peace operation must be to focus international attention, leverage and resources on supporting national actors ... to restore peace, address underlying conflict drivers and meet the legitimate interests of the wider population, not just a small elite.”<sup>14</sup>

Jean Arnault, one of the authors of the HIPPO report, clarified what was meant by the term “politics” in this context, stating simply “the search for negotiated solutions to conflicts.”<sup>15</sup> In this, he contrasted political solutions to military operations, counter-insurgency campaigns, and efforts to extend State authority.<sup>16</sup> The HIPPO’s first concern, Arnault wrote, “is to reconnect the use of force with the politics of peaceful settlements as a pre-condition for deployment.”<sup>17</sup> Importantly, the “primacy of politics” mentioned in the HIPPO report does not mean that political affairs sections should be higher in the mission’s hierarchy (and here the use of “politics” rather than “political” is relevant), but rather that the overarching political solution should be the reference point for the work of a mission.

These descriptions offer helpful clues as to the substance of the term “political solution” in a peacekeeping context. But they also tend to dodge the question, framing the political negatively as “not military or technical” rather than providing a positive definition. The Action for Peacekeeping Declaration suffers from the same shortcomings, committing only to “stronger engagement to advance political solutions to conflict and to pursue complementary political objectives and integrated strategies.”<sup>18</sup>

Drawing from the HIPPO report, and based on wide-ranging interviews with former and current UN leaders and experts, we propose the following working definition for the term “political solution”:

A political solution in a peace operations context is one where parties reach negotiated, inclusive agreements to halt the killing and attempt to address the major grievances that triggered the violent

conflict or are likely to trigger further violent conflict. As such, a political solution offers a comprehensive framework for a sustainable transition to peace, and a clear set of commonly agreed elements for achieving it.

Under this definition, ceasefires or cessations of hostilities typically would only be part of broader political solutions, unless they were considered sufficient to sustainably end a conflict; likewise, the protection of civilians, stabilization and State-building could be part of a political solution, but would not in and of themselves constitute one. In line with the HIPPO report, this definition demands that a political solution be negotiated, not merely the outcome of force, and that it be inclusive, representing more than just the interests of the belligerents.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, it allows for military and technical engagements that could be used to incentivize parties to reach a political solution.

Having a working definition of a political solution does not solve the deeper substantive questions of what is needed to resolve conflicts (and some experts suggested that too formulaic a definition could inhibit the work of peacekeeping), but it helps to clarify other related definitions in this report. “Political primacy” means placing the political solution at the centre of the work of a peace operation and articulating how all other mission activities would contribute to that solution.

It is worth a final note on the term “political strategy.” This report focuses on the translation from a Security Council mandate to a mission strategy. We use the term “strategy” broadly, given the range of documents that might constitute a strategy within the UN system. For example, today’s peacekeeping missions are required to have a Mission Concept, a document that should provide strategic guidance on the basis of the Council mandate. Some missions have also developed documents entitled “political strategies” or “mission plans”, which are not required and may not conform to the precise requirements of UN guidance on Mission Concepts, but which may well move the mission closer to the kind of political primacy envisioned by HIPPO. A broad use of the term “strategy” allows us to consider all approaches used by missions.



## II

# From Mandate to Strategy

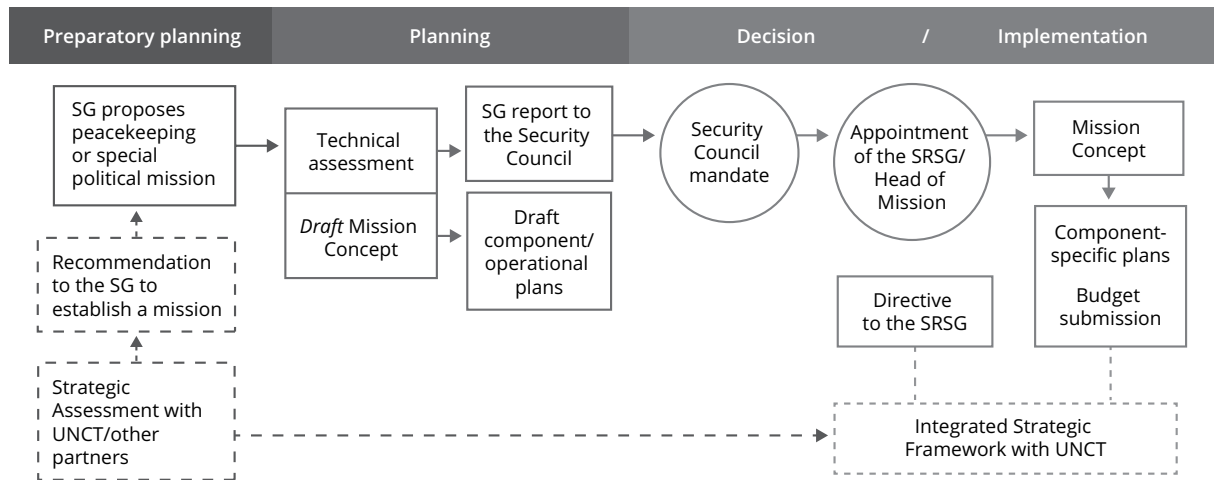
The principal focus of this project is how a political strategy can be developed amongst the Security Council, the UN Secretariat, and mission leadership. The 2014 UN guidance on the preparation of a Mission Concept details the linear path of this process, which begins with preparatory/planning phases by the Secretariat, then a Security Council mandate, and finally the development of a Mission Concept after appointment of a Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG).

The roles and responsibilities are meant to be fairly clear under this guidance: Unless otherwise indicated, the mission leadership is responsible for developing and executing the Mission Concept, on the basis of an SRSG directive issued either at the outset of a new mission or following a substantial change in mandate.<sup>20</sup> The Mission Concept is a strategic planning document, which should lay out the vision of the mission, how it will

implement the Council mandate, prioritization of tasks and guidance to mission entities on how to accomplish the strategy. The 2014 guidance replaced the 2010 Integrated Mission Planning Process guidelines and earlier requirements on missions to establish mission-wide plans, some of which were in place during the earlier moments of our case studies. As of the writing of this report, there was new draft guidance in development by DPO, which would shift the responsibility to develop the Mission Concept from missions to the UN Secretariat, also requiring that Mission Concepts develop a “broad political direction” to guide its mandate implementation.<sup>21</sup>

In practice, however, the pathways from a Security Council mandate to a mission strategy vary significantly from mission to mission, and indeed, vary at different moments in the same mission. In some cases, a peacekeeping operation had no mission-wide strategy for

## Pathway of a Mission Concept (from 2014 Mission Concept Guidelines)



years or maintained outdated strategies long after they were rendered redundant. In others, the Secretariat used its regular reporting to the Council to provide strategic guidance to the mission without developing a Mission Concept. Mission Concepts themselves also vary widely: some clearly articulate the overarching political objectives of the mission, whereas others are an operational implementation plan, more akin to a results-based budget.

As discussed below, process matters and can have a significant impact on the substance of the strategy and on how it is received by those implementing it. The diversity of approaches across missions offers an opportunity to gain insight into what kinds of processes might produce the most effective strategies for achieving the Security Council's intended objectives.



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# III Trends in Peacekeeping

The mandates and strategic planning for peacekeeping missions have been strongly influenced by the changing character of armed conflict, especially over the past 10-12 years. This section briefly overviews some of the most important trends in violent conflict, and their impact on the scope and focus of peacekeeping. It finds that the growing complexity and intractability of today's conflicts have led to an increasing security/stability focus by UN peacekeeping, potentially (though not necessarily) allowing less space for political engagement. The trend to deploy peacekeepers into settings without viable peace processes—and often during large-scale conflict—has also complicated the UN's political role, though in some cases this has allowed for entrepreneurial approaches to peacemaking by missions.

Over the past decade, the rate of major civil wars has tripled, driven by the growing role of non-State actors, the greater impact of large-

scale violent extremism, and the influence of transnational criminal networks.<sup>22</sup> Many of today's internal conflicts are deeply regionalized, as neighbours, regional and international players use proxy forces to gain influence. Modern conflict also suffers from far higher rates of relapse than earlier eras: roughly 60 per cent of conflicts from the early 2000s have relapsed.<sup>23</sup> These trends have contributed to historic levels of conflict-related displacement and far higher numbers of civilians caught up and targeted in violent conflict.<sup>24</sup> Today's violent conflicts are deadlier to civilians and more intractable than ever before.

These trends have had several impacts on UN peacekeeping. Firstly, today's conflicts present a greater risk profile to UN peacekeepers, especially in areas affected by violent extremism. In recent years, the UN has been more regularly and directly targeted, taking on greater casualties and needing to take more steps to protect their

own personnel.<sup>25</sup> Facing the highest toll of peacekeepers in recent history, UN missions have, in some settings, become more focused on their own security (and indeed in protecting other UN activities in country) and less able to interact freely with local populations.<sup>26</sup> The question of “bunkerization” and the effect of reduced contact with local communities is relevant for political engagement strategies.

Second, UN peacekeeping is more frequently confronted with settings of “no peace to keep,” where belligerents have not fully laid down arms, peace agreements are either incomplete or lapsed and/or the more traditional functions of peacekeeping are less relevant. This reflects a willingness of Security Council members to authorize peacekeeping in areas of sudden or protracted conflict with fewer assurances that the presence of a mission will lead to a comprehensive or sustainable peace. The absence of viable peace processes, combined with open violent conflict, has meant that UN missions have been directed to prioritize activities like the protection of civilians, stabilization and even neutralization of armed groups. In places like the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan, the protection of civilians has become the highest priority for UN missions, especially as peace processes have either languished or lapsed.<sup>27</sup>

Third, the growth of civil wars as the major form of violent conflict has meant that host States are necessarily belligerents in conflicts involving their own citizens. Not only have long-standing civil wars contributed to a decline in the basic governance capacities of States, but they place the UN in a difficult position vis-à-vis their host governments. **At times needing to protect civilians from their own governments, while also required to operate with host State consent, UN peace operations have found themselves caught in extraordinarily difficult situations.** These settings have also strained the UN’s typical approaches of building State capacity and extending State authority: in active civil war, these activities can become polarizing, leading populations to question the UN’s impartiality or, inadvertently, having the UN bolster a State’s ability to continue the use of violence. When the

UN does not support the government directly, or calls them out for their actions, unhappy governments may stonewall UN leaders and threaten to withdraw consent for the mission.

Fourth, the regionalization of civil wars has contributed to a proliferation of actors involved in making peace, including some well outside the affected region. As shown in the case studies below, today’s peacekeeping contexts are a crowded playing field, where envoys, regional organizations, neighbouring capitals, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and financial institutions jostle for position. Often, the UN’s role in a peace process may appear relatively small, defined in terms of technical and logistical support or Good Offices. At the same time, UN peacekeeping missions may be massive players in country, spending billions on their deployment, providing development and humanitarian support to tens of thousands of people and maintaining presence across much wider areas of the country than other actors. Here, the logistics arm of peace operations can play important roles, enabling actors to travel around difficult to access regions, connecting parties that would otherwise be isolated and moving key resources into inaccessible areas.

Finally, in recent years great power competition has spilled over into the Security Council, repeatedly undermining the UN’s ability to respond effectively to major (and some minor) conflicts. The Council’s failure to halt brutal wars in Yemen and Syria, its paralysis in the face of the conflict in Ukraine, and its deep divisions over global security issues like Iran’s nuclear weapons have rendered it largely irrelevant to many of today’s most serious conflicts.<sup>28</sup> While the Council has maintained relative unity on existing peacekeeping operations, tensions have crept in to disrupt cohesive approaches to conflict. Moreover, increased arrears in peacekeeping assessments (over USD \$1 billion) and the steady downward pressure on budgets for the UN has meant that peacekeeping has faced a sceptical (internal and external) audience, resulting in more than USD \$1 billion reduction in the peacekeeping budget in the past few years alone.



## IV

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# Lessons from the Case Studies

In this context, we examined the five largest peacekeeping operations deployed today—UNMISS, MONUSCO, MINUSCA, MINUSMA and UNAMID—asking how the missions developed new political strategies at key moments in their lifespans. Based on the five case studies, we have extracted the following lessons and recommendations that have broad applicability across peace operations.

### 1 Strategy should feed mandates

Security Council mandates are often seen as the source or starting point for political strategies but experience suggests that the flow should

be reversed. A strategic vision—based on in-country assessments and early and ongoing engagement—should feed the Council’s initial and subsequent mandates for a peace operation. In this context, the UN should consider formally implementing a proposal, outlined in the HIPPO report, to institute two-step mandating, deploying a small advance mission to scope out issues and help build toward a well-informed vision for the eventual peace operation mandate. This is consistent with the Stimson Center’s recommendation that the prioritization and sequencing of peacekeeping missions’ activities should be understood as a field-driven process facilitated by Security Council mandates, rather than a Council-driven process.<sup>29</sup> It also accords

with a key theme in the June 2020 expert roundtable organized for this project, that there is a distinction between grand strategy (based on a broad vision for the country, drawn from deep knowledge of that setting) and a more operational mission implementation strategy to drive day-to-day activities.

## **2 Peace agreements matter – but they have their limits**

Across the cases, the presence of a peace agreement played a significant role in how a mission's mandate was developed and implemented. The UN mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), for example, benefited from a far clearer political role when it was articulated within the regionally agreed upon 2003 peace agreement and then incorporated into the Council's mandate. Following the 2006 elections, however, the formal political transitional period for the DRC ended and left the Council somewhat adrift in terms of the peacekeeping mission's overall goals. The result was an ever-increasing mandate that responded to continued killing in eastern Congo, stretching into areas like security sector reform and stabilization, without an overarching political vision for the mission. Similarly, the mission in Darfur was plagued from the outset by an unfinished peace process with little buy-in from the major parties. While the Darfur Peace Agreement provided an initial basis for deploying UNAMID, it offered a poor starting point for articulating a clear role for the mission. As a result, the mission spent much of its lifespan without a political strategy, providing technical and logistical support to a process that had little chance of success. In South Sudan too, the collapse of the initial political arrangement and lack of a viable peace agreement at key junctures of UNMISS' lifespan is highlighted in the case study as a major impediment to a political role for the mission.

However, the presence of a peace agreement is not a prerequisite for a meaningful political role. In both Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR), peacekeeping missions were deployed alongside negotiations but before peace agreements were reached. In Mali, the mission was able to carve out a role gradually,

by supporting elections and a set of consultations to understand why previous peace processes had failed. These steps paved the way to a 2015 peace agreement, which provided a clear role for MINUSMA. Similarly in CAR, MINUSCA's initial political efforts were heavily focused on electoral support and halting mass atrocities in the short-term, with very little vision of a broader political solution. This initial engagement, however, created space for the mission to play an instrumental role in an inclusive national dialogue and elections in 2015-6. These efforts, in turn, set off broader processes that ultimately led to the signing of a peace agreement in 2019, again providing a clear role for MINUSCA that could be captured in a Council mandate.

These varied experiences suggest that the absence of a peace agreement does not necessarily preclude a political strategy and role for peacekeeping. Many agreements falter, or fail to include key parties, and do not result in an end to widespread killing or civilian protection. In fact, a non-viable or insincere peace agreement (such as in Darfur) may make it harder for missions to facilitate political solutions than the absence of a peace agreement. At times, signing a weak agreement can reduce international pressure and give parties plausible excuses to stall, miring the UN in processes without progress. In some instances, having a substantive but small political role (such as support to elections) may create more opportunities for missions to have meaningful political influence than under a peace agreement.

## **3 A strong analytic basis for strategy**

In light of peace agreements' limitations, they should not be the starting point for peacekeeping missions' political strategies. Instead, mission strategies should be based on cross-cutting analysis, including stakeholder mapping, scenario planning, and a strong sense of the political economy of conflict; today's missions often only partially engage with these analytic tools and approaches. Understanding how power is distributed is important, and often not the principal focus of analysis. There was consensus across experts on the need for strategies to address local, national, and regional



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levels. When crafting mission mandates, the Council is often less aware of local dynamics or places less emphasis on their importance, causing unanticipated problems later on. The Secretariat could do more to bring local issues to the Council's attention earlier and consistently throughout the process.

A stakeholder analysis should inform decision-making by the mission about whom to engage with and how. For example, missions can use stakeholder analyses to inform strategic communications decisions about which messages are critical to communicate to which stakeholders. Political strategies and strategic communications strategies are usually separate documents developed through independent processes, but the stakeholder analysis-driven approach could help link the two. Similarly, this analysis can inform decisions by the mission about who should be included in peace processes or engaged through other means. Mali's experience highlights how decisions about who gets a seat and at which table are highly political decisions that can have very important consequences for the cessation of or increase in

violence. Peacekeeping missions do not always have strong influence over which parties are invited to participate in a peace process, but they can use their stakeholder analyses (including which actors are likely to be allies or spoilers to peace, and analysis of likely perpetrators of violence) to push for certain actors to be brought into the process, or to push for new processes to be created to address those actors' grievances.

## 4 Bigger mandates do not necessarily mean bigger politics

There is often an unwritten assumption that larger missions with a range of activities across the political, security and humanitarian arenas will have greater leverage when it comes to influencing peace processes. One of the reasons for deploying a billion dollar mission with tens of thousands of troops is to be able to provide a security guarantee to a political process, and one of the reasons for expanding a mandate into areas like stabilization, security sector reform

(SSR) and protection is to underpin a political process with improved conditions and confidence on the ground. Yet, the experience of the peacekeeping operations in this study suggests that greater size may not lead to stronger political influence. In some cases, a large presence on the ground might even lead a mission to focus on its military and technical engagements and become distracted from its political objectives.

While the presence of large numbers of UN troops is correlated with a reduction in violence against civilians (indicating an influence of the conflict parties' immediate incentives and behaviours),<sup>30</sup> it does not on its own necessarily change the longer-term political calculations of parties to the conflict. The 2008 deployment of nearly 20,000 African Union (AU)/UN troops into Darfur had no apparent impact on the Government's or rebels' positions with respect to the peace negotiations (which are largely unresolved 12 years later). Nor did UNMISS' very large presence in South Sudan in 2013 appear to give it much influence over the protagonists of the civil war, as the 2016 relapse into open conflict demonstrated. Other factors, such as the threat of International Criminal Court (ICC) indictment, the imposition of sanctions, and international pressure appeared to play a much more direct political role. This is not always the case, and there are several instances where MONUSCO and MINUSCA, for example, used force to bring warring parties to a negotiating table (indeed MONUSCO's Force Intervention Brigade may have increased regional political engagement too). But it is worth interrogating the assumption that robust force inherently creates leverage in a peace process.

Less visible are the challenges of managing "Christmas tree" mandates for large multi-dimensional missions. Across our case studies, mission leaders pointed to the pragmatic challenges of running sprawling missions with competing priorities, enormous logistical constraints, and heightened expectations ranging from local citizens to Security Council members. In these settings, it is all too easy for the operational "tail" to wag the political "dog," for mission leaders to become consumed with managing a mission to the detriment of a more holistic vision for the UN in-country (especially when violence is continuing at a high rate). This phenomenon is not only a function of the

peacekeeping mission's managerial decisions, but also related to the levels of consent and cooperation of the host State government. Difficult host governments may welcome greater military and technical engagements from missions in specific areas, which contribute to the governments' own security, political or financial interests, while freezing them out of political processes. In MONUSCO, for example, the Council's gradual increase in the size and scope of the mission over time—including the addition of greater protection responsibilities, expanding roles in SSR, the gradual growth of stabilization, and the 2014 mandate to neutralize armed groups—coincided with a parallel decrease in the political influence of the mission in country. This decline was likely more strongly influenced by changes in the Congolese political landscape but the mission also strained to articulate a political role amidst all of its other priorities. Similarly, the size of UNAMID often operated as a sort of anchor on the mission, causing it to expend all of its political capital with Khartoum in achieving entry visas for staff and troops, extract expensive equipment from quarantine, and demand clearances for access to affected areas. "We used up all our political juice on operational things," said a former senior UN official.

Jean-Marie Guéhenno, the former chief of DPO, has argued that larger missions sometimes fail to use their presence as a fulcrum for gaining influence in country due to "a lack of understanding of the political nature of peacekeeping, as if the conduct of military operations and the military posture could be divorced from the politics of the situation."<sup>31</sup> Our research suggests that some mission leaders *do* understand the political nature of peacekeeping and that the skillset and personality of SRSGs matters a great deal, but that they often find themselves consumed by the day to day operations of large missions.

## 5 Local peace processes can be critical

Peace processes are typically considered top-down elite bargains, initiated by the conflict parties and eventually trickling down into improved stability for the broader citizenry.<sup>32</sup> While the elite bargain remains important

across most conflicts, the case of UNMISS' 2018 mission strategy also demonstrates the utility of connecting local-level peace processes to the national one. The UNMISS approach was based on a recognition that national politics are deeply connected to local dynamics, where even highly localized cattle rustling could be traced to powerbrokers in Juba. In response, UNMISS' 2018 strategy demanded that activities like intercommunal conflict resolution, local work to promote justice, and engagement with traditional authorities should all clearly demonstrate how such work would feed into the revitalized peace process at the national level. A similar lesson was found in MINUSCA's 2017 political strategy, which targeted actors whose motivations for violence were unlikely to be influenced by the national political process. Both of these missions took advantage of their sizeable presence on the ground across wide areas of the country, which gave them leverage in local political processes that they lacked in national processes.<sup>33</sup>

In mandating missions, the Council should demand that missions report on how local-level activities are contributing to a broader political solution. In turn, mission leadership and the Secretariat could draw from the UNMISS example in better articulating those links in their mission strategies. The Council should do its best to maintain flexibility (in both its expectations and in mandate language) for missions to use opportunities for political influence where they see them. This might mean enabling the mission to pursue opportunities outside what might be seen as the "main" national-level political process, where a mission might have little political leverage, in order to bring in constituencies or address triggers of violence that are not included in the national-level process.

## 6 Using the players on the field

Peacekeeping is taking place on an increasingly crowded playing field, where the UN is frequently relegated to a fairly minor role in the overall political process. Council mandates and mission strategies have often struggled to clearly define how a mission will relate to these other players, focusing more on the isolated tasks of the UN. At most, the Council may ask the UN to "support" other actors—such as

UNMISS' support to the UN's own Special Envoy, the AU and Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in the revitalized peace process; UNAMID's support to the AU in the 2014 Darfur peace process; MINUSMA's support to Algeria as the "lead mediator" (as well as to the AU and Economic Community of West African States [ECOWAS]) in the Algiers process; and MINUSCA's support to the AU and Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) in the African Initiative. Mission strategies tend to follow suit, only expressing the roles and responsibilities of other actors in fairly vague terms, and seldom articulating the comparative advantages of each.

It is a well-established practice in strategy-making that organizations should have a clear vision of objectives and a well-articulated pathway to achieving them. In the case of peacekeeping, that pathway inevitably relies upon the work of other actors, not only the parties to the conflict, but also the wide range of Member States, regional organizations, envoys and civil society groups that can influence a peace process. While it may be difficult for the Council to define those roles—given its limited capacity to task other actors—mission strategies should analyse the relative strengths, roles and responsibilities of these players, specifying how the mission will interact with and gain leverage from them. This can inform Council mandates. In the cases of peacekeeping missions operating alongside UN regional envoys and/or UN groups of experts, this requires regional strategies that do more than articulate broad generic goals.

## 7 Building the Security Council into a strategy

A coherent unified Security Council is crucial to the success of a mission. Where the Council is divided, or where it is unable to articulate a clear common vision for a peacekeeping operation, there is far less chance of building towards and applying consistent diplomatic pressure to adhere to a viable political strategy. In some cases, a well-crafted and articulated UN mission strategy could straddle differences enough to unify Council members behind the mission; in others, there may be less apparent scope for the Secretariat or a peace operation to influence the coherence of the Council where the issues

that divide them are far deeper than applied to a single mission. Thus, mission strategies should take Council unity into account, identifying issues where divisions may cause complications, and also areas where the Council could come together. In CAR, Russia's decision to promote the Khartoum-led peace process against the efforts of other Council members to support the African Initiative offers an example of the detrimental effects of Council fractures. During the revitalized peace process in South Sudan, several Council members (and indeed the Government of South Sudan) were strongly opposed to the creation of a hybrid court as part of the transitional justice chapter of the agreement. Finding ways to defuse that tension—in this case by placing the African Union and IGAD in the lead on the hybrid court—was a strategic issue for maintaining Council unity.

Nominal Council unity is not always a sufficient indicator that the major powers will work together on a political process or that they will have leverage over the actors fuelling war. The Security Council's decision to impose an arms embargo on South Sudan (after years of delays and disagreements) was seen as a meaningful moment of unity but was quickly flouted by South Sudan's neighbours; similarly, the relative unity across the Council on the mandate for Mali has not prevented regional players from trafficking arms and resources into the country. A senior UN official captured an important lesson in this context: "Council members need to back their own resolutions in ways that show consistency and not undermine each other."

## **8 Dealing with difficult or weak governments**

One increasingly common trend across peacekeeping is the challenge of difficult governments, many of which have been eroded through decades of corruption and neglect, implicated in violence against civilians and/or resistant to more inclusive peace processes. Constrained by the principle of host State consent, and often mandated to partner with the government on their core tasks, missions have struggled to find the right balance between partnership and impartial mandate implementation. Some Council

mandates recognize this challenge and call on governments to take specific actions to enable missions, including, for example, the call on the Government of Sudan to facilitate UNAMID's access to affected areas, and the Council's condemnation of the Government of South Sudan's role in the killing of civilians during the civil war.

Missions too have attempted to outline this challenge in their strategies, such as the 2016 MONUSCO Mission Concept, and the 2018 UNMISS strategy, both of which describe the difficulties of dealing with the host government. But there are more consistent ways that missions can incorporate navigating host State consent into their political strategies. For example, a 2018 Stimson Center report recommends selecting areas of political focus early on in a peacekeeping mission's deployment in part based on the strength of the government's consent. For example, choosing politically sensitive areas (such as supporting the creation of human rights mechanisms or security sector accountability bodies) when consent is strong, and prioritizing areas where the government's interests more obviously overlap with the mission's when consent is weak.<sup>34</sup> The report also recommends being aware of actions that are likely to trigger a deterioration of consent and conducting advance political outreach to mitigate sensitivities and reduce misunderstandings, as well as regularly reporting on consent to the Council so that missions can seek political support for firm action early on when consent begins to weaken.

Even in situations of strong consent, the weak capacity of the host State can seriously challenge the assumptions underlying a political strategy. The Security Council sometimes overestimates what a peacekeeping mission can achieve in the absence of a capable government partner. For example, prior to MINUSCA's deployment the Council identified that the absence of the rule of law was a major driver of violence in CAR, and for that reason gave the mission an unusual "urgent temporary measures" mandate that allowed the mission to conduct arrests and take other actions to fill that gap in the short term. However, the mission's ability to use its arrest powers to combat impunity still relied on the State's capacity to manage other areas of the criminal justice process, including issuing warrants, trying



cases and maintaining adequate corrections facilities. Thus, despite strong consent from the CAR Government, MINUSCA's ability to address the challenges related to the absence of rule of law – an important component of the Council's original political mandate for the mission – was limited by the State's weak capacity.

## 9 Protection as politics

Across the cases, there was a clear trend towards protection of civilians as increasingly central to missions' mandates. In some cases, such as MONUSCO and UNMISS, the Council shifted protection from one of several priorities to a position of *primus inter pares*, first in line for the use of resources and highest on the agenda when it came to reporting on the mission's activities.<sup>35</sup> In some settings, this was interpreted as pitting protection against other mission priorities, creating a hierarchy that did not allow for a coherent overall strategy. In cases such as UNMISS in 2014, the protection needs were rightly an all-consuming priority, as hundreds of thousands of civilians relied on the mission to prevent and interrupt mass atrocities. And MINUSCA offers an example where the protection of civilians was the highest priority from the outset of the mission's mandate.

In other cases, the prioritization has been the other way around – for example, the first mandate for MINUSMA after the signing of the 2015 Algiers peace agreement articulated a singular “strategic priority” for the mission – namely, to support the implementation of that agreement. In 2019, a second strategic priority was added focused on protection of civilians in the centre

of the country, and the Council made a point of identifying support to the peace agreement as the “primary” strategic objective. Here again, the mission appeared to struggle to understand what this prioritization meant in terms of the distribution of resources (especially given that the addition of the second strategic priority was not accompanied by any additional resources), and struggled also to connect the “political” work focused on the north of the country with the protection efforts focused on the centre.

The experiences of the five missions studied suggest that conceiving of the protection of civilians as a separate objective, without connecting the goals of protection of civilians to a broader political solution, can lead to missed opportunities and poor strategies.<sup>36</sup> Several UN experts complained that the dominance of protection of civilians led to “endless missions” that struggled to envision an exit from the country given the likelihood that civilians would be at risk for decades to come. Protection, of course, should be a priority when risks to civilians are high. But more effort could be made at the mandating and strategy-making phases to position the protection of civilians as a clearer enabler for a political solution, rather than a stand-alone activity.

## 10 The technical can bolster the political

Across many of the cases, missions suffered from a division between so-called “technical” activities and the broader political work of the mission. Where this division was most apparent, missions struggled to develop coherent strategies. Some



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missions were able to articulate how the technical work would feed into a political solution, leading to far better strategies.

On the one hand, processes like Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) and SSR are fundamentally political, in the sense that they require buy-in from the leadership of governments and almost always from a range of other actors such as armed groups, community leaders and donors. This is well recognized across missions, especially those that have struggled to advance such processes due to lack of political will. There were few instances, however, where a mission-wide strategy clearly articulated these processes as leading to a political solution. In some, such as MONUSCO's 2014 Islands of Stability strategy, large-scale national reforms were described as a final stage of a linear process that would first establish basic security and stabilize a conflict setting. This sequential view of how the DRC would change over time failed to reflect reality, and isolated military and so-called technical processes from a more holistic theory of change. In contrast, the 2018/19 UNMISS Mission Concept identifies both capacity building and protection as crucial elements of a broader political goal of "building durable peace" that is linked to the national peace process. MINUSCA's 2017 political strategy (one of the only missions to have a document of that name) articulated a locally-driven vision for halting violence that combined political outreach, military and police operations, technical engagement (such as DDR and CVR programmes), and State-building support as needed to respond to the specific motivations of different perpetrators of violence that were not being sufficiently addressed by the national political process.

In some cases, even a mission's electoral support was expressed in purely technical terms. Of course, there is broad recognition that the UN must be seen as impartial, especially in an electoral setting, and the public messaging should reinforce the technical and logistical side of UN support. In terms of developing a strategy, more could be done to articulate how support to electoral processes will contribute to a broader political solution. For example, in the case of the 2006 elections in DRC, there was a clear sense within the UN leadership that the technical and logistical support of the mission was contributing to implementation of the underlying peace agreement, building confidence in State institutions, and leading to a reduction in the risks of a resumption of war. In contrast, during the 2016-18 constitutional crisis in the DRC, the Council placed electoral support under the stabilization priority, focusing on the short-term objective of reducing instability through the electoral period. This led to the mission being focused more on the immediate security impacts of the elections, rather than a longer-term vision of how the electoral process might build towards a more inclusive political system, develop wider trust in the State, and address some of the long-standing grievances of marginalized groups in the Congo.

## 11 Keeping sight of peace dividends

Many conflicts at the local, national and regional levels are driven by economic factors. Some peace operations have taken creative steps, ranging from disrupting local rackets to engaging with banks and finance ministries, but many

UN stakeholders are reluctant to acknowledge this issue and the role missions can play. Peace operations should not only analyse the political economy but think creatively about how to engage with it.

In particular, there is a recurring problem in peacekeeping settings of missing peace dividends. Peacekeeping missions' political strategies are often predicated on the assumption that their political objectives (persuading perpetrators to halt their violence, supporting a restoration of State authority, promoting the rule of law, etc.) will yield peace dividends in the form of access to basic services, jobs, foreign investment, and so on. Yet, missions often do not articulate what they anticipate those peace dividends to be or how they expect them to be distributed, and in practice these dividends often do not materialize in the short term. This causes problems because peace dividends are often a priority concern for many communities in conflict-affected countries and the failure to see these dividends can cause populations to lose faith in political processes. Taking a political economy lens to the conflict and trying to anticipate whether and how peace will lead to improvements in financial security and access to services could help peacekeeping missions develop more realistic political strategies.

## 12 Translating strategies into marching orders

Having a strong political strategy may amount to very little if it is not translated into clear "marching orders" for mission components and field offices to follow. Some senior mission leaders, depending on personalities and prior experiences, may naturally tend toward this structured approach more than others. In the absence of clear instructions from mission leaders, heads of mission components, sections and field offices will develop their own plans based on their priorities and interests but this can lead to incoherence and missed opportunities.

The crucial lesson across the cases is that strategies should harness the mission's wide range of military, police and civilian capabilities and its field offices toward a common political vision. Strategies should offer a vision at the

outset that allows all mission components to articulate their work in support of that end state. This process is linked to the related concept of prioritization and sequencing. If a mission component cannot articulate how its activities contribute to the core mission priorities, then mission leadership should consider whether to continue those activities or redirect those resources toward other tasks that are more clearly advancing the mission's priorities. The strategy should also offer a vision for how these different activities can be sequenced to achieve the desired outcome. For example, the strategy could lay out how military operations, political dialogue, community outreach, State-building support and DDR initiatives could be used in sequence to influence armed group behaviour.

The UN's ongoing efforts on planning, strategy and assessments have yielded important improvements that have helped create greater coherence across mission components. For example, the introduction of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment System into peacekeeping missions has created processes for missions to review activities and assess their contributions toward mission priorities. But a clear vision from senior mission leadership, and an articulation of how each component's activities should contribute to that vision, also remain essential.

## 13 The many pathways to a strategy

While there has been UN guidance for many years, the practice of strategy development has varied significantly across missions and moments in time. In some missions, the Security Council resolution was never translated into a mission-wide concept or strategy, leaving individual components of the mission to develop their own plans.<sup>37</sup> In others, the Secretariat developed a set of strategic guidance that was then transmitted to the mission, placing the mission leadership in more of an implementing role.<sup>38</sup> And at other moments, the mission leadership developed its own strategy with very little interaction with Headquarters. At the time of writing, new guidance on Mission Concepts was under development by DPO, which would require the Secretariat to lead in drafting Mission Concepts.

Based on the case studies, there is no single “right” process to develop a strategy, and no clear finding that either the Secretariat or missions should be in the driver’s seat. However, the best processes appear to have the following elements: (1) active engagement by the mission leadership, leading to buy-in to the final product; (2) a strongly supportive and constructive role by the Secretariat, in particular the relevant Integrated Operational Team; (3) frequent interaction with the key Security Council members, often before the issuance and annual renewal of the mandate; (4) prior discussions with the host government and other conflict actors to understand their positions (though not necessarily asking for their input on the strategy); and (5) broadly consultative processes to build consensus across the mission and other key partners.

Terminology also matters. Several experts warned that the term “political strategy” in a mission setting can leave some components feeling excluded. Instead, the term “mission strategy” helps convey a sense that all components are contributing to a common goal, even if some do not view that goal in political terms. Similarly, the term “political solution” used frequently by HIPPO, Action for Peacekeeping and elsewhere could be improved – one suggestion was “political transformation.”

## 14 Towards iterative, flexible strategies

Across all of the case studies, a recurrent complaint from UN personnel was that missions had been turned into “planning factories,” required to produce Mission Concepts; mission-wide protection of civilians, human rights, gender and other plans; reports on Council benchmarks; and results-based budgeting plans. “By the time we finish one strategic plan and get it cleared by UN Headquarters, it’s already irrelevant and we need to start a new planning process,” a former SRSG stated.

In the highly fluid contexts of peacekeeping, producing a static strategy that requires layers of bureaucratic clearance may feel like an unnecessary impediment to the kind of nimble

responsive action demanded of missions. Indeed, many senior UN officials suggested that the “real” strategic plan was often kept in the SRSG’s head, while the written plans were *pro forma* responses to Headquarters demands. “There is no way to write down a political strategy,” a former senior UN official argued. “You just have to appoint someone who can feel their way through.” The cases reviewed for this study show many examples of entrepreneurial, effective SRSGs navigating largely by their own starlight to accomplish very positive outcomes. But the cases also underscore the downside of an unwritten, unknown strategy: staff within the mission and potential partners outside the mission struggle to get in line behind a leader who does not communicate a vision for the mission. If heads of components do not understand whether and how their activities contribute to the mission’s political vision, it can exacerbate the tendency for missions to go their own way, disconnected from their political contexts. The unwritten approach can also cause problems when mission leaders falter or have little support in keeping political efforts on course, such as when a host nation constrains freedom of movement or undermines a peace agreement. At the same time, if leaders leave, they may take with them their strategic vision. And further, if there is no written strategy, it may further reduce the effective role of the Security Council’s diplomatic pressure and political influence with key actors, as well as a needed give-and-take about the success in implementing the mission with Council members aside from annual renewals.

There is not a one-size-fits-all approach to having the primacy of politics realized in a mission strategy, but the cases seem to point to a few common elements. These include (1) the need for more iterative, less rigid political strategies, living documents that are constantly reviewed and updated based on ground-truthing with the parties, and which do not overly constrain mission leaders; (2) a document that presents the SRSG’s overarching political vision with clear roles articulated for all mission components that directly contribute to that vision; and (3) a short process of consultation and approval, such that the strategy is not already seen as out of date by the time it is completed.

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- 3 NB: this project is linked to Action for Peacekeeping and as a result does not directly examine non-peacekeeping settings, such as Special Political Missions or regional presences. In our view, the exclusive focus of A4P on peacekeeping is a missed opportunity to implement the HIPPO recommendation to consider peace operations along a spectrum, which would have allowed for a broader focus in this piece. In this context we have, wherever possible, drawn experiences from beyond peacekeeping to inform our findings.
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Case Study 1

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# THE POLITICAL STRATEGY OF UN PEACEKEEPING

in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

by Adam Day



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Initially deployed in the midst of the Second Congolese War in 1999, the UN peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is one of the longest serving missions in the UN today. Over the course of its deployment, the mission has undergone dramatic changes, beginning as a small ceasefire observer mission and eventually swelling into a large multi-dimensional presence with an ambitious electoral support, State-building, stabilization, protection, human rights and national reform mandate. The growth and ambition of the mission corresponded with seismic shifts in the Congolese political and security landscape, from the post-war consolidation of peace, through three elections cycles, several major security crises and tectonic shifts in the positions of DRC's influential neighbours. Today, the Security Council has indicated that UN peacekeeping in the DRC – at least in its current form – is coming to a close, with an anticipated three-years until the mission draws down and exits.

Drawing on an extensive literature review and interviews with dozens of UN officials, this study examines the political role of UN peacekeeping in the DRC, focusing on three key moments in the mission's lifespan: (1) the mission's support to the 2006 elections and its immediate aftermath; (2) the shift towards more robust use of force following the March 23 (M23) rebellion in 2013-14; and (3) the 2016 constitutional crisis, leading to the 2018 decision to put in place a gradual exit of the mission from the DRC. The study will pay particular attention to the ways

in which the Security Council's mandates during these watershed moments were translated into political strategies and/or approaches by the UN Secretariat and mission leadership. This report contributes to a joint United Nations University/Stimson Center research project on the political role of UN peacekeeping, in support of the Action for Peacekeeping initiative by the UN's Department of Peace Operations (DPO).

The study is divided into four sections. First, it provides a brief overview of the evolution of the mandates of United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC, its French acronym) and the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), noting the key shifts in the size, responsibilities and focus of the mission.<sup>1</sup> Based on this contextual overview, the second section narrows in on the three key moments mentioned above, describing the process by which new or substantially changed mandates were translated into political strategies and approaches on the ground. Here, issues of substance and of process matter: *What was the content of the approach adopted by the mission, and what steps were taken to arrive at a particular strategy?* The third section captures some of the overarching trends and findings about MONUC/MONUSCO's political role in the DRC over its lifespan. The final section draws lessons and policy findings from the DRC context that could be applicable to a broader audience in peace operations.



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# The Evolution of the UN's Mandate in the Congo

The UN's mandate in the DRC evolved and expanded dramatically from the moment when MONUC was first deployed as a 500-strong military observer mission in 1999.<sup>2</sup> At the time, the principal task of the mission was support to the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement that attempted to end the Second Congolese War, via monitoring and reporting on compliance by the signatories to the agreement. However, after only one year and facing enormous security threats as the Lusaka Agreement began to disintegrate, MONUC was given a Chapter VII (Action with Respect to the Peace, Breaches of the Peace and Acts of Aggression) mandate, a higher troop ceiling of roughly 5,500 troops, and a broader set of tasks related to the voluntary disarmament, demobilization, repatriation, resettlement or reintegration of foreign armed groups (DDRRR).<sup>3</sup>

The mission was also provided the mandate to use deadly force to protect those in imminent danger, one of the first protection mandates in peacekeeping.

MONUC played an important political role – alongside UN special envoys and other international heavyweights – in guiding negotiations that resulted in the Global and Inclusive Agreement signed by all major parties in December 2002, formally ending the civil war. This agreement elevated MONUC to a guarantor of the transitional Government and a coordinator of the donor support to Kinshasa, which attempted to demobilize 130,000 combatants and build democratically elected national institutions.<sup>4</sup> This role was reflected in MONUC's 2003 mandate, in which it was tasked to chair the International

Committee in Support of the Transition (CIAT) overseeing implementation of the peace agreement.<sup>5</sup> The mandate in 2003 also included a role for MONUC in facilitating the DDRRR process and protecting civilians.<sup>6</sup> In recognition of the critical role of the region—and the fact that both Rwanda and Uganda had national forces on Congolese soil—MONUC was also tasked to support regional confidence-building measures amongst Congo, Uganda and Rwanda.

Over the next two years—from 2003 through 2004—MONUC’s security focus and troop strength steadily increased, first in response to the escalating crisis in Ituri,<sup>7</sup> and then again following the 2004 seizure of Bukavu by the Congrès national pour la défense du peuple (CNDP) led by Laurent Nkunda.<sup>8</sup> By 2005, MONUC’s troop strength had grown to 15,600, with a mandate to support the Congolese army in operations to disarm militias across the Kivus and work with the newly appointed Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for the Great Lakes Region to find “lasting solutions” to the security problems there.<sup>9</sup>

Likely the highpoint of MONUC’s political role was its support to the 2006 national elections, which was part of a broadened mandate that included technical/logistical support to elections, support to the adoption of legislation, and security sector reform (SSR).<sup>10</sup> The mission was unable to move forward with its legislative and SSR mandate, however, because soon after winning the presidency, Joseph Kabila began to sideline MONUC and within two years began pushing for its draw down in the DRC. Security concerns during this period also took centre stage: a dispute between losing presidential candidate Jean-Pierre Bemba and President Kabila spilled over into violence in Kinshasa and elsewhere, while Laurent Nkunda’s CNDP escalated its attacks in North Kivu. Large-scale fighting between 2006 and 2008 led to the displacement of an additional million people and contributed to the proliferation of armed groups across eastern Congo.

First mapped out in 2007 as a path towards an orderly exit from the DRC, MONUC increasingly began to focus on stabilization. By 2009, this work had grown to include operations to extend State

authority, support to key reforms in the military and the police and securing mining areas from attacks by armed groups.<sup>11</sup> In 2010, this was formalized by the Security Council, which added the term “stabilization” to the newly named MONUSCO, authorized a troop ceiling of nearly 20,000 soldiers and put in place a two-prong set of priorities for the mission: protection of civilians (PoC) and stabilization.<sup>12</sup> Over the next three years, this meant MONUSCO was increasingly focused on the security situation in eastern Congo, working to clear areas of armed group activity, build State capacities and coordinate donor support to national institutions. The mission also provided technical and logistical support to the 2011 national elections, in which Kabila won the presidency for a second time.

In late 2012, a newly formed group calling themselves the March 23 Movement (M23)<sup>13</sup> attacked and temporarily took control of the eastern capital Goma. Faced with an immediate threat to the stability of eastern Congo, the Security Council authorized the deployment of the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB), a brigade of roughly 2,000 troops drawn from Malawi, Tanzania and South Africa that deployed in April 2013 and played an important role in the defeat of M23 the following October. For the first time in UN peacekeeping, a mission was explicitly authorized to use offensive force, rather than adhering to the well-known principle of defensive use of force.<sup>14</sup> This so-called “neutralization” mandate came to dominate much of MONUSCO’s tenure from 2014 onward, creating heightened expectations of the mission’s ability to impact the operational strength of the major armed groups and protect civilians under imminent threat.

The M23 rebellion also opened a political door for MONUSCO, allowing the mission to play an important role in the regional talks in 2013 that resulted in the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework (PSCF). For the first time since 2006, the mission was mandated to support something akin to a peace agreement, a broad regional commitment to address the institutional weaknesses that gave rise to insecurity in eastern Congo, and to address the chronic problem of regional interference on Congolese territory. The presence of the FIB – composed of some of the most important players in the region – was also

an opportunity for the mission to play a more central role in the political landscape of the DRC.

However, a number of factors intervened to inhibit this political role for MONUSCO. First, the PSCF itself quickly became bogged down in bureaucratic processes, unable to move beyond general statements of intent into implementable reforms and investments. This was in part because Kinshasa continued to resist any outside role in its own institutional reform, including by the UN, and also due to a gradual worsening of relations between Kabila and the powerbrokers in the region.<sup>15</sup> Recurrent disputes between MONUSCO and the Congolese Government about the appropriate targets for the FIB led to a deterioration in relations between the mission and Kinshasa and a lack of progress against the armed groups. At one point in 2014, a dispute between the mission and the Government over joint operations against armed groups in eastern Congo led to a near total severing of relations for a period. Taken together, these dynamics meant the PSCF was less of a political conduit than had been envisaged initially, and the political role for MONUSCO remained extremely limited.

By 2016, the DRC had reached another crisis point as presidential elections had been delayed well beyond the constitutional period and Kabila appeared unwilling to step down. Continued proliferation of armed groups in eastern Congo, along with steadily worsening human rights conditions around political space, placed MONUSCO in a difficult position. On the

one hand, the Security Council had emphasized the mission's PoC mandate, placing it above the stabilization and political priorities. This reflected the reality that the mission was not a heavyweight in the political processes in Kinshasa, and the expectation from the Council that the UN's assets were best oriented to the security situation in the East.

At the same time, momentum behind the mission's exit from the DRC began to grow. In 2016, the Council requested that the mission again enter into a strategic dialogue with the Government over the conditions for the mission's withdrawal from the country. Though no agreement was ever fully reached, the strongly contested 2018 elections provided the key impetus to move more quickly towards the mission's exit. Following Felix Tshisekedi's ascent to the presidency in early 2019, the Council mandated an independent strategic review of the mission, aimed at charting a course for the draw down of the mission. This review described an ambitious national reform agenda that would need to succeed if the DRC was to move into a phase of greater stability and laid out a sequence of steps for the mission to withdraw over a three-year period.<sup>16</sup>

As of the writing of this report, the mission had developed an exit strategy for leaving the country over the coming years, hoping to reconfigure the UN presence in country to help address the challenges that are sure to persist well beyond the lifespan of peacekeeping in the DRC.<sup>17</sup>



## II

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# Three Turning Points in MONUC/MONUSCO's Lifespan in the DRC

As the above overview of MONUC/MONUSCO's lifespan in the DRC demonstrates, the mission has evolved significantly since its initial deployment in 1999. Rather than attempt to capture every new mandate established by the Security Council, this section examines three critical junctures, exploring in each how the mandate was translated into a political strategy by the Secretariat and the mission. The first moment covers the 2006-7 period, during which MONUC provided invaluable support to the elections process, continued to play a key role as chair of the committee overseeing the post-war transition, but then experienced a significant

drop in political relevance in the immediate aftermath of Kabila's election to the presidency. The second subsection focuses on the M23 takeover of Goma in 2013 and the Council's decision to increase MONUSCO's military capabilities. Here, the involvement of key regional players in the FIB may have provided the mission temporarily with greater political leverage in the DRC and the region, though this soon dissolved. The final moment explores the constitutional crisis from 2016-18, during which the Security Council appeared to re-emphasize the mission's security roles in country, recognizing that the African Union (AU) was playing a far more direct (if not particularly effective) role in the political

trajectory of the country. It concludes with the Council's call for a strategic review that would frame the mission's exit from the country.

## 2006-7 ————— A Brief High Water Mark for MONUC

The lead up to the 2006 elections demonstrated a moment of clarity for MONUC's political role in the DRC. From 2003, the mission had been mandated to convene the International Committee for Support to the Transition (CIAT), a body with broad oversight of the electoral process and the other key elements of the transition. "MONUC had a formal role in convening the CIAT, a huge amount of political autonomy to urge the main political players in Kinshasa, and directly intervened to resolve disputes between the parties," a former MONUC official stated.<sup>18</sup> This central role was reflected in reports of the Secretary-General at the time, which stated that the key role of MONUC was a political one, focused on building confidence in the transition and bolstering the nascent Government.<sup>19</sup>

Those involved in MONUC's political work in the pre-electoral period flagged three factors that contributed to the mission's relevance and leverage. First, the clarity of the role articulated for MONUC within the transitional agreement, along with the critical need to have the elections take place in a credible and timely manner: "We were at the centre of the process, in the room the whole time, the donors and the Government responded to our calls because they knew the elections would not happen without us," a UN official noted.<sup>20</sup> Another former MONUC official added that electoral support was "the kind of back to basics work that peacekeeping is able to do," noting that the expansion of the mission's mandate into areas like security sector reform and stabilization "placed the UN in a position of not knowing what it could deliver, and not knowing what political actors were needed to get the job done."<sup>21</sup> This point was echoed in reports by the Secretary-General to the Security Council at the time, which spoke of a "wide gap" between expectations and reality in terms of PoC in particular.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, the task of elections

support was "something the mission leadership and the Secretariat easily understood, a concrete and achievable deliverable that was clearly at the top of the Council's priority list."<sup>23</sup>

The second factor that appeared to bolster MONUC's political leverage was effective use of the full resources of the broader UN family in-country. Ross Mountain, the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) and head of the UN Country Team (UNCT) in the DRC, was viewed as a dynamic and entrepreneurial UN official, able to pull together the UNCT around a common approach to the elections. According to one UN official involved in electoral support at the time, "[Deputy SRSG] Mountain put together a game plan to support the elections process with every asset in the country team, with the UN Development Programme and MONUC at the centre. This meant that the political actors in Kinshasa had to rely on the UN for support and had to listen to us when we gave advice or sent messages."<sup>24</sup>

The third factor was the high-profile and central role that SRSG William Swing personally carved out for MONUC in the lead up to elections. A seasoned American official with a deep history in the DRC, Swing came into the role with what one expert called "unprecedented gravitas" and an impressive set of contacts amongst Congo's elite.<sup>25</sup> "Swing was able to convene [the CIAT] and draw the highest level officials from the Government and the major embassies," a former UN official described. "He was known to the parties, and there was a sense that he could carry the big players like the US and France."<sup>26</sup> SRSG Swing bolstered MONUC's leverage ahead of the elections by facilitating the establishment of the International Committee of Eminent Persons, chaired by former President of Mozambique, Joachim Chissano, and composed of highly-respected senior officials.<sup>27</sup> When tensions broke out between President Kabila and Vice-President Bemba over the elections results, SRSG Swing was able to arrange for direct contact between the two, while helping to coordinate messages by the Eminent Persons Committee to urge restraint and offer Bemba safe passage out of the country.<sup>28</sup>

Internally, MONUC did not have an overarching political strategy guiding its work in the run-up



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to the election. The mission's Political Affairs Department (PAD) did develop a series of papers that helped to bring the mission together around a common approach to the elections and, in this respect, PAD "helped keep the mission focused on its political role."<sup>29</sup> However, as described by one former MONUC official, "[SRSG] Swing carried the strategy around in his head. He knew Congo better than most of us, and he had the network of connections that allowed him to manoeuvre the terrain there. We [PAD] were there to support him, but we never charted out a course on paper for the whole mission's political role."<sup>30</sup>

While the mission may not have had a formal document entitled "political strategy," PAD did play a far more central role in MONUC than in later years of the mission. "PAD was the heartbeat of the mission then," one former MONUC staff member noted. "Political [Affairs] set the direction for the mission, and it was easy because we were all centred around implementing a political agreement."<sup>31</sup> This meant that the mission was also largely in charge of developing its own approach, without much direction from the Secretariat. "Under [SRSG] Swing, the Secretariat

was very much in the back seat, in support of the mission, but we didn't issue guidance when it came to strategic decisions," a former UN Secretariat staff member noted.

The high water mark of the UN's political leverage did not last much beyond the 2006 elections and, in fact, may have begun to erode on some fronts prior to the polls. According to several experts, the elections were also the overriding goal of the Security Council: "Once we had overseen a successful election, the Council and Kabila were ready to declare victory and wind down the mission," one former MONUC official said.<sup>32</sup> Soon after Kabila took office, the Secretary-General appointed Alan Doss as SRSG, a seasoned British official with a very successful track record in planning the wind down of the peacekeeping operation Sierra Leone and in establishing the exit benchmarks for the mission in Liberia. "But things didn't go to plan," Mr Doss noted. "The elections solved one political problem, but they had created another one in the marginalized Tutsi community that soon became [Laurent] Nkunda's CNDP uprising."<sup>33</sup> The combination of a deeply contested electoral outcome and a rapid rise of

insecurity in eastern Congo meant that MONUC had to quickly pivot towards its protection mandate, moving troops and attention away from Kinshasa to confront armed group threats in the east. And it meant that instead of focusing on a narrowly drawn path towards draw down and exit, MONUC became even more deeply drawn into multidimensional peacekeeping in the DRC.

If the pre-electoral period was characterized by a fairly clear (if extraordinarily difficult) mandate to support elections as part of a transition, the post-electoral moment was far murkier in terms of MONUC's mandate and priorities. Faced with growing insecurity across the country, a nascent Government lacking viable State institutions beyond major urban areas, and a highly fluid regional context, the Security Council began to add dozens of tasks to MONUC's mandate.<sup>34</sup> "The mandate ballooned," Doss noted. "The Council pushed for more focus on protection and humanitarian issues, Kabila thought the UN should only be there to defeat the CNDP, and we kept getting sucked into one crisis after the next."<sup>35</sup> Rather than come on board to oversee the exit of MONUC, SRSB Doss was tasked by the Council to engineer one of its most rapid expansions as a raft of new tasks were thrust upon the mission.

According to several former MONUC officials, there was little scope to develop an overarching political strategy in this context, given the multiple demands placed on the mission by the Council, the need to address the immediate security risks in eastern Congo, and the lack of interest on the part of Kinshasa. "There was a blurring of the idea of mandate and strategy," SRSB Doss said, "we were so focused on moving troops out, protecting key sites, and handling the regional players that we never developed an integrated political strategy for eastern Congo. MONUC focused on the mechanics rather than the politics of protection."<sup>36</sup> This was reflected in the Council mandates at the time, which stressed that the mission's highest priority should be addressing the protection threats in the Kivus, with only tertiary mention of a political track to address the conflicts.<sup>37</sup>

The absence of an overarching written political strategy did not inhibit MONUC from engaging in important and constructive ways before

and during SRSB Doss' tenure. Good access to President Kabila allowed MONUC to help broker the Nairobi Communiqué between Kinshasa and Kigali, committing both parties to rein in their respective proxy forces in the region. Between 2007 and 2008, the mission played important roles in a peace agreement between the CNDP and the Government,<sup>38</sup> and supported a track-two initiative between the Government and the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FLDR).<sup>39</sup> In early 2008, this work resulted in the signature of the Goma Accords, an explicitly political attempt to resolve the CNDP crisis. While the accords did not hold, this was not for lack of effort on the mission's part. And it should be noted, given the later fall of Goma, that the Goma Accords likely prevented a serious offensive on the city at the time.

According to several former MONUC and Secretariat staff, this political work was enabled by a positive and relatively hands-off approach by the Secretariat. "During [SRSB] Doss' tenure, the Secretariat saw itself as an enabler of whatever the mission wanted to do, we didn't try to issue any top-down guidance to him," a former member of the Great Lakes Team noted. "Headquarters saw itself as supporting the mission, not guiding it."<sup>40</sup> Several UN officials highlighted the importance of this light touch by the Secretariat, noting that the mission's leadership was broadly trusted with the strategic direction of the mission, even as the number of tasks ballooned upward.

## 2013-14 MONUSCO Goes on the Offensive

The second moment in MONUSCO's lifespan was triggered by the 2013 attack and takeover of Goma by the M23 Movement, a group of disaffected former CNDP members that felt betrayed by a failed peace process a few years before.<sup>41</sup> Already before the fall of Goma, the mission had significantly reoriented away from Kinshasa, prioritizing PoC and extension of State authority in the volatile eastern provinces. But the attack—demonstrating that the State could not hold its eastern capital against a rebel group—constituted a shock to the region and

the Security Council. In response, in April 2013 the Council authorized the FIB that provided with the first explicit offensive use of force mandate in peacekeeping.<sup>42</sup> “The Council was in emergency mode when it authorized the FIB,” a representative of a Council Member State noted. “It saw Goma as a domino that could fall and cause all of Congo to collapse, so its overriding concern was to get MONUSCO into top gear on the military front. Everything was focused on the force.”<sup>43</sup>

The new mandate for MONUSCO slightly preceded the arrival of a new SRSG for the mission, Martin Kobler, a German diplomat who had led the UN mission in Iraq and served as Deputy SRSG in Afghanistan previously. His arrival, on the heels of the defeat of M23 and deployment of the FIB, led to a rapid change in the overall strategy of the mission. “SRSG Kobler was very much influenced by the provincial reconstruction process in Afghanistan,” a MONUSCO official who had served at the time noted. “He wanted to quickly extend State authority into so-called ungoverned spaces and deliver rapid dividends to the people.”<sup>44</sup> The Islands of Stability concept—which was quickly put into place by SRSG Kobler as the overall Mission Concept—indeed appeared strongly influenced by counter-insurgency operations in places like Afghanistan. Following the mantra “shape, clear, hold, build,” the Islands of Stability envisioned UN peacekeepers driving armed groups from key areas, holding territory against incursions, and helping to create the conditions for the establishment of viable State institutions.<sup>45</sup>

In fact, the Islands of Stability concept was also largely the mission’s political strategy at the time.<sup>46</sup> “[SRSG] Kobler saw the Islands of Stability as the way to partner with the Government, to show that MONUSCO had a value added,” a MONUSCO official stated. “If the mission could help build State capacity in eastern Congo, then other national reforms – things like security sector reform, improved human rights, elections – would more easily follow.”<sup>47</sup> As laid out in the Mission Concept at the time, MONUSCO had three interrelated priorities: PoC, stabilization, and implementation of the regional PSCF.<sup>48</sup> Here, the political objectives—security sector reform, political dialogue and empowerment of civil society—were largely identified under

the PSCF. Importantly, the Mission Concept described this as a sequential set of activities in three steps: protection, then stabilization, then longer-term political reforms.<sup>49</sup> “The political stuff came last in Kobler’s book,” a former member of MONUSCO’s Political Affairs Division noted. “The approach he created for the mission was all about showing boots on the ground advancing against the enemy.”<sup>50</sup>

The FIB was meant to play a crucial role in this approach, targeting priority armed groups together with the national army, reducing the threat posed to the State, and creating the space for the development of national institutions. Moreover, the FIB was to send a strong signal that the regional powerhouses were invested in DRC’s stability, and ready to take meaningful steps to implement the PSCF. “This included on the political front,” a UN official in New York noted. “Having regional players on the ground and more willing to use their weight in Kinshasa was meant to give greater leverage to the UN when it came to convincing Kabila to adhere to the constitution and implement the PSCF.”<sup>51</sup>

According to several former and current MONUSCO officials, Kobler’s approach to developing and implementing the Mission Concept was to “make decisions first and ask questions later.” In a short period of time, he had put in place the Islands of Stability strategy, introduced a large-scale shift of staff from the Kinshasa headquarters to a range of field offices in the east, and pushed hard with the Government for more robust action against the FDLR. “He was an SRSG who wanted to be seen to be making a difference from the outset,” a former UN official said, highlighting the strong public communication element to the Islands of Stability concept.<sup>52</sup> Part of the political role of MONUSCO at the time was to be more visible, making frequent statements to the press, and raising the profile of the UN in-country. Within the mission, too, there were frequent internal communications on progress in the Islands of Stability work, weekly updates sent around to all staff and a slogan (*Peace It!*) meant to give a sense of enthusiasm and a forward-leaning posture.

According to several Congolese politicians, this high-profile role for MONUSCO was a double-edged sword. “It was good that the UN was

publicly focused on the armed groups in the east,” said a senior official in Government, “but there was too much in the press that was negative about the Government. We began to lose confidence in MONUSCO very quickly.”<sup>53</sup> This loss of confidence reached a crisis point in late 2014, when MONUSCO wished to ride the momentum of the M23 defeat and deploy the FIB against the FDLR (the top priority armed group identified by the Security Council at the time).<sup>54</sup> Neutralizing the FDLR was not only a military objective but a political one for MONUSCO: President Kagame had played a crucial role in the defeat of the M23 and would have been eager to see the FDLR weakened in response.<sup>55</sup> “One of the key political roles of the FIB was to keep positive regional momentum going too,” a former MONUSCO official said. “If the mission could put pressure on the FDLR, it would have opened up the possibility of broader regional deals, maybe the repatriation of the FDLR to Rwanda, and real progress towards our goal of stabilizing the east.”<sup>56</sup>

However, the Kabila Government was opposed to any robust military action against the FDLR, in part in recognition of the group’s role in defeating the M23. “We never agreed to fight the FDLR at the time, and it was politically impossible for us to conduct joint operations with MONUSCO so quickly after M23,” a Congolese Government official said.<sup>57</sup> When, in late 2014, MONUSCO’s Force Commander publicly announced that operations against the FDLR would commence in the coming months, the Government reacted strongly against the decision.<sup>58</sup> Kabila quickly announced that Generals Fall Sikabwe and Bruno Mandevu had been tasked with key operational command roles in the joint FDLR operations. Both generals had been “red listed” by MONUSCO’s Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP) based on credible findings that they had perpetrated serious human rights abuses during earlier assignments.

According to MONUSCO’s human rights policy, the “red list” was considered an absolute barrier to military cooperation. Following announcements by both SRSK Kobler and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations that MONUSCO would not undertake joint operations while the two generals were involved, the relationship between the mission and the Government

soured rapidly.<sup>59</sup> “Kabila had painted us into a corner,” a former MONUSCO official noted. “We had gone public with the FDLR, so he went public with the red flagged generals.”<sup>60</sup> This incident seriously affected the relationship between the Government and MONUSCO, leading to a long lull in joint operations, but perhaps more importantly a lack of access and traction with key political figures in Kinshasa. A former MONUSCO official stated, “After the ‘red generals,’ MONUSCO was pretty burned with the Government. We couldn’t get a meeting with Kabila anymore, the senior officials were dismissive of us, and we had a much harder time pushing for the bigger political reform agenda.”<sup>61</sup>

An open question at the end of SRSK Kobler’s tenure was how to evaluate the FIB’s neutralization role in eastern Congo. On the one hand, it was seen as crucial to efforts to limit armed groups in eastern Congo, and increasingly central to the overall PoC approach by MONUSCO. The FIB was also meant to be a political tool for the mission, a clear statement that regional powers were invested in DRC’s stability and ready to use their weight to achieve progress on the PSCF and other commitments. According to several experts in MONUSCO and within the expert community, the FIB simply did not deliver that political weight to the mission. “It was like being in a chess game and you’re given an extra queen, so the expectations go up, but after a couple years of her not improving your position on the board, you start to wonder why you went through all that trouble.”

## 2016-2018 --- A Constitutional Crisis

In 2016, the DRC was facing a major constitutional crisis. President Kabila, who was serving his second term, was unwilling to step down and appeared more focused on placing obstacles in the way of national elections due at the end of the year. Relations with the international community were fraying fast, as major donors and regional partners became increasingly frustrated at the lack of progress towards a democratic transition, despite repeated assurances by the Government. Sensing potential weakness, opposition parties began to speak out more stridently, holding large-

scale protests and calling for regime change, against which the State security forces often responded with repressive tactics and use of force. Armed groups were becoming increasingly politicized, violence levels were on the rise in much of eastern Congo and a new uprising in the central Kasai region was straining the capacities of the Government and the UN to respond.<sup>62</sup>

Facing likely delays in the presidential elections and a related risk to the broader stability of the DRC, the Security Council's renewal of MONUSCO's mandate was notable for elevating the political role of the mission above that of stabilization.<sup>63</sup> Whereas in 2015, support to elections was positioned below protection and stabilization in the mandate (and indeed compartmentalized as a separate section), in 2016 the Council reconfigured the mandate to include a more comprehensive "political situation" area, placing it above stabilization. The broad "political situation" mandate for MONUSCO included support to political dialogue amongst Congolese stakeholders, monitoring human rights in the context of elections, provision of technical assistance and logistical support to elections, working to bring to justice those responsible for egregious human rights violations, provision of Good Offices to the Government to promote human and civil rights, and work to end child recruitment.<sup>64</sup> "They [the Security Council] saw the Kabila Government backsliding on the elections and wanted to make a clear link between political space and the credibility of the electoral process," a former MONUSCO official noted.<sup>65</sup>

By 2016, however, MONUSCO's mandate had become an over-adorned Christmas tree, with more than 25 operational paragraphs and, according to some counts, upward of 50 discrete tasks. Even within the PoC section (which received the highest priority by the Council), there were seven sub-priority areas, covering a wide range of activities from physical protection to Good Offices to DDR. "How was the mission meant to prioritize when the Council threw everything at us?" a former MONUSCO official said. "It was a recipe for confusion."<sup>66</sup> At the working level, some members of the Council agreed: "MONUSCO was a case of a mission where every year we had a discussion about what was really needed, and instead of paring away to get to that priority, we just added another set of tasks on. It was because

each Council member had tasks they needed to keep in, so we could never reduce."<sup>67</sup> This had in fact been recognized by mission leadership as early as 2010, when SRSB Doss had pushed for a strategic review to develop a prioritized mandate, but debates over protection and draw down took centre stage.<sup>68</sup>

The addition of the "political situation" section in the mandate appeared to suffer from the same Christmas tree phenomenon. "The Council jotted down a long list of things MONUSCO should do, but there was no real sense of the actual role the mission should be playing through the constitutional crisis," a UN expert noted.<sup>69</sup> This was in part because MONUSCO did not formally have a clear role in the processes established in Kinshasa. The National Dialogue process set up to resolve the electoral impasse was chaired by President Kabila and facilitated by an AU-appointed envoy, whereas the UN (both MONUSCO and the Regional Envoy) played only a fairly vague supportive role.<sup>70</sup> A member of the Permanent Three on the Security Council summarized, "We [the Council] realized that MONUSCO was not in a good position to deliver the elections, or even get much traction pushing hard for them, so we used the mandate more as a sign of what we wanted out of the process itself: we wanted a credible, peaceful process, and MONUSCO was the eyes and ears of the international community."<sup>71</sup>

Soon after SRSB Maman Sidikou, a Nigerien diplomat with deep experience in the African Union, took the helm of MONUSCO, he instituted a mission leadership process to translate the 2016 Council mandate into a Mission Concept. This took the form of a two-day retreat of the senior leadership, a consultative process across the mission and some consultations with the UNCT. In terms of process, this was an almost entirely field-driven Mission Concept, with the Great Lakes team in the Secretariat only consulted after a near-final version had been completed, though the Secretariat formally approved the final draft.

The 2016 Mission Concept reflected a high degree of scepticism that the elections process would move forward within the envisaged timeframe, but placed the highest priority on the mission's support to a credible, peaceful process within the two-year horizon of the strategy.<sup>72</sup> In the



section dedicated to support to the political process, the Concept largely restated the Security Council resolution, indicating that the mission would use its Good Offices to facilitate dialogue, promote and protect political space, engage with civil society and provide direct assistance to the electoral authorities.<sup>73</sup> But it also identified areas of joint action with the country team around elections – particularly the UN Development Programme – and contained an annex that provided specific guidance on how the more general aspects of the Concept should be taken forward.

The Mission Concept was also followed by a more in-depth process to develop implementation plans in every field office, led by the Senior Stabilization Advisor and overseen by the Deputy SRSG for Operations and Rule of Law. In each office plan, specific provisions were included concerning how the office would work to promote political space, support elections and take forward other key provisions in the Mission Concept. “We tried to turn the high-level mandate language of the resolutions and the [Mission] Concept into a workable day-to-day plan for each office,” a former MONUSCO staff member described.<sup>74</sup>

Importantly, the Mission Concept also tied the electoral process to MONUSCO’s exit from the DRC. The Kabila Government had long been demanding that the mission withdraw and saw the end of peacekeeping as a key signal that the country had moved into a new phase. During SRSG Kobler’s tenure, a “Strategic Dialogue” process had been set up between the Government and MONUSCO, to negotiate the terms of an eventual withdrawal from the DRC, though no

formal agreement was reached. As such, the withdrawal of the mission constituted “one of the few points of leverage that MONUSCO ha[d] in Kinshasa.”<sup>75</sup> The Mission Concept articulated a three phase withdrawal vision for MONUSCO, the first phase of which ended with the holding of credible elections. The second phase, in which MONUSCO would begin significant reductions in its troop presence in eastern Congo, would only take place following credible, peaceful elections. “This idea of making MONUSCO’s exit contingent upon elections was a way to send a signal to the Government and all the parties, and it was a way to build human rights and political space into the mission’s eventual withdrawal plan,” a former MONUSCO official noted.<sup>76</sup>

In this respect, MONUSCO’s Mission Concept appeared to go beyond the Council mandate, at least in terms of making political conditions clearly part of the mission’s eventual exit from the country. Resolution 2277, for example, focused more on the security targets to be achieved for the reduction of the force presence, leaving the more complex indicators around political space and elections to be decided between the mission and the Government. “The Mission Concept was a key preparation for our approach to the Strategic Dialogue with the Government,” a MONUSCO official described. “It showed that we would demand something broader than just improved security for the draw down of the mission.”<sup>77</sup>

For the first time, and on the request of the Council, the Mission Concept also included “tailored strategies” for addressing the threat posed by armed groups in eastern Congo.<sup>78</sup> Focused primarily on the priority groups (FDLR as well as three others: LRA, ADF and FRPI), these



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strategies laid out how the mission's military approach would complement a longer-term political solution for each group. Here, the goal was to embed the neutralization operations in a broader strategy that would work alongside stabilization and political interventions to address the root causes of conflict. Moreover, the strategies attempted to link what had been seen as peripheral security concerns in eastern Congo to the political elite in Kinshasa. "We all knew that armed groups in the east were part of a power network stretching from Kinshasa into the broader region," a UN expert noted, "and we needed strategies that reflected the interlinked nature of these groups."<sup>79</sup>

Broadly, the Mission Concept process reflected three political realities for MONUSCO in 2016: (1) the relative lack of role the UN had within the electoral process; (2) the need to view insecurity through a more political lens; and (3) an attempt to gain leverage via the draw down and exit of the mission. Over the 2016-2018 period, MONUSCO's path largely following this course: it was not a central player in the electoral process that resulted in the nomination of Felix Tshisekedi, though it did provide important logistical and technical support to the polling; it reported regularly on issues of political space, freedom of speech and human rights around the elections process; and it increasingly focused on how its exit from the DRC would take place.

During 2016, President Kabila in fact reached out to the UN for mediation support to the constitutional crisis. However, based on an analysis that the opposition parties were not willing to engage in the type of mediation envisaged by Kabila, the UN demurred, prompting

a turn to the AU for mediation support.<sup>80</sup> In December 2016, the AU brokered the Saint Silvestre Agreement between the Government and the main opposition parties, setting the course for elections. Taking advantage of this moment, the UN Secretariat executed what it called a "political pivot," pushing for the Council to prioritize the UN's support to the agreement in subsequent mandates. This, according to experts involved, was designed to align the mandate with the Mission Concept, but also help to create a more visible political role for the UN in-country. Thus, while the UN had kept a distance from leading mediation efforts, it remained ready to help the parties implement the agreement when they were ready. This laid the groundwork for the eventual elections in 2018.

In 2019, with a new Government coming into place, the Security Council mandated an independent strategic review of the mission, aimed at charting a course for the mission out of the country.<sup>81</sup> Led by a former senior UN official with a mandate to produce an independent assessment of the country, Youssef Mahmoud's review described an opportunity for a positive trajectory for the DRC. Though facing enormous challenges, the country could achieve the conditions needed for the draw down of the mission if its political leadership was able to progress an ambitious national reform agenda, address the most crucial threats posed by armed groups, and undertaken concrete actions under the PSCF. This review was an important reference point for the Council's 2019 mandate renewal for MONUSCO, in which it suggested that the review's benchmarks for a (at minimum) three-year withdrawal of the mission should guide the future planning of the mission.<sup>82</sup>



### III

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# The Political Trajectory of the UN in the DRC

**B**ased on the above three moments in the lifespan of MONUC/MONUSCO in the DRC, some conclusions about the longer political trajectory of the mission can be identified. Examining these trends, this section points to broader lessons that might be learned across peace operations.

## **DIMINISHING POLITICAL RETURNS**

The 2006 presidential elections were the high water mark of the UN's political relevance in the DRC. MONUC had a clear and central role within the transition process, and a tangible value added to the parties in terms of organizing the elections. Almost immediately after President Kabila was elected, however, this political relevance declined precipitously. This was in part

because the Government had far less need for the UN; in fact, the presence of a peacekeeping mission was an irksome reminder to Kabila's Government that the DRC remained fragile and in need of international intervention. The transition to a stabilization mission in 2010 can largely be seen as an effort by the Security Council to assuage concerns in Kinshasa and establish a more relevant, acceptable presence in the DRC. In some ways this worked, allowing the mission to stay on in country, but it may have been at the cost of a clear political role. According to a wide range of interlocutors, MONUSCO never enjoyed the kind of political relevance that existed during the 2006 elections period and earlier. Instead, it became seen more as a service provider for the Government, conducting joint military operations against armed groups, helping to

build State capacity and only tangentially involved in the national political process. The decision not to define the UN's political role may well have been due to concerns about sovereignty given that Kabila had been elected in a process that met with international approval, but it left the mission somewhat rudderless at several points in its lifespan.

Internally to the mission, this dwindling political role manifested in the gradual marginalization of the PAD. MONUC staff from the 2006-2010 period of the mission spoke of PAD as the central advisory group to the SRSG, actively involved in setting goals for the mission and advising on courses of action. Over time, however, this role appeared to wither, leading to the sidelining of PAD in the overall strategy-making of the mission. "PAD gradually became more or less a news reporting function within the mission," a former MONUSCO official described, "which reflected that MONUSCO's political role had become pretty irrelevant by 2011 onwards."<sup>83</sup>

## **PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS TAKES OVER**

Over time, MONUC/MONUSCO came to prioritize PoC over every other mission task. This was done gradually, as the mission grew in size and scope, and also tracked the growth of PoC doctrine within the broader UN. The result was the Security Council quickly mandated MONUSCO to prioritize PoC over all other mission tasks, including when it came to use of resources. According to some experts within the mission and in New York, this elevation of PoC meant that there was less attention paid to the political role of the UN in country. "We turned into a protection machine," one MONUSCO staff member said. "The Council is only interested in whether we have protected civilians, all the press is about our protection failures, and we spend all our time thinking about the operational side of getting troops to hotspots."<sup>84</sup>

Other experts noted that the rise of PoC in MONUSCO contributed to a widening expectations gap between the mandate and what the mission could accomplish on the ground. Over time, as the mandate for MONUSCO grew to include a wide and more ambitious range of

protection tasks, there were more and more possibilities to fall short. "Every massacre that happened in Congo became our fault," a former MONUSCO official noted.<sup>85</sup> Several former and current MONUSCO staff suggested that the strong messaging about PoC by the Council meant that the mission was less able to focus on its political work. This is not to suggest that PoC and politics are necessarily separate issues – progress on PoC should have been bolstered by political engagement and should have been seen as part of a broader set of political goals in country. However, the potential complementarity of the two areas was not something clearly articulated in the strategies of the mission in its lifespan.

The PoC priority for MONUSCO also impacted its relationship with the host Government. As the political crisis around the presidential elections deepened in 2016, protection also took on an even more distinctly political overtone. State security services, long known for their predatory practices and abuses against civilians, were used to dispel public protests, often violently. As the Secretary-General regularly reported, State security services were more dangerous to civilians in terms of human rights violations than any armed group.<sup>86</sup> Within the mission, one of the most complex questions became whether MONUSCO would interpose itself between Government forces and civilians in the case of ongoing protection risks.

## **CHRISTMAS NEVER COMES**

A recurrent complaint across the UN has been the length, complexity, and viability of MONUSCO's mandates. Over time, the Council appears to have missed opportunities to refine and focus the mission's mandate, instead appending an ever-increasing list of tasks that are not easily prioritized. With a Council resolution that now exceeds 15 pages of dozens of tasks with disparate time frames and potential for implementation, the mission's mandate has appeared fractured rather than coherent, pulled between myriad of priorities without an overarching vision of its role in country. "The Security Council has become far less disciplined and the language has gotten looser," a senior Secretariat official explained. "This is because each Council member is more

concerned with making sure its specific issue is in the mandate, not whether the mandate makes sense.”<sup>87</sup> Other experts also noted that internal pressures – by a variety of specialist UN agencies demanding their issue be reflected in the mission mandates – meant that mandates tended to balloon over time.

From a political standpoint, the result has been equally muddled in recent years, more of a list of political tasks than a clearly articulated role in country. The UN’s role in support of the elections initially scheduled for 2016 was a case in point: amongst the long list of issues in the “political situation” section of the mandate, the actual role of MONUSCO was difficult to discern. “In the earlier years, the Council had an easy job,” a MONUSCO official noted. “It could just say ‘support the peace agreement’ and the UN knew what to do because it was all in there. But once there was no peace agreement, once the Council started trying to deal with all of the other troubles in Congo, the political place for the UN stopped being clear.”<sup>88</sup>

## **EAST MISSES WEST**

The increasing security focus of MONUC/MONUSCO was accompanied by a gradual shift of resources and attention to eastern Congo, most visibly when the mission relocated senior positions to Goma in 2014-15 (though by then a bulk of staff were already in the east). On one hand, this shift was the logical result of wishing to be closer to the most heavily affected conflict areas, to place the strategic planning of the mission closer to its operations. Several MONUSCO officials, however, spoke of this shift as diluting the mission’s sense of its political role in Kinshasa, and of bifurcating the mission into two entities: a large force-driven neutralization/protection/stabilization mission in eastern Congo, and a small political mission in Kinshasa. This was of course not actually the case – MONUSCO’s leadership regularly met and took joint decisions for all of the DRC – but the tendency for the mission to describe itself in dual terms did appear to increase as a result of this shift.

## **A BLACK BOX VERSUS A HEADLINE**

At different moments in the lifespan of MONUC/MONUSCO, the mission’s public persona has waxed and waned. During the 2006 elections period, the mission was on the front page of most newspapers, and even in the post-electoral period under SRSB Doss there was a robust public information campaign that kept the mission in the headlines. This public profile played an important role in staking out room for manoeuvre for the mission at key moments, but it also came at a cost: SRSB Kobler’s well-publicized decision to ‘red flag’ Congolese generals for joint neutralization operations was an embarrassment to the Government and meant MONUSCO was quickly isolated in Kinshasa. In contrast, SRSB Sidikou’s low-profile approach appeared to mollify many political actors and may have brought him closer to the decision-makers during the constitutional crisis, but possibly with little leverage to assert the UN’s position with the parties.

These differences in leadership styles are important. They point to the question of whether a political strategy should be a formal document disseminated widely, or whether it should reside largely in the head of the SRSB. Several former MONUC/MONUSCO staff suggested that the overall vision for the mission, including the political role and how the UN would interact with the parties, was not something that could be written down. “The SRSB is a black box,” one stated. “The political strategy is just what the SRSB has in his/her mind.”<sup>89</sup> Others, however, were critical of this and suggested that the most effective moments of the mission were where the broader vision was clearly disseminated across the mission and publicly. The differences also point to a deeper issue about how the profile and personality of SRSBs shape missions: some establish ambitious public personas for the mission, others adopt a quieter, less antagonistic line.



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## IV --- Key Findings

**M**any aspects of the MONUC/MONUSCO experience are not unique. Other large missions have been drawn into settings with little prospect of short transition to post-conflict peacebuilding; several other missions have seen peace processes disintegrate, leaving them with little peace to keep. And missions often face similar problems of eroding host State consent amidst growing internal conflicts. The following section therefore offers some broader lessons and recommendations for those involved in mandating or leading peace operations.

### **1 Link mandates to political frameworks**

UN peacekeeping in the DRC saw its greatest relevance when it was clearly situated within a peace process, playing a well-defined role.

Following the 2006 elections – when the formal transitional period articulated in the peace agreement lapsed – the Security Council and the mission found it far more difficult to articulate a political role for the UN in country. While there were certainly moments when that role was evident (e.g. in the 2011 elections, and briefly following the establishment of the PSCF), the lack of a framework for a political process plagued the mission for much of its lifespan. If the Council sees no such framework, it should interrogate the ambition of its mandate, rather than continue to broaden it as the Council did in the case of MONUSCO.

### **2 Get back to basics**

MONUSCO demonstrates perhaps the most obvious case of “mission creep” in UN

peacekeeping. Over time, the Council gradually amplified the mission's mandate, adding task upon task until the mission was overburdened, without a clear vision of what it had to achieve. Some of the tasks, especially those related to large-scale national reforms, are more likely to take place over a 40-year period than the far shorter horizon of peacekeeping. Looking back across the lifespan of the mission, the clearest examples of success are those related to implementing a peace agreement, such as the UN's support to the post-2003 transition, its early work on the PSCF, and some of its efforts to implement agreements between armed groups and the Government. Over the years, as the DRC made little progress on its national reform and stabilization agenda, these issues failed to give the UN leverage with the political leadership of the country. Rather than broadening a peacekeeping mission's set of tasks into areas it is unlikely to impact meaningfully in the short-term, the Council and the Secretariat would do well to examine the more achievable elements of MONUC/MONUSCO's tasks and refocus on those.

### **3 Design synergies, not competing priorities**

One of the major challenges of MONUSCO's sprawling mandate has been the sense that different mission components were competing for priority. Great attention has been paid to the position of tasks within the mandate (on the assumption that higher placement in a resolution means higher priority), while the Council has occasionally issued guidance on priorities. Likewise, and particularly under the Islands of Stability approach, tasks have sometimes been considered sequentially, with the political objectives as a sort of final stage in a largely security-driven process. This mindset is not helpful, as it reinforces the mission as a grouping of separate pillars, rather than a single entity pursuing a common vision. Instead, missions should start with a single overarching political set of objectives and then articulate how the other tasks (PoC, stabilization, human rights, etc.) contribute to that goal together and in support of each other.

### **4 Understand and shape the relationship with the host government**

Some of MONUC/MONUSCO's most important successes were done in direct partnership with the Government. However, at times the mission has been seen as too close to the Government, potentially undermining its ability to exercise its political role impartially. This has especially been the case in the context of joint military operations with the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC), which were perceived by some Congolese as an example of the UN being instrumentalized, but also in the context of the 2011 elections, during which the UN was perceived as supporting a process that had been unduly altered by Kabila. In developing an overarching strategy for the UN in country, mission leaders should pay special attention to the issue of host State consent, how partnership with the host government will be addressed, and areas where a certain amount of critical distance may be needed. This should be done as early as possible, including possibly ahead of the Council mandate for a new peace operation.<sup>90</sup>

### **5 Beware a hostage situation**

Some of the more ambitious elements of the UN's mandates in the Congo presented a familiar Catch-22: either the Government reforms or the UN will not leave, but given the UN has no power to implement those reforms, it remains. The UN mission then becomes somewhat hostage to Government intentions rather than an instrument of Council decision-making. This also means the UN is continually negotiating from a position of weakness, more eager to stay than the host government wishes. The Council and the Secretariat should take this dynamic into account when designing mandates, and also when planning for key shifts such as transitions.

### **6 Understand who does what**

The DRC presents one of the most crowded fields in international conflict resolution. Dozens of special envoys fly in and out of Kinshasa; major regional organizations like the AU and Southern

African Development Community maintain envoys in and around the country; hundreds of peace-oriented NGOs compete for donor money for their programmes; while the UN maintains an SRSG of MONUSCO, a Special Envoy for the Great Lakes, a Group of Experts and one of the largest UNCTs in the world. In the past, the bifurcation of the UN Department of Political Affairs and Department of Peacekeeping Operations meant these actors received different guidance and support from their respective hierarchies. Security Council mandates necessarily focus on the peacekeeping mission itself and are not useful tools in laying out clear responsibilities. This places even greater onus on the Secretariat and mission leadership to develop strategies where the respective roles are articulated.

## **7 Differentiate between a plan and a strategy**

For much of MONUC/MONUSCO's lifespan, there has not been a formal document that would be considered a mission-wide strategy. In its later years, Mission Concepts were developed, but

these were often less of a strategy and more of a roadmap for implementing the Council's mandate. "We have tended to go straight into mission planning," a MONUSCO staff member noted, "which gets us straight into operations and the results-based budget without that higher-level sense of the strategic direction of the mission."

## **8 Headquarters as a mission backstop**

The MONUC/MONUSCO experience points to the need to have strong mission leadership buy-in and control over strategy-making, including when it comes to influencing the content of Council mandates and the development of mission strategies. In this regard, the Secretariat appears to have been most effective when it acted as a backstopping partner, offering support and broad guidance, participating in an iterative and constructive exchange. A review of Mission Concept guidance with this preferred dynamic in mind would be helpful.<sup>91</sup>

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Case Study 2

# PEACEKEEPING WITHOUT A PARTNER

A Review of UNAMID's Political Strategy in Darfur

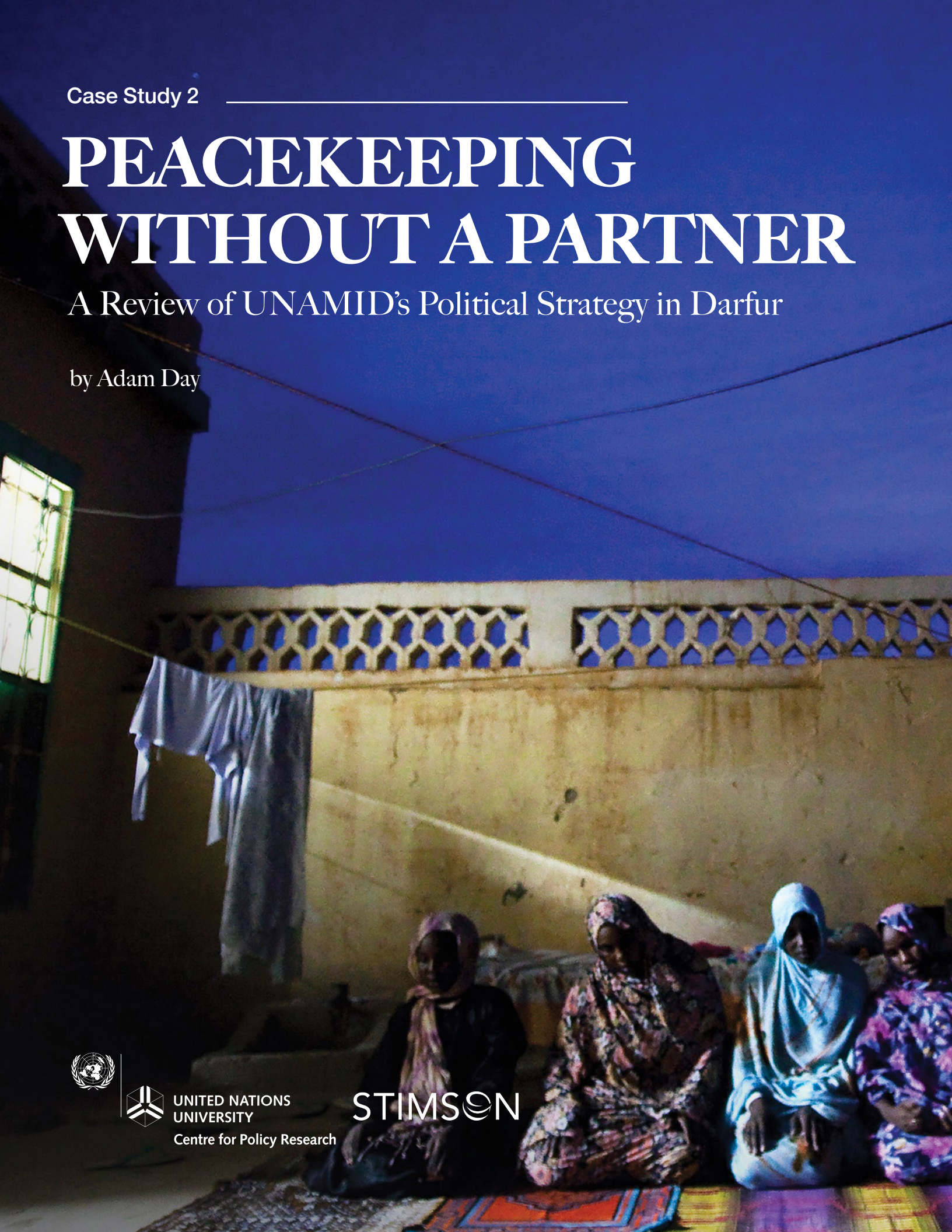
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The establishment of the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) in 2007 was the outcome of a highly contentious, complex process that broke new ground for the UN in a number of ways. For the first time, the UN and African Union (AU) were mandated by the Security Council jointly to oversee a peacekeeping operation, one that not only took over from a pre-existing AU-led mission (the African Union Mission in Sudan – AMIS), but also co-existed with another UN peacekeeping mission in the country (UNMIS) and a distinct UN-AU mediation process for Darfur. From its outset, UNAMID faced enormous challenges, including a host Government overwhelmingly unwilling to accept its deployment into Sudan, a massive displaced population that remained at acute risk to attacks by the belligerents, and a peace agreement that was essentially dead on arrival with the parties.

The extraordinarily difficult starting conditions for UNAMID did not get easier over its 13-year life in Darfur. Successive attempts to broker a peace deal resulted in new agreements, but none that gained broad based buy-in from the main parties to the conflict, while risks to civilians continued across the subregion. And throughout most of its deployment, the mission was severely hampered by a non-cooperative host Government that prevented its freedom of movement, restricted personnel coming into the mission and frustrated many day-to-day operations. Even after the 2019 coup – which ended the 30-year reign of President Bashir and ushered in a new governing coalition – the Darfur peace process has remained fragile, with continued fighting in parts of the region. Today, there are nearly as many internally displaced people in Darfur as there were in 2007, the peace

process remains largely unimplemented, and the mission has struggled to execute its mandate to protect civilians. Already beginning a draw down set to finish in October 2020, UNAMID is likely to complete its time in Darfur with relatively little progress on the political aspects of its mandate.

This study examines UNAMID's political mandate in Darfur, paying particular attention to the ways in which the mission developed strategies during different phases of its deployment. The driving question behind the study is: *How did the Security Council, UN Secretariat, and mission leadership develop politically-driven strategies at key moments in the mission's lifespan?* It explores three different moments in UNAMID's tenure in Darfur: (1) its initial mandate in 2007, which provided the mission with its overall set of objectives, including support to the Darfur Peace Agreement;<sup>1</sup> (2) the 2014 shift of mandate to support the Doha Declaration of Peace for Darfur;<sup>2</sup> and (3) the period from 2018 to late 2019, during which the Council called for UNAMID to develop an exit strategy from Darfur, including eventually in the context of the new Government that came into power in Sudan in 2019. For each period, the study examines how the Council's mandate was translated into a new strategic direction for the mission, with particular attention to the demands on the mission to support the Darfur peace process. It also looks at how the other mission priorities – such as protection of civilians (PoC), facilitation of humanitarian assistance and human rights monitoring – were balanced alongside the political work of the mission.

Based on this analysis, the report offers some broader lessons for peace operations, including for the Security Council, the UN Secretariat and mission leadership.



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# Three Key Moments in UNAMID's Political Life

This section analyses three key moments in UNAMID's tenure in Darfur, examining how each Security Council mandate was formed, translated into a plan by the Secretariat and the mission, and then implemented on the ground. It concludes that in all three moments (2007, 2014 and 2018), there was extremely limited space for UNAMID to play a direct political role on the peace process, and as a result few opportunities to craft a mission-wide political strategy. In some cases, the mission was not able to generate a mission plan at all; in others, strategic direction and guidance was developed in an iterative fashion amongst the Council, AU and UN secretariats, and the mission.

## Phase I The Mission Begins

UNAMID's initial mandate was shaped in large part by three related factors: the pre-existing deployment of AMIS, deep divisions within the Security Council, and strong resistance by the Government of Sudan to any UN-led intervention in Darfur. Examining these together, this section argues that UNAMID's political role was at most a secondary consideration of the Security Council, contributing to an unclear mandate and a challenging starting point for the mission's work on the peace process. This in turn meant that for its first years, UNAMID struggled to develop a mission strategy, focusing mainly on

the challenges of its deployment and leaving the political process almost entirely to the separate Joint AU/UN mediation.

## MANDATING UNAMID

By mid-2003, the war in Darfur had resulted in tens of thousands of deaths and more than two million displaced persons, prompting an international outcry and hurried efforts by the AU to broker a ceasefire between the main rebel groups and the Government of Sudan. The September 2003 ceasefire agreement signed in N'Djamena became the basis for the deployment of AMIS in early 2004, which was mandated to monitor the agreement, facilitate humanitarian delivery and contribute to improved security.<sup>3</sup> Comprised of roughly 2,000 troops, less than 500 military observers and 800 unarmed civilian police, AMIS was a thin line of defence between the so-called *janjaweed* militias and the millions of vulnerable Darfuri civilians. Recurrent attacks on AMIS forces resulted in dozens of AU fatalities, while the mission was hampered by chronic shortfalls in funding, equipment and well-trained police.<sup>4</sup>

In May 2006, pressed by the AU, two of the rebel groups and the Government signed the Darfur Peace Agreement, committing the parties to a ceasefire, disarmament of the pro-government militias, power- and wealth-sharing arrangements, and a Darfur-wide dialogue process to broaden participation in the peace process.<sup>5</sup> This was, however, only a very partial agreement that lacked buy-in from the rebels and the Government (not to mention the rebel groups that did not sign), and did little to lessen the continued violence in Darfur. Calling the situation a threat to international peace and security, the UK, US, France and several elected members of the Security Council<sup>6</sup> co-sponsored a proposed resolution on a UN peacekeeping force that would deploy 17,000 troops and 3,000 police under a Chapter VII (Action with Respect to the Peace, Breaches of the Peace and Acts of Aggression) mission, reinforcing AMIS and mitigating the risks of further large-scale civilian deaths.<sup>7</sup> In response, China, Russia and Qatar abstained from the vote, arguing that deployment of such a force without the consent of the Government of Sudan would be a violation of

the country's sovereignty.<sup>8</sup> President Bashir also reacted negatively to the proposed resolution, publicly withholding consent and likened it to a form of "Western colonization."<sup>9</sup> The AU – of which Sudan was of course a member – remained lukewarm to the resolution, wishing to retain strategic control over the peacekeeping forces deployed in Darfur.<sup>10</sup> This meant no resolution was passed for nearly a year.

In July 2007, the Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 1769, calling for the creation of an AU-UN hybrid force to replace AMIS, eventually calling it the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID).<sup>11</sup> In order to assuage the concerns of China, Russia, Sudan and the AU, several important modifications were made to the previous draft resolution. Perhaps most importantly, UNAMID was to have "an African character," a fairly vague term that was interpreted to mean that the troops deployed would be mostly African, key leadership positions within the mission would be held by Africans and that the AU would maintain a strategic partnership with the UN in guiding the mission (though the UN retained sole control over the operational chain of command). The Council also dropped previous language related to the threat of sanctions if Khartoum did not accept the force, and punitive language related to Khartoum's obstruction of humanitarian aid.<sup>12</sup>

The core mandate of UNAMID was drawn from a joint UN/AU report,<sup>13</sup> elements of AMIS' mandate and a report of the UN Secretary-General of July 2006.<sup>14</sup> On its face, the mandate was broad and ambitious, calling on UNAMID to:

- Contribute to security conditions to allow for humanitarian delivery and return;
- Protect civilians under imminent threat;
- Assist in the implementation of the Darfur Peace Agreement, and monitor the 2004 ceasefire agreement;
- Assist in the political process, including to support the AU/UN Joint Mediation;
- Contribute to a secure environment for economic reconstruction and development;

- Contribute to the promotion of human rights;
- Assist in the promotion of rule of law, including institutional support; and
- Monitor the Sudan/Chad/Central African Republic border.

The resolution was also specific on how the Security Council expected UNAMID to support the political process, articulating the following tasks as part of its Good Offices function:

- Support to the AU/UN Joint Special Representative (JSR) for Darfur, and the mediation efforts of the Special Envoys of the AU and European Union (EU);
- Support and monitor implementation of the Darfur Peace Agreement and any subsequent agreements;
- Participate in and support the main bodies established by the Darfur Peace Agreement, including through technical and logistical support;
- Facilitate the conduct of the Darfur-Darfur Dialogue and Consultation mechanism laid out in the Darfur Peace Agreement;
- Assist the referendums laid out in the Darfur Peace Agreement;
- Ensure complementary implementation of all peace agreements in Sudan; and
- Liaise with UNMIS and the AU on implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement for Sudan.<sup>15</sup>

On its face, UNAMID's mandate appears to carve out a clear political role for the mission in support of the peace process; however, the reality was much murkier. Here, it is worth highlighting that UNAMID was mandated to support the AU's lead role in the peace process, given the central role of the AU in brokering the Darfur Peace Agreement and its standing with the parties.<sup>16</sup> The types of support demanded from the mission were in reality much less political and much more technical/logistical, especially its support to the Joint AU/UN Mediation Team leading talks with the parties. In fact, by establishing a separate mediation team outside of UNAMID's command

structure, the message was a fairly clear one, expressed by a former official of a Security Council Member State: "We saw UNAMID as the cars, the planes and the money to underpin a peace process being run mainly by the AU; we didn't necessarily like it, but that was the reality."<sup>17</sup>

Rather than an overtly political role, several experts noted that UNAMID was established primarily to carry out many of the tasks that AMIS had been unable to perform due to its capacity shortfalls. Here, the large military component of the mission (nearly 20,000 troops) and mandate to protect civilians and facilitate humanitarian delivery reflected an overriding focus of the Security Council on the security situation, while the political process was what one UN expert called "aspirational background noise."<sup>18</sup> Instead of playing an active role in the peace talks amongst the parties, the Council oriented UNAMID more towards a preparatory and supportive role; for example, the most direct tasking of the mission was to facilitate the Darfur-Darfur Dialogue and Consultation, a process designed to broaden civil society buy-in to an eventual expansion of the Darfur Peace Agreement into an agreement amongst all belligerent groups in Darfur. While important, this was at least one step removed from the main action of the negotiations, which were envisaged by the Council as a separate process led by the Joint Mediation.

## OPERATIONS WITHOUT STRATEGY

Within the UN Secretariat, the bulk of the preparations for UNAMID were focused on the thorny issue of host State consent, particularly with regard to the deployment of troops into Sudan, leaving little room to translate the mandate into a political strategy for the peace process. President Bashir was clearly unwilling to accept the earlier formulations of a UN-led mission, and it was only after a concerted diplomatic effort – including at a meeting between Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and the Sudanese Foreign Minister – that Khartoum grudgingly agreed to the deployment of the hybrid mission with an African character.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, the UN's efforts to keep the AU on board with the deployment of the mission meant that gradually the UN ceded nearly all of the political role to the AU. "There was no possibility to orchestrate a common political strategy," a



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former senior UN official said, “because we used up all our energy just trying to get people into Darfur.”<sup>20</sup>

In New York, an Integrated Operational Team – composed of political officers, military, police, logistics and human resources – was formed in 2007 to support the deployment and strategic direction of UNAMID. This team managed a heavy lift from an operational standpoint: in a very short period of time, the UN had to generate roughly 20,000 troops from African countries, many of which did not have the logistics or the training to deploy quickly. Coordination with the African Union added another layer to the Secretariat’s work, given that the strategic guidance given to UNAMID needed to be consulted and often cleared in Addis. This overriding focus on operational deployment of the mission meant that the Secretariat generated little political guidance to the mission in the first years of its deployment. “For the Secretariat, UNAMID’s biggest political challenge was getting into Darfur and moving troops around – there wasn’t really much bandwidth for thinking of what the mission might do on the political process,” one

former member of the Secretariat said.<sup>21</sup> Another former UN official was even more critical: “the UN leadership assumed that UNAMID’s operational presence in Darfur would create political leverage and a role for the mission, but that simply never happened.”<sup>22</sup>

On the ground, the mission leadership was equally concerned with UNAMID’s operational challenges, with little scope to develop a political strategy for engagement. The JSR, a Congolese former minister serving in his first peacekeeping mission, did not develop a mission-wide strategy for UNAMID during his tenure leading the mission. While some parts of the mission did have strategic documents (for example the force had a military concept of operations based on Resolution 1769), there was no overarching Mission Concept for UNAMID in its first years. Midway through 2008, a seasoned UN official was brought in as the civilian Chief of Staff, helping to develop more rigorous planning for the mission, and in February 2009 the mission issued a directive on PoC. However, no political or mission-wide strategy was developed or disseminated in the first years of the mission.

This does not mean the mission was completely unengaged politically in Darfur. The head of UNAMID's political section at the time, a dynamic personality who later joined President Mbeki's mediation team supporting the political process for Sudan and South Sudan, deployed political officers to the different Darfuri states ostensibly in support of the Darfur-Darfur Dialogue and Consultation provisions of the peace process. UNAMID also supported the visits of the Joint Mediation Team, including by facilitating direct talks with the rebel group leadership around Darfur, while the UNAMID force regularly met with the signatories to the ceasefire to encourage further commitments to the peace process. However, a range of experts and UN officials involved at the time agreed that these kinds of activities did not rise to the level of serious political engagement with the main parties to the conflict, or much influence over the course of the talks. "UNAMID was never positioned to do political work in Darfur or Khartoum," a former senior UN official said. "How could the mission develop a political strategy when it had no role to begin with?"

The combination of recurrent operational challenges, a heavy security focus by the UN Secretariat and the mission leadership, and an unclear political role in Darfur meant that UNAMID did not develop political strategy during its first two years of deployment. It was only in 2010, in the context of the South Sudan referendum and a broader reconfiguration of the UN presence across Sudan, that the Secretariat initiated a strategic review of the mission, resulting in a mission plan. But even then, as the subsequent sections illustrate, UNAMID struggled to carve out a political role for itself in the peace process.

## Phase II

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### A Shift Towards the Political

In 2011 an apparent breakthrough occurred in the political process for Darfur, as several rebel groups and the Government of Sudan signed the Doha Document for Peace in Darfur (DDPD). This was combined with a decision to fold the joint mediation role into that of the JSR of UNAMID,

placing the mission ostensibly in a far more central role to the political process. However, like its predecessor, the DDPD suffered from a lack of meaningful buy-in by the parties, many of whom continued to fight openly in Darfur over the next two years while others remained outside the process. Frustrated by a lack of progress on the peace process, in 2013 the Security Council called for a joint AU-UN strategic review of UNAMID, focused in large part on its role vis-à-vis the peace process.<sup>23</sup>

The review painted an extremely pessimistic picture of the situation on the ground and pointed to the limited scope for UNAMID to impact the peace process.<sup>24</sup> Specifically, the review noted that UNAMID was unable to perform its three core political functions: (1) support to the signatory parties of the DDPD; (2) engagement with the Government and the rebel movements to promote negotiations; and (3) support to Darfur-based internal dialogue and consultations. The review stated that UNAMID had been unable to move the signatories forward due to delays in the implementation of the agreement and the absence of a more inclusive political settlement with non-signatories. Lack of unity across the rebel movements as to how talks should proceed had left the process stagnant, while divergent views across the international community had failed to produce pressure on the parties. The review called for a renewed focus on UNAMID's role in supporting the DDPD, with a top priority given to its work in mediating between the Government and the non-signatory armed movements. It also laid out clear political benchmarks for the parties to achieve relative to the peace process, with UNAMID playing a direct brokering and monitoring role.

The AU/UN strategic review was so impactful the Security Council immediately endorsed its findings, without the usual haggling over terms and outside of its usual mandate renewal cycle.<sup>25</sup> The resolution gave UNAMID three priority areas: protection, mediation between the Government and the non-signatories, and mediation of local level conflict, all of which the Council suggested were in support of the DDPD. This constituted a significant shift for UNAMID, placing greater emphasis on its role in the political process, and dropping other issues; in fact, the Council



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specifically instructed the mission to de-prioritize a range of tasks that had been included in the mission's original mandate, including support to rule of law institutions and the police.

The way in which Resolution 2148 was created suggests a significant shift from earlier mandates for UNAMID. Here, the Council had requested a joint strategic review from the secretariats of the AU and the UN, which ultimately proposed a revamping of the political role of UNAMID. The subsequent resolution essentially endorsed the findings of the review without modification. "We wrote UNAMID's mandate," one UN official stated, "the Council accepted everything we had in the review."<sup>26</sup> The Council also required that the UN and AU jointly report on progress against these priority areas every year, with a six-month review between reports in addition to the regular reporting of the Secretary-General. As described below, this frequency of reporting became one of the most important ways in which UNAMID's strategic direction was set, largely by the UN and AU headquarters.

## FACTS ON THE GROUND

While the 2014 Security Council mandate articulated a more overtly political role for UNAMID, several factors affected its ability to translate the mandate into a viable political strategy. Firstly, in early 2014, President Bashir implemented Operation Decisive Summer, an offensive into North and South Darfur aimed at eradicating the rebel strongholds and ending their ability to challenge the State. Between 2014 and mid-2015, the Sudanese army launched a series of large-scale operations into Darfur, destroying the operating capabilities of the major armed groups across most of the region and displacing tens of thousands of civilians in the process.<sup>27</sup> In the wake of these attacks, Bashir declared the war in Darfur to be over, closing off further negotiations with non-signatory parties and essentially ending any prospect for a renewed political process under the DDPD. Instead, he launched a national dialogue process under Sudanese auspices, without any direct demand on UNAMID. "By the end of Operation Decisive Summer, there was no mediation to be



done,” a former UN official stated.<sup>28</sup> Here, the key role articulated by the Security Council for UNAMID – mediation between the Government of Sudan and the non-signatory armed groups – had been largely foreclosed by facts on the ground.

Secondly, the position of Khartoum in the international arena was shifting rapidly as Sudan became less of a pariah State. Facing a deepening financial crisis in 2014-15, Khartoum was increasingly desperate to rebuild its status with the international community, rid itself of crippling sanctions, and draw donor assistance. Bashir reached out to Arab allies, joined the Saudi-led coalition on Yemen and disowned its relationship with Iran. The Sudanese Government also offered its assistance in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), aligning with the US and other major powers in the hopes of improving its status with the West. As the European refugee crisis took hold, Sudan also became an important migration point, a place where European powers saw value in supporting the Khartoum to prevent onward migration. “This big shift in attitude towards Sudan meant that the Western powers were much less interested in shoving a peace agreement down Bashir’s throat,” one UN official said. “It meant that when Khartoum said negotiation with the rebels was over, most of the major powers just accepted it.”<sup>29</sup> Several UN officials working on the Darfur file at the time similarly noted that the Council dynamic reflected this lack of eagerness to push a peace process too hard while Khartoum was helping far more high-profile issues like the fight against ISIS. Again, this left UNAMID with less scope to play the political role envisaged by the Council mandate.

Thirdly, the AU began to take a much more overt leadership role on the political track. While UNAMID and the Joint Mediation had both been established on the basis of a partnership between the AU and the UN, the relationship between the two entities was never smooth on Darfur. As early as 2008, the AU created the African Union High-Level Panel on Darfur (AUPD), led by former South African President Thabo Mbeki, to essentially chart out a separate track for its own political engagement. In 2009, the AUPD’s 125-page report entitled “Darfur: the Quest for Peace, Justice and Reconciliation” recommended a wide range of steps Khartoum and the parties to the conflict should take to achieve peace.<sup>30</sup> On the basis of this report, the AU publicly announced a roadmap of its own for a global political settlement for Darfur, renaming the AUPD the African Union High-Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP) and designating it as the lead entity on the political talks. “This was a clear indication from the AU that it didn’t see the UN as a major player in the Darfur peace process,” an expert pointed out.<sup>31</sup> In August 2014, just as the Council was articulating a more central role for UNAMID in the DDPD, a high-level AU, UN and Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD) meeting agreed that AUHIP should take a lead role in bringing the armed movements into a national dialogue with Khartoum. “From that point on,” a former UN official noted, “all of the meetings with the opposition groups, armed groups and other players in the Darfur conflict were conducted by AUHIP, not UNAMID.”<sup>32</sup>

Finally, by 2014 the bulk of New York’s focus on UNAMID was on reducing its size and cost. From 2014 to 2018, UNAMID’s staffing was reduced by roughly 40 per cent, while the budget dropped



from USD \$1.3 billion to \$400 million during that period.<sup>33</sup> “We were consumed with trimming the monster,” a UN official involved in the UNAMID file said. “Most of the energy was directed at putting the mission on a severe diet.”<sup>34</sup> Here, the relationship between UNAMID and the Secretariat was often strained, as the mission resisted ever-increasing cuts to its budget, which it saw as reducing its capacities to deliver on its mandate. According to several UN officials, one of the ways the mission resisted was by avoiding any development of a Mission Concept or strategy. “UNAMID saw strategic planning as yet another way for Headquarters to pare them back, because once a new strategic planning process was started, the Secretariat would start asking what resources were really needed for reaching these goals.”<sup>35</sup> This meant that for the 2014-2017 period, UNAMID developed no mission-wide strategy, despite the clear call for a political role in the DDPD.

## MANAGING UP AND DOWN

Instead of a traditional mission strategy, the Secretariat began to use its regular AU/UN reporting requirements to the Council as a *de facto* strategic plan. In April 2014, the AU/UN special report on Darfur proposed a modification of the mission’s benchmarks, including related to the peace process.<sup>36</sup> In endorsing these benchmarks, the Council requested similar AU/UN reporting on an annual basis, with reviews every six months. “We [the Secretariat] created a cycle with the mission and the Security Council,” a former senior member of the Darfur team in New York said, “where the mission’s mandate implementation was fully captured in the benchmarks. We would travel to Darfur four

or five times a year, be sure the mission had a chance to feed into the process, but also use the visits as a way to give strategic direction to the mission based on these reports.”<sup>37</sup>

Basing the strategic direction to the mission on regular reporting to the Council meant that UNAMID’s approach was constantly being updated. Rather than a static document with a two-year end state (typical of mission strategies in the UN), UNAMID was guided by a report that contained the latest updates on the political and security situation. This allowed for gradual changes to be made to the strategy, including where the political emphasis would fall for the mission. For example, as the impacts of Operational Decisive Summer became increasingly clear, the importance of the political negotiations in the DDPD shrank, while intercommunal violence rose significantly. Recognizing this shift, the 2016 special AU/UN report recommended that UNAMID shift its focus towards protecting the newly displaced populations and resolution of intercommunal violence.<sup>38</sup> As one expert on the UN said, “The Secretariat helped the Council recognize that the elite political process wasn’t something UNAMID could really influence, so it was able to change the mission’s priorities towards intercommunal violence, without causing a huge ripple in Council dynamics because it was based on the AU/UN recommendation.”<sup>39</sup> Another expert captured the role of the Secretariat: “Headquarters found a way to manage up to the Security Council through these joint reports, and also to manage down to the mission.”<sup>40</sup> This role of the Secretariat became even more important during the shift towards drawing down UNAMID and developing an exit strategy for the mission.

## Phase III

### Leaving Darfur

For many Darfur experts, UNAMID's exit had become an inevitability well before the Security Council formally took up the issue in 2014. Chronic shortcomings in the mission's ability to protect civilians, lack of progress on the political negotiations, and an inability to prevent resurgent intercommunal violence following the signing of the DDPD all contributed to a growing sense of frustration and a willingness of the Council to consider drawing UNAMID to a close. "By 2014, the writing was on the wall," a former UNAMID official said, "the mission had to go."<sup>41</sup> How the Security Council mandated the eventual transition of the mission, and how this mandate was translated into a strategy for UNAMID in the lead up to the 2019 coup, is the principle focus of this section.

#### PROTECTION AND PEACEBUILDING

In August 2014, soon after the joint AU/UN report on Darfur, the Security Council issued a resolution that explicitly mentioned an exit strategy for UNAMID. The core request was for the UN to identify those tasks that could be progressively handed over to the UN Country Team (UNCT), based on an assessment of where it had a comparative advantage.<sup>42</sup> The Council also asked the Secretary-General to provide recommendations for an exit strategy for UNAMID, and on how a future mission might be configured. In the same resolution, the Council clearly shifted UNAMID's focus away from the political track, demanding that the mission give priority use of resources to protecting civilians and to facilitating humanitarian access.<sup>43</sup> "From that point on," a UN official noted, "most of the forward planning on UNAMID was focused on how to keep protecting civilians, drawing down the troops, and transitioning tasks to the country team. There wasn't really any focus on the peace process."<sup>44</sup>

Over the next two years, the situation in Darfur changed significantly, with a direct impact on the transition plan: the Khartoum-led Operation Decisive Summer led to a dramatic reduction in the number and size of armed groups

operating in the region, but also a resurgence of intercommunal conflict. Rather than focus on the national-level political process or mediation with the non-signatory groups, the Council pushed UNAMID towards protection and the progressive handover of peacebuilding tasks to the UNCT. Resolution 2363 (2017) was the clearest indication of this shift: UNAMID was tasked to pursue a two-prong approach, military security in the central Jebel Marra area and intercommunal peacebuilding in the rest of the region.<sup>45</sup> While UNAMID's role in supporting the mediation was still listed as a priority area, according to several experts involved in the process, it had been moved almost entirely to the back burner. "The AU was leading the political track, there was no real expectation that UNAMID would be seriously involved in the talks," one expert noted.<sup>46</sup>

One year later, Resolution 2429 (2018) built on this two-pronged approach and laid out a "whole of system" concept for the transition. Here, UNAMID was to collocate with the UNCT in each of Darfur's states, creating State Liaison Functions (SLF) that would deliver peacebuilding programming for communities and service delivery for displaced persons. According to a senior UN official involved in the transition planning, this approach reflected the realities of Darfur at the time. "Large parts of Darfur hadn't seen conflict in years; when we asked them what they wanted they said water, schools, roads, not peacekeeping and not more talks."<sup>47</sup>

Largely neglected in these plans was any high-level political role for UNAMID vis-à-vis the DDPD. In private meetings between the AU and the UN, senior AU officials reportedly suggested UNAMID quietly let go of any attempts to engage with the non-signatory parties, to "let the mediation slip into a coma."<sup>48</sup> And while the JSR did continue to spend a significant proportion of his time in Khartoum meeting with the leadership of various groups (in fact, his office moved to Khartoum as part of the transition concept), the dominant focus of the mission quickly became the transition out of Darfur.<sup>49</sup> Meetings of the Working Group for UNAMID's Exit in Khartoum became a key point of contact between the mission and the Government, but they focused almost exclusively on issues like troop reductions and asset transfers, offering few opportunities for the mission to engage meaningfully on the political process.<sup>50</sup>

## END DATE NOT AN END STATE

The underlying concept for UNAMID's exit was largely developed within the UN Secretariat, subsequently consulted with UNAMID's leadership and the AU, and then produced as a recommendation to the Security Council. "In New York, it became clear that UNAMID was phasing out, and the Secretariat designed the two-prong approach to help it reconfigure quickly into a peacebuilding presence," one senior UN official said. And while there was relatively clear agreement between the UN and AU secretariats on the two-year timeframe for this draw down, differences of view existed within the Security Council and UNAMID's leadership. "There was a big disconnect between Headquarters and the mission leadership in terms of the transition," a Security Council official noted. "And there was a feeling, including within some of the Council, that the Secretariat was rushing things, making decisions and then assuming we'd sign off on them."<sup>51</sup> While the Council only ever "took note" of the recommendation that UNAMID end its substantive mandate by June 2020, there was a strong sense that this timeframe was driving the process.

Concern about the timeframe was echoed by many in UNAMID itself, who claimed a two-year horizon for the transition was much too short, especially given the continuing violence in Jebel Marra and the large numbers of newly displaced people from Operation Decisive Summer. "It meant UNAMID was driven by an end date, not an end state," one expert said, highlighting that the timeframe for the transition became the overriding concern.<sup>52</sup> As the military draw down began in earnest – dropping the overall number of troops in Darfur from more than 15,000 to just over 4,000 in a two-year period – some in the mission worried that UNAMID would be left without crucial protection capacities at a fragile moment and little scope to provide a security guarantee for the peace process. "We had major armed groups refusing to participate in the DDPD, a real need to keep a peace process going, and open conflict in the Jebel Marra region, but UNAMID was still drawing down as fast as it could," one expert said.<sup>53</sup>

## TRANSITION PLANNING

Putting in place a transition plan for UNAMID was an enormous undertaking, one that consumed the bulk of the mission's energy from 2017 until the 2019 coup. A range of coordination and planning structures were put into place, including senior-level forums for UNAMID and the UNCT in the field, regular meetings of the Darfur Integrated Task Force in New York and occasional meetings of the Tripartite Coordination Mechanism comprised of the UN, AU and Sudanese leadership in Khartoum.<sup>54</sup> This was supported by the Joint Transitions Team from New York, a relatively new group drawn from the Department of Peace Operations (DPO), the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), and the UN Development Programme (UNDP).

By July 2018, this activity had resulted in the development of a Mission Concept for UNAMID's transition, largely following the two-pronged approach described above.<sup>55</sup> The Concept articulated a continuing role for UNAMID in support of the DDPD, including engagement with the Government and the non-signatory movements (indeed the Mission Concept notes that the JSR's relocation to Khartoum reflects the priority placed on the peace process). But in more concrete terms, the Mission Concept suggested that UNAMID would focus on the more local level on implementation of the DDPD, prioritizing rule of law, community reconciliation, service delivery, and durable solutions for internally displaced person.<sup>56</sup> "The transition concept kept the DDPD as a reference point, but only really the parts that included local work on peacebuilding," a UN official involved in the process said. "There was no real contemplation of who would take on the political aspects of the peace process that had been assigned to UNAMID, because there was a sense that the AU had already taken over the talks."<sup>57</sup>

## A COUP, A PAUSE, A LETTER

In April 2019, long-simmering popular discontent with President Bashir erupted into a mass protests and a coup whereby the military removed Bashir and his National Congress Party (NCP) from power. The installation of a



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transitional military council in Sudan resulted in continuing protests, harsh crackdowns and short-term suspension of Sudan from the AU.<sup>58</sup> In response to the extremely volatile moment in Sudan, the UN and AU conducted a joint strategic assessment to Sudan, focused on UNAMID's continued role and eventual draw down. While it recognized that the seismic shifts in Sudan called for the mission to adjust to the new realities in the country, it also suggested that the mission should continue to plan for its exit by the end of 2020.<sup>59</sup>

The joint AU/UN report issued at a moment of significant divisions amongst the Security Council about the future of UNAMID. A group of Member States including Germany and the UK (co-pen-holders on the Sudan), Poland, Belgium and France saw the Sudanese crisis as an opportunity to slow down the mission's exit; in contrast, Russia, China, Kuwait and Indonesia demanded that the transition continue along the timeframe articulated in Resolution 2429.<sup>60</sup> During its June 2019 deliberations, the AU Peace and Security Council issued a communiqué extending UNAMID's mandate for 12 months

and endorsing the continued closure of sites as part of the mission's draw down.<sup>61</sup> However, the African members of the Security Council soon transmitted an additional request to the Security Council, that UNAMID's draw down should be "paused."<sup>62</sup> This recommendation was taken up by the Council, which issued a July 2019 resolution temporarily pausing the draw down process, but not modifying the overall draw down period for the mission.<sup>63</sup>

Amidst this wrangling over dates (which took place over a long period from September 2019 to June 2020), "the key political question became what would the follow-on presence in Darfur be: would it be another security-focused mission, something more focused on peacebuilding, or something that would support the political process?"<sup>64</sup> It is worth flagging here that, prior to the 2019 coup, there was very little appetite within the Council for another peace operation to succeed UNAMID. Even as consensus grew on the need for some kind of mission, there were divisions within the Council, with some members pushing for a more protection-focused mission

(possibly with a Chapter VII mandate) and others demanding an end to peacekeeping in Darfur. In this context, newly elected Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok wrote two letters to the Security Council – the first in February and the second in March 2020 – which laid out Sudan’s request for a follow-on presence in Sudan: while the first letter articulated a much broader scope of activity for the UN across Sudan, the second laid out a more limited set of tasks that would include support for the peace negotiations taking place between the Sudanese parties, facilitation of humanitarian aid and technical support to Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration processes.<sup>65</sup>

It is worth noting here that most of these Council deliberations took place far from the dynamics of Khartoum, while the AU and IGAD were far more directly involved. Several experts pointed out that this distance from the political process in Sudan meant that the Council negotiations were disconnected from the realities on the ground, and largely done without input from the Sudanese leadership.<sup>66</sup> Here, because UNAMID had not developed strong relations with the powerbrokers in Khartoum, the mission did not provide an entry point to the Council either.

## AN OPPORTUNITY

At the time of writing, the Security Council had authorized a new political mission in Sudan, while UNAMID was continuing its planned draw down within the expected timeframe.<sup>67</sup> For UNAMID, the political landscape changed significantly. “UNAMID is now actively involved in the talks [between the Darfuri parties and the Sudanese Government] in Juba. The mission is much more central to the process that it was previously,” one expert on UNAMID said.<sup>68</sup> Others suggested that UNAMID was still largely a peripheral player, offering technical support more than substantively guiding the process, while the Council has remained almost totally unengaged on the Juba talks.

It remains to be seen whether the future UN presence is better able to execute its political tasks, but there are some early signs that it will. The new Government has demonstrated far greater openness to the UN playing a role in the peace process. And for its part, the UN has deployed one of the most capable and knowledgeable UN officials to Khartoum to lead the planning process for a new mission. As one Security Council member noted, “The stars are much better aligned this time around for a mission that will be able to meet expectations.”



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## II

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# Key Findings

UNAMID is widely known as one of the UN's most challenging peacekeeping experiences in the history of the UN. In discussions with experts within and outside the UN, there was near consensus that the hybrid AU/UN model did not generate the kind of strategic partnership between the organizations that would have been required for the mission to have gained real leverage in Sudan. Those directly involved in the day-to-day running of the mission almost uniformly referred to it in negative terms, highlighting the mission's reputation for poor performance, its difficult relationship with the host Government, and the lack of meaningful progress on the peace process during its tenure in Sudan.

As this study has demonstrated, many of the mission's shortcomings were the result of factors beyond its control. A divided Security Council meant UNAMID's mandates were more often

the result of political expediency and lowest common denominator thinking than any kind of strategic vision on the part of the Council. Indeed, one expert insightfully noted that the Council's strategy on Darfur was "designed to lay the groundwork for peacekeepers, not for peace."<sup>69</sup> Hemmed in on all sides, UNAMID suffered chronic obstructionism from Bashir's Government, frequent neglect from the AU and ever-increasing difficulties of attracting talented staff. The result, from the point of view of UNAMID's political role in Darfur, has been a mission overwhelmingly concerned with its own operational survival, struggling to overcome massive barriers to host Government consent to its very existence in country, and without the kind of concerted international and regional backing that would have been needed for it to press the conflict parties towards peace. There may be lessons too about mandating peace operations at the subnational level – the fact

that UNAMID was constrained to Darfur may well have contributed to its limited political leverage with national actors.

Nonetheless, the UNAMID experience offers a range of interesting and potentially important findings in terms of a peacekeeping mission's political role in a challenging conflict environment. As the UN has increasingly found itself in what Richard Gowan has called "the peacekeeping quagmire" – settings where peacekeepers are deployed with little prospect of overseeing a successful peace process – lessons from missions like UNAMID are more important than ever.<sup>70</sup> With this in mind, the following lessons may be of more general applicability:

## 1 Weight is not leverage

With an operating budget of USD \$1.3 billion, nearly 20,000 troops, and an expansive mandate across Darfur, UNAMID initially appeared to be an attempt to gain leverage through size. If anything, however, the enormous costs of deploying (often poorly trained) troops into a region that did not enjoy strong host State consent meant that the mission tended to cash its political chips on operation concerns. As one former senior UN official expert put it, "by the time we had used up our juice getting two civilians through the visa gauntlet and some of our troops' kit out from quarantine, there was no juice left to ask the Government for anything."<sup>71</sup> In fact, there may well be an inverse relationship between the size of a peacekeeping mission and the political leverage it enjoys, as its assets in country are more easily translated into *de facto* hostages than any kind of pressure point on the parties to the conflict.

## 2 No means no

From 2006 onwards, President Bashir was at best a reluctant host to UNAMID, more often acting as an overt barrier to the mission's success. "It was clear Bashir saw UNAMID as a Trojan horse for the West, a way to get European spies into Darfur, bolster the [International Criminal Court] case against him, and try to topple his Government," one expert noted. In the face of enormous international pressure to deploy something into

Darfur, the Security Council and the secretariats of the UN and AU appeared willing to imagine host State consent rather than achieve it. The result was a mission that spent nearly all of its energy overcoming the thousand daily cuts of an obstructionist host State, drafting notes verbales to extricate containers from impoundment, quietly removing senior staff from the mission area to avoid public expulsion, asking vainly for flight clearances that were never forthcoming in time for a rapid protection response. The lesson here is for the Council and the Secretariat to do more to test host State consent before deploying a mission, to be willing to send small, fact-finding missions to define the scope of possibility for a peace operation before spending USD \$1 billion on a mission that cannot implement its mandate.<sup>72</sup>

## 3 Dual/dueling bosses

The decision to mandate a joint AU/UN mission was seen at the time as a necessary step to garner consent from both Khartoum and Addis Ababa for UNAMID's establishment. However, it does not appear that the Security Council had a clear vision for how the two organizations would work together at the strategic level on Darfur, instead appearing to choose hybridity as a way of punting the question of strategy. As a result, the UN and AU often seemed more dueling than dual, more concerned with who would control direction of the mission than in arriving at a common vision for Darfur. The result was that UNAMID was gradually stripped of its political role, which moved towards the AU over time, leaving the mission with enormous operational responsibilities but little traction. As the UN and AU again consider how the two organizations may cooperate on the Darfur file for the follow-on presence, they should reach clear agreement at the highest level on roles, responsibilities and expected outcomes.

## 4 Support vs. service provision

UN peace operations can play enormously influential roles via the support they offer to conflict parties, whether technical, advisory, logistics or Good Offices. Throughout much of UNAMID's tenure, its mandate to support the



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peace process has been relegated to a technical and logistical one that has not translated into more direct influence. For example, its support to the Joint Mediation and the AUHIP-led talks was seen by many experts as little more than transport and convening space, without giving UNAMID much stake in the talks themselves. However, its more recent role in supporting the talks between the armed groups and the Government of Sudan in Juba have been viewed by some as somewhat more influential, allowing UNAMID to help shape the scope of discussions more than previous efforts. Both the Security Council and the Secretariat should consider how different forms of support in the various peacekeeping settings today might be calibrated to maximize leverage in political processes.

## 5 Partial peace agreements

UNAMID was established on the back of an incomplete peace agreement, characterized more by its non-signatories than its participants.<sup>73</sup> Here, the Council appeared to treat the peace agreement as “just a way to get boots on the

ground,” rather than part of a broader strategic approach to resolving the conflict in Darfur. As a result, the bulk of the mission’s political work was directed at expanding the participation and inclusiveness of the peace process, mediating towards a common position between the non-signatories and the Government. While a laudable task, it is not clear that this was the best role for a large multidimensional peacekeeping mission that was also tasked with protecting civilians, facilitating humanitarian aid, reporting on human rights and building up rule of law capacities.

## 6 A strategy vs. strategic direction

Through much of UNAMID’s history, it did not have a Mission Concept or did not employ a mission-wide strategy to guide all components. However, from around 2014 to present, the AU and UN secretariats appear to have effectively used their annual reporting requirements to set the strategic direction for UNAMID in an iterative process with the Security Council. Here, the gradual refinement of mission benchmarks in

the UN/AU reports have become a consistent reference point for Council mandates and have become integral to the strategic direction of the mission. While this does not necessarily replace the need for a mission strategy at the field level, the practice is one that could be considered for application beyond UNAMID. It may also be worth considering the process to produce the transition concept as a possible model for strategy-making.

## 7 Full car, empty driver's seat

In discussions with a range of actors including the Security Council, the AU/UN secretariats, and mission staff, it was often unclear where a strategy should be developed. Those within UNAMID rankled at the tendency of the Secretariat to set the strategic direction for the mission, arguing that it had paved the way for a precipitous draw down at a time of uncertainty for Sudan. In contrast, several UN staff in the Secretariat complained that the UNAMID leadership was reticent to develop its own political strategy, while the AU often appeared willing to develop its own approach in parallel to the UN. This points again to the lack of common vision at the highest levels

of the UN and AU on the purpose of UNAMID, but also to a more mundane need for clear articulation of roles and responsibilities from the outset of a peace operation.

## 8 Leverage in the transition

“UNAMID has never been more relevant than when it is headed out of Darfur,” one UN expert stated, noting that the mission’s transition to peacebuilding has given the UN new status within the country. While most transitions are thought of as a winding down and loss of influence in country, there can often be moments where the UN can utilize the fluidity of a transitional moment to reposition itself. In the case of Darfur, that may involve a recalibration of the UN’s role in the broader Sudan discussions, a recasting of the UN’s peacebuilding role in Darfur, and a renewed relationship with Khartoum following the 2019 coup. Rather than think of transitions as largely operational processes to reduce the footprint of the UN in-country – or worse, a handover of tasks to other actors – the UN should think of the reconfiguration of its presence as an opportunity to gain greater political leverage.<sup>74</sup>

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Case Study 3

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# WAITING FOR PEACE

A Review of UNMISS' Political Strategy  
in South Sudan


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The United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) was established in 2011 in a climate of optimism, immediately following the peaceful secession of South Sudan from Sudan. While UNMISS was in part designed to prevent a return to hostilities between Khartoum and Juba, its principal mandate was to build up the capacities of the South Sudanese State; one of the most ambitious and far-reaching State-building mandates in UN peacekeeping. With a USD \$1 billion annual budget and an extraordinarily broad remit to strengthen institutional capacities in the areas of rule of law, administration, and security sector reform (SSR), the first Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) of UNMISS declared that the UN's task in South Sudan was "literally building a country."<sup>1</sup>

The hubris and hope as UNMISS launched did not last long. The mirage that South Sudan could be held together by a complex patronage network soon evaporated and in-fighting within the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M) precipitated the outbreak of a brutal civil war in December 2013. In response, the Security Council mandated the termination of State-building activities and a reorientation towards physical, rights-based and humanitarian protection. Shifting mid-conflict from a peacebuilding mission to one focused primarily on protecting civilians was a radical departure from anything that had been tried before in the history of peacekeeping. UNMISS' cooperation with the Government deteriorated quickly and significantly, with freedom of movement

obstructed and impediments to basic operational functions commonplace in flagrant violation of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). This was followed by years of broken ceasefires and peace accords facilitated by duplicitous neighbours and all without the genuine buy-in of the main parties. Despite the signing of the revitalized agreement on resolution of conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in late 2018 – paving the way for the formation of a Transitional Government of National Unity – pockets of violence endured. Threats to civilians are manifold as critical provisions of the accord, such as cantonment and security arrangements as well as the issue of the number and boundaries of States, face significant hurdles to implementation. As of the time of writing, there are still more than 190,000 displaced people inside UN-administered protection of civilians (PoC) sites and millions more displaced around the country and across borders in neighbouring countries. While the relative traction of the R-ARCSS offers hope, the limited role UNMISS has played in making the deal, and is envisaged to play in its implementation, means that its impact on the political solution to conflict dynamics in South Sudan is diminished.

This study examines UNMISS' political strategy in South Sudan with a specific focus on the Mission Concepts developed at key junctures throughout the mission's history. It is based on a desk review of reports of the Secretary-General, Security Council resolutions, Mission Concept and strategies as well as an extensive review of the scholarly literature. It also draws

on field research in Juba, Bentiu and Malakal in December 2018, as well as interviews conducted with dozens of key informants remotely in May and June 2020. The main questions addressed herein are: *How did mission leadership, in cooperation with the UN secretariat, interpret and translate the mandate handed down by the Security Council into political strategies for UNMISS; what factors influenced this process; and, how has the strategy evolved?* The study examines three key moments of the mission lifecycle to date: first, the establishment of the mission in 2011, creating what was primarily a State-building mission to consolidate the newly independent State;<sup>2</sup> second, the transformation of the mandate in 2014 following the outbreak of war, ceasing the State-building project and pivoting to a protection focused operation;<sup>3</sup> and, third, the emergence from the outbreak of violence in 2016 symbolized

by the signing and incremental implementation of the R-ARCSS. These moments were selected as having triggered significant adjustments to the mission's political strategy. At each of these key junctures, the study examines the intent of the Security Council, how a new strategic direction was derived from the Council mandate and how that strategic vision was articulated within the mission's guidance architecture – focusing specifically on the directives for the mission to support the political process. In addition, the study analyses how this political work was articulated with other key priorities of the mandate, including PoC, facilitation of humanitarian assistance, and human rights monitoring. Based on this analysis, the study concludes with a series of lessons for peace operations stakeholders, including mission leadership, parts of the UN Secretariat and Member States in the Security Council members.



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# Translating UNMISS' Mandate into Political Strategies

This part of the study examines three key moments of UNMISS' time in South Sudan. At each critical juncture, it analyses: the context, examining the Security Council's intent for the mission; the interpretation of that mandate and translation into a Mission Concept and/or strategy; and the implementation of that strategy. The analysis shows that in each of these stages the political space for the mission to influence and manoeuvre was limited, often by factors well beyond the UN's control. Consequently, UNMISS has played a limited political role in the peace process. Nevertheless, at some moments the mission has developed politically-driven strategies, helping it to carve out a political role, and has also proven innovative in

linking its local conflict resolution to the broader national political process.

## Phase I Establishing the Mission (2011)

UNMISS' inaugural mandate was the product of a clear objective to build the capacity of the newly minted nation State and to work on outstanding Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) issues that risked a return to all-out war with the north. This section argues that the political objectives

of the Council were fairly straightforward but left little room for building peace that predicated on anything other than central Government as the main guarantor. A lack of political leverage over the Government was compounded by a lack of buy-in to critical disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) and security sector reform (SSR) processes. This dictated that little progress was made on the political strategy to create a peaceful polity predicated on the rule of law and democratic principles before it descended into civil war.

## HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

The UN's role in South Sudan since 2011 is inextricably connected with what happened throughout the 22-year civil war of independence. Sudan's 'second' civil war<sup>4</sup> pitted the Khartoum Government against the SPLA/M fighting over wealth, power, the role of religion in the State and self-determination. Over the course of two decades, more than two million people were killed, four million were displaced and around 600,000 sought refuge in neighbouring countries as refugees.<sup>5</sup> In 2005, a CPA was struck between the parties,<sup>6</sup> bringing an end to the war, sharing wealth from oil revenues and making provision for a UN mission to support its implementation and oversee a referendum on the question of independence for southern Sudan. Through *Operation Lifeline* and other channels, western donors had been zealous supporters of southern Sudan in its war with the north, providing political support in addition to vast amounts of aid. Yet, they took a back seat as junior partners to the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) as the chief brokers to this peace, with the UN having limited involvement.

Resolution 1590 in 2005 created the United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) as a multidimensional integrated operation with 10,000 troops and 715 police. Its three main objectives were to: (1) assist in implementing the CPA; (2) support security and justice sector reform; and, (3) protect civilians.<sup>7</sup> The Council explicitly mentioned a political role of UNMIS saying it should: "provide Good Offices and political support for the efforts to resolve all ongoing conflicts in Sudan."<sup>8</sup> It was given quite specific responsibilities relating to monitoring

and verifying the implementation of the ceasefire agreement. However, as the mission progressed its support to the implementation of the peace agreement was overwhelmingly focused on resolving the dispute over the oil-rich Abyei region and preparing for national elections in 2010 and the referendum in 2011.

It was widely agreed that without a meaningful transformation process, the SPLA/M rebel-group-turned-Government and more than 100,000 former liberation soldiers now responsible for security across the country posed high risks to civilians. The lack of progress on DDR and SSR would later contribute to the collapse of the fledgeling South Sudanese State in 2013.<sup>9</sup> The referendum on statehood for South Sudan was held in January 2011 resulting in an overwhelming majority (98.83% of participants) in favour of independence.<sup>10</sup> On 9 July 2011, South Sudan declared its independence marking the end of the CPA and the conclusion of UNMIS operations.

## MANDATING THE MISSION

On 8 July 2011, the Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 1996 mandating UNMISS to replace UNMIS.<sup>11</sup> Determining that the situation in South Sudan constituted a threat to international peace and security in the region, acting under Chapter VII of the Charter (Actions with Respect to Threats to the Peace, Breaches of the Peace and Acts of Aggression), the Council authorized UNMISS with 7,000 troops and 900 police. It specified a range of capacity-building tasks to support the new Government of South Sudan in peace consolidation, thereby fostering longer-term State-building and economic development.

On the one hand, the Council's overall intent was reasonably clear. The strategy of the mission was to focus on "strengthening the capacity of the Government of the Republic of South Sudan to govern,"<sup>12</sup> including through the establishment of county support bases across the country. This approach was based on the assumption that this would contribute to extending State authority across its territory, consolidating a stable, viable State, capable of taking responsibility for providing basic protections and services to its population in a place that had only ever known war.<sup>13</sup> As one interviewee said, "the vision was



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simple: turn South Sudan into Sweden.”<sup>14</sup> This would be a State-building enterprise combined with huge levels of aid and funding from bilateral donors to the South Sudanese State. To a large extent, this is because the mission was designed to see potential aggressors and threats emanating from Sudan to the north, not due to internal division in SPLA/M.<sup>15</sup> The Council also envisaged that a gradual draw down of the uniformed component would be likely, noting that it “further decides to review in three and six months whether the conditions on the ground could allow a reduction of military personnel to a level of 6,000.”

On the other hand, the specific intent of the Council was more difficult to discern. In addition to the State-building focus, the mandate was very broad also directing UNMISS to undertake: PoC, DDR and SSR, police, rule of law and justice sector reform.<sup>16</sup> One interviewee suggested that at the time “the mandate was a peacekeeping copy-and-paste approach, not one tailored to South Sudan.”<sup>17</sup> This was much to the chagrin of

many South Sudanese who did not see the need for a Chapter VII authority and PoC mandate. How the mission should prioritise between this array of tasks was unclear. Furthermore, the resolution afforded UNMISS an important – though not exclusive – role in providing Good Offices, advice and support on all matters relating to the political transition, including addressing remaining conflict issues.<sup>18</sup> In practice, as with the CPA, the UN’s role in efforts to resolve outstanding issues between the north and the south – such as oil pipeline arrangements and the final demarcation and status of areas around the border, particularly Abyei,<sup>19</sup> South Kordofan and Blue Nile – was much more circumscribed. As it played out, this role was to be played by the Secretary General’s Special Envoy for the Sudan and South Sudan (SES/SS), in support of the African Union High-Level Implementation Panel. From the very beginning, the role and associated leverage of UNMISS in pursuing political solutions to conditions that warranted its deployment were in the hands of others.

## MANDATE INTERPRETATION AND TRANSLATION

According to the mission leadership at the time, UNMISS' first Mission Concept was drafted by the Integrated Operational Team (IOT) at Headquarters and communicated to Juba. The concept was primarily a restatement of the Security Council mandate, offering broad goals around: consolidation of State authority; support to the Government in resolving conflicts, building its capacity, implementing SSR; PoC; and, human rights monitoring. This concept was criticized by officials in the mission at the time for lacking nuanced analysis of the situation on the ground and was described by a Senior Mission Leadership official at the time as "quite shallow and very static."<sup>20</sup> Despite a back-and-forth between the mission Chief of Staff and the IOT, it was said that it never became clear how the document would help on the ground. One expert noted that "there is often a disconnect between how things are conceptualized and how they actually work on the ground."<sup>21</sup> The value, it was noted by several interviewees, was more in bringing people around the table to develop a common vision than in producing instructive strategic guidance for the mission as a whole in the circumstances. As a result, the concept did not necessarily find its way through to an elaborated mission-wide strategy or plan. It did, however, become an overarching framework document from which the other strategic documents and planning tools were developed.<sup>22</sup>

Given the capacity-building needs and directive from the Council, UNMISS leadership developed and prioritized a 'peacebuilding plan', providing a joint vision for the various components, primarily focused on capacity-building programmes underway with State institutions. Similar to the development assistance frameworks of its time, including the Group of Seven+ New Deal for Fragile States, this guided a close partnership with host authorities, and involved the Senior Mission Leadership meeting regularly with the Council of Ministers to discuss progress and challenges. It included a simple traffic light monitoring and evaluation system that became the basis for reporting to the Security Council informally as well as via the results-based budgeting (RBB) system.

When it came to translating the mandate into a strategy for the mission, the problem was not a lack of strategic planning, it was an overabundance of different strategies that did not adequately align with each other. Strategies on PoC, the County Support Base (CSB) concept, an early warning-early risk system as well as the 'peacebuilding plan' epitomized what Alan Doss has referred to as missions being "strategy factories."<sup>23</sup> To the extent that the peacebuilding plan constituted the dominant overarching strategy for the whole mission, there was a disconnect between this and other strategies such as PoC.<sup>24</sup> The PoC strategy existed in parallel but the two were not married and aligned. Experts interviewed for this study suggested that the creation of the new mission came as something of a surprise to key stakeholders – who expected an extension to UNMIS and a more protracted transition to a follow-on presence. Consequently, as one interviewee recalled, "the 'lay-down' for the mission was based more on the logistical capabilities of the previous mission than the security and protection challenges faced by the new one."<sup>25</sup>

Contrary to the ideal case where the Secretariat and the mission would work together to develop these strategic documents, interviewees noted that the relationship between Headquarters (i.e. the IOT and Under-Secretary-General - USG) and the Senior Mission Leadership in the field was not always a constructive and mutually reinforcing one. The SRSB at the time had pre-existing relationships with key stakeholders in country and among influential Member States at the UN, including in the Security Council (e.g. the troika of the US, UK and Norway). As a result, certain strategic discussions and decisions on the overall mission strategy could be arrived at directly, circumventing (the need for) the IOT and the Secretariat as a bridge between the field and the Council. While in other missions the IOTs play an important role in informal negotiations with key members of the Council to shape a mandate, in the case of UNMISS the relationship between the IOT and the Council pen-holder (the US) was not so constructive. As one official explained, "[The US Mission to the UN] was a little more reluctant to allow the IOT to shape the mandate and, at times, it became an almost adversarial relationship."<sup>26</sup>



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## AN EXPLOSION OF VIOLENCE

During its first two years, UNMISS made very little progress on key aspects of its State-building mandate. With the SPLA/M unconvinced about ‘right-sizing’ the army (from more than 200,000) and State institutions still seen as illegitimate and ineffective, the lack of buy-in to DDR (let alone SSR) placed a glass ceiling over what UNMISS State-building efforts could achieve.<sup>27</sup> As one expert interviewed for this study explained: “The Government wasn’t really interested in this at all.”<sup>28</sup> By late 2013, the Government of South Sudan was in crisis. Relations between President Kiir and Vice President Machar had deteriorated, leading Kiir to allege a coup attempt and sack Machar. This precipitated an open clash between the two sides’ loyalist forces in Juba, marking the beginning of a civil war. Violence quickly spread across the country resulting in widespread and systematic attacks against civilians, including atrocity crimes and displacing hundreds of thousands – many of whom fled to UN bases to seek sanctuary.

In response to reports of widespread and systematic killings, the Security Council held an emergency session. Fearful that continued support to the Government could be seen as politicizing the mission - or worse being complicit in the abuses by the national security agencies - Resolution 2132 on 24 December 2013 increased the troop and police ceiling to focus on: “support its protection of civilians and provision of humanitarian assistance.” The signal from the Council was clear: stop State-building and focus on protection. A shift of this significance was unprecedented in the history of UN peacekeeping.

Less than two weeks after the outbreak of fighting in Juba – unusually quick for such delegations that normally wait for a ‘ripeness’ moment – IGAD deployed a mediation team to press for peace. A Council press statement affirmed its full support for IGAD’s mediation efforts.<sup>29</sup> In a subsequent statement, the Council welcomed the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council’s creation of a commission to investigate human rights

violations.<sup>30</sup> The co-existence and cooperation with (sub)regional actors is not unusual in contexts of peace operations. However, the speed and supremacy with which IGAD, and to a lesser extent the AU, intervened was emblematic of the limited role UNMISS played in negotiations on the political process.

While the mission reeled in the early days of the conflict, some interviewed for this study argued that it also entered a period of effective problem-solving.<sup>31</sup> A core group came together and developed a more targeted streamlined strategy for repurposing existing resources to respond to the unfolding protection crisis and reconfiguration of the mission. Indeed, one interviewee said: “The documents we produced at that time were more simple, clear, succinct and easy to follow.”<sup>32</sup> Others recalled how this enabled the mission to innovate and respond more quickly in crisis response mode on issues around securing and managing the impromptu camps for internally displaced people that had been created at UN bases in particular. Another noted that “the mission performed better in that period than it ever did before or has since.”<sup>33</sup> However, as it became clear that this would not be a short-term contained dispute and violence escalated, “Everything the mission did became about PoC.”<sup>34</sup>

As Kiir’s ‘big tent’<sup>35</sup> was in tatters and his patronage networks disintegrated<sup>36</sup> fighting continued and spread. South Sudan was facing a dire humanitarian emergency. Around two million people had been forced to flee, including nearly one and a half million internally displaced persons and 400,000 refugees. More than 10,000 people had died in the conflict and over 97,000 had sought protection in impromptu camps within and adjacent to UN bases.<sup>37</sup> Both before but certainly after the outbreak of conflict, UNMISS’ mandate to monitor, investigate and report on human rights violations and abuses, as well as violations of international humanitarian law, was at times in tension with its political strategy. The human rights agenda “fell victim to what the political agenda was.”<sup>38</sup> By May 2014, the shift to a PoC focused mission was complete, bringing an end to the brief period of State-building for UNMISS.

## Phase II

### Shape-shifting in Response to Crisis (2014)

#### AN UNPRECEDENTED COURSE CORRECTION

In advance of the required mandate renewal date in July, the Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 2155 on 27 May 2014, renewing and extending UNMISS operation for six months.<sup>39</sup> Resolution 2155 formalized the changes that had occurred in the field since the outbreak of conflict, redirecting UNMISS to focus on four key pillars: (1) PoC; (2) facilitating the delivery of humanitarian assistance; (3) monitoring and reporting on human rights violations; and, (4) supporting the implementation of the ceasefire agreement.

At the same time, Resolution 2155 also adjusted the PoC mandate subtly but significantly to request that UNMISS “protect civilians under threat of physical violence, *irrespective of the source of such violence*”<sup>40</sup> – a phrase that has become code for acknowledging that Government forces were culpable for abuses. The Government of South Sudan was never particularly happy with the PoC and human rights aspects of the original UNMISS mandate and this contributed to a continued deterioration of relations between the UN and the Government.

The resolution also highlighted the Council’s endorsement of the 23 January Cessation of Hostilities Agreement and the emerging political settlement between the Republic of South Sudan and the SPLM (in opposition). In doing so, the Council highlighted that UNMISS should support the IGAD-brokered peace process. It went further to state its “readiness to consider all appropriate measures against those who take action that undermines the peace, stability, and security of South Sudan, including those who prevent the implementation of these agreements.”<sup>41</sup>

## PEACEMAKING FROM THE PERIPHERIES

The Council mandate placed UNMISS in a supportive role to the peace process but gave it no direct role in the mediation. Responsibility for negotiating the political settlement was left to, and led by, IGAD and the AU. While not expected to lead, a number of factors contributed to making it difficult for UNMISS leadership to play a more meaningful role on the political front. Despite a mandate to use 'Good Offices' for peace consolidation and PoC purposes,<sup>42</sup> and notwithstanding the well-known contextual knowledge and interpersonal relationships of the UNMISS SRSG at the time (Hilde Johnson), Department for Peacekeeping Operations' leadership instead decided that political engagement was to be handled by highly-regarded and well connected SES/SS, Haile Menkerios.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps most important, in the days following the outbreak of conflict, before the new mandate, the mission was preoccupied with reconfiguring from a capacity-building footing to a more robust PoC-focused posture. Between this and the conflict management activities required in and around the PoC sites, playing a meaningful role in mediating between parties who were increasingly accusing the mission of partiality was simply beyond UNMISS' capacity. UNMISS' role in the political process was largely restricted to coordinating with and providing security and logistical support to the work of IGAD's various mechanisms designed to monitor and verify the implementation of the ceasefire agreement.<sup>44</sup> As a result, the SRSG played a marginal role in the efforts to mediate and resolve the conflict. As one interviewee put it, in these circumstances, the "SRSG was void of a political role."<sup>45</sup>

A new SRSG was appointed in 2014 and the priority was clear from the Council: focus on PoC. As one interviewee recalled: "The focus of the mission was squarely on protection of civilians because of the big PoC sites. There were not a lot of 'political' elements in the mandate at the time."<sup>46</sup> The civil war had the effect of isolating the mission from the political leadership of both sides, as UNMISS had to protect civilians from, and report on human rights abuses by, all parties to the conflict. This was partially a conscious decision by the UNMISS leadership,

looking to maintain independence and counter perceptions of bias. The mission was also facing daily impediments to its freedom of movement and access to conflict-affected areas by the Government and the SPLA/IO forces. This led to a rapid deterioration in relations, including the decision of the Government to expel the Deputy head of mission, Toby Lanzer, and the seizure of assets and personnel by the SPLA (in opposition). With the parties adopting aggressive and obstructionist positions against the mission, there was no opportunity for UNMISS to act as a broker for political talks during this period.

In order to bring a more united international political front, regional brokers created the "IGAD-PLUS" mechanism – including the African Union (via the African Union High Representative for South Sudan, former Malian President and Chair of the AU, Alpha Oumar Konaré), the troika (US, UK and Norway), China, the European Union (EU), the IGAD Partners Forum (IPF) and the UN.<sup>47</sup> With UNMISS too caught up in the operational side of PoC to be viewed as an impartial actor, the UN was represented in this IGAD-PLUS format by the SES/SS. In effect, Addis Ababa became the centre of gravity for the political process and a semi-permanent site of talks. In contrast, UNMISS and its senior political leadership remained bogged down in-country and predominantly in the PoC sites managing everyday crises. IGAD, the AU and the parties welcomed UNMISS involvement in the mediation process but only really as transport and logistics partner (or as one interviewee put it: "a glorified travel agent"), not as a genuine player in the mediation. Any hope that this technical/logistical support role might grow into a more meaningful substantive one did not come to pass.

The regional arrangements leading the political process must be understood in the context that South Sudan's long history of conflict has often involved its neighbours, whether through direct military involvement, cross-border movement of resources or via large refugee flows.<sup>48</sup> Regional and subregional actors have continued to lead in mediating between the parties and facilitating political settlement. Despite claims of comparative advantage and political leverage vis-à-vis the UN, these efforts have not always been characterized by a unity of purpose. Regional actors have shown themselves far



more committed to advancing their own national interests than acting to safeguard and support the people of South Sudan. As one interviewee put it: “you had the neighbours – Sudan, Uganda and Ethiopia – all pulling in different directions, using their friends in the Council to make sure that UNMISS either did what they wanted it to do or did not do what they didn’t want it to do.”<sup>49</sup> Allied with different sides in the political crisis - reflecting their competing interests - the regional rivalries and power struggles between neighbouring countries have resulted in incoherent (sub)regional support. This has included all too common violation of the eventual arms embargo (see more below); imperiling the fragile peace accords along the way. These arrangements have tended to distance the UN from the process, hindering strategic coordination between these efforts and the UN.

The IGAD-PLUS formula eventually garnered sufficient regional and international pressure resulting in the signing of the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) in August 2015.<sup>50</sup> The Council adjusted the UNMISS mandate in October that year in Resolution 2241, extending the role of UNMISS in the political process to include: “supporting Implementation of the Agreement”.<sup>51</sup> Under this instruction, the Council further elaborated that this should include support and technical assistance to constitution-making, DDR and SSR activities. The resolution also envisaged notable logistical and security support to the work of the ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring Mechanism to oversee cantonment of forces and the Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission to monitor implementation of the ARCSS.<sup>52</sup> In December, the Council further

increased the troop and police ceilings to 13,000 and 2,001 respectively in Resolution 2252.<sup>53</sup>

Despite this incrementalism towards greater support to the political process, the protection-focused mandate endured. As one official involved in mandate deliberations at the time put it: “In South Sudan, the PoC-focused mandate in 2014 was written as a temporary measure while the peace talks were going on. No one thought it was sustainable beyond a short turn of around six months and yet it has continued due to the political stalemate.”<sup>54</sup> In part, this reflected the reality on the ground where PoC threats are high and it is clear that political will is low and missions have limited political leverage. However, this narrow interpretation of the PoC mandate illustrated the challenges to aligning PoC and political strategies.<sup>55</sup>

## OPERATING WITHOUT A STRATEGY

On the ground, the mission worked on a new Mission Concept that might reflect the signing of the ARCSS but never ultimately settled on one as circumstances were changing month-to-month. As a result, the mission did not have a clear political strategy at that point. Despite improved working relations between the mission and Headquarters, UNMISS did not have time to develop a new whole-of-mission strategy in 2015-16. As quickly as the window of opportunity opened, it closed back shut. It took a long time to see the ARCSS take root, with critical provisions relating to security arrangements not agreed to until later. During that time, there were repeated violations of the peace agreement, including the 19 February 2016 attack on the PoC site in Malakal



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resulting in 18 deaths. It was over a year before Riek Machar and a number of opposition forces cagily returned to Juba to join the Transitional Government of National Unity. However, it was only a few months before fighting again broke out again in Juba. While the principals may not have intended those events to lead to open war,<sup>56</sup> their lack of command and control over forces loyal to them – and/or a willingness to default to military confrontation – reignited violence across the country.

Hundreds of thousands of South Sudanese were being killed and the parties to the conflict were wilfully preventing humanitarian assistance reaching those doomed to die by starvation and ill-health: a clear indication that political commitment to the ARCSS was lacking among the parties. This relapse included critical moments in UNMISS' lifetime including the July 2016 attacks on PoC sites at UN House in Juba, on a World Food Programme warehouse, and on humanitarian workers at the Terrain Hotel to which the mission was unresponsive. Interethnic divisions were deepening as incendiary hate speech became commonplace. Government and opposition forces sought to take territory – particularly oil fields – while civilians continued to suffer the brunt with thousands displaced and killed.

These events starkly illustrated the inability of UNMISS to affect the calculus of the parties. Once again, the mission was stuck between a rock and a hard place.<sup>57</sup> Whatever political space there was for the mission/SRSG to operate in, the mission struggled to occupy the role envisaged by the Council for a range of reasons. First, UNMISS bandwidth – particularly that of the military and police components – was consumed with the PoC

crisis and sustaining the PoC sites. However, the lack of strategy and political direction limited the ability of the mission's externally facing components (such as Civil Affairs and Political Affairs) to make meaningful contributions in pressing for peace. As a senior official described the strategic vacuum at the time, "we did not have a solid political concept, let alone a strategy."<sup>58</sup>

Second, even if there had been an appropriate strategy and adequate capacity, the avenues to engage politically had mainly been closed off. The points of contact between UNMISS and the principals suffered due to the mission's decision to distance itself from the protagonists and their respective assemblages. This disconnect significantly limited the ability of the mission to use 'Good Offices' to advocate for protection and potentially prevent and deescalate situations that may otherwise have been possible.<sup>59</sup>

Third, the continued leadership by regional arrangements and important high-level delegations and representatives from IGAD and the AU continued to blur the lines of political authority.<sup>60</sup> As with earlier rounds of negotiations, IGAD/AU delegations – including significant powerbrokers from neighbouring countries – conducted the talks with the parties, working on substantive issues like an inclusive national boundary commission on the number of states. Former President of Botswana, Festus Mogae (Chair of the Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission), and the AU High Representative Konare – later joined by IGAD Special Envoy for South Sudan, Ismail Wais – would hold a range of bilateral pre-meetings with various stakeholders, confusing the lines of authority and political messaging.<sup>61</sup> Again, they all welcomed UNMISS

involvement as a transport and logistics partner but not as a meaningful third-party mediator. As one interviewee remembered it: “They did it deliberately. They didn’t want UNMISS to do anything except pay for things or fly people around.”<sup>62</sup>

Lastly, while the Council consistently messaged about UN support for the IGAD-led mediation, it was less instructive about the role it saw for the different components of the UN system. As one former UNMISS official put it, “there were so many envoys it created confusion and no clear instruction from UN Headquarters as to who was doing what!” As discussed above, the profile, gravitas and parallel mandate of the SES/SS (and to the AU) – first Haile Menkerios and later Nicholas Haysom<sup>63</sup> – often created points of confusion or tension for UNMISS. Interviewees noted an ambiguous hierarchy of authority that created a situation where it was not entirely clear whether or not the SRSg was to be seen as the undisputed emissary of the UN in Juba or not (i.e. the face on the ground of the Secretary-General, Security Council and Member States). A lack of division of labour and problems with coordination and communication further exacerbated this. The same disconcerted approach applied to Council members’ engagement. The troika expected privileged treatment by the mission leadership to the detriment of relationships with other influential Member States (e.g. France or China). Amid this confusion, one interviewee suggested that “The UN would have to clean up its own house first and then ask the others to clean up theirs.”<sup>64</sup>

While the starting position for UNMISS vis-à-vis the principals was already at a low ebb, the myriad of different actors occupying the political space undermined the authority and leverage of the SRSg and, in effect, relegated the mission to relative spectatorship in the political arena.

## FINDING THE WRONG STRATEGY

UNMISS was heavily criticized for its perceived inaction in the face of violence against civilians at the PoC sites in July 2016. However, the Council’s reaction to this – to add more troops – was not universally seen as a wise response. As one interviewee remarked, “It is as if the Security Council says ‘we have to do *something*

and they decide more troops are the answer.”<sup>65</sup> On 12 August 2016, Resolution 2304 further increased the authorized troop strength of the mission to 17,000 troops.<sup>66</sup> This included a Regional Protection Force (RPF) of 4,000 troops, proposed by IGAD, to be constituted by IGAD Member States along with Rwanda who were involved in the peace process. In addition to ‘doing something’, by authorizing the RPF, the intent of the Council was three-fold. First, it would protect itself and civilians in the short-term – in theory, the RPF would “promptly and effectively engage any actor that is...preparing attacks, or engages in attacks, against UN installations, personnel, humanitarian actors and civilians.” Second, it would stabilize Juba, including by securing key installations and access points such as the airport and major roads, creating the space for an inclusive (meaning including Machar and those in opposition) political process to unfold in the medium to longer term.<sup>67</sup> Third, despite the regional character of the proposed force, by placing the RPF under the command of the UN and UNMISS Force Commander, the Council would retain a degree of control.

While the US and some others on the Council supported the RPF concept, the mission and the Secretariat were reportedly not consulted meaningfully on the resolution. Senior Mission Leadership and members of the IOT had advised against it, partly because it was highly contentious in the eyes of the South Sudanese Government who rejected it as a violation of sovereignty and the “thin end of the wedge.”<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, the original rationale for the force – i.e. risk of open conflict in Juba – quickly disappeared after the departure of Riek Machar and opposition forces making the RPF role in creating conditions for a revival of the ARCSS agreement redundant. Despite these changing circumstances, a high-profile September 2016 Council delegation visit to South Sudan and Addis – co-led by US Permanent Representative to the UN Samantha Power – resulted in the eventual (albeit caveated) acceptance of the RPF by the Government of South Sudan. Arguably, what remained was a symbolic act of ‘doing something’ by the Council and the mission was compelled to do the bidding of particular Member States rather than responding with what was needed to deliver on the ground. The Government continued to obstruct mission efforts, meaning

the troop surge destined for the RPF was significantly delayed and ultimately reassigned to expand UNMISS presence with extra boots in the Equatorias that had experienced new waves of violence and forced displacement at that time.<sup>69</sup> The RPF consumed lots of political capital, energy and resources – securing land for bases, visas and getting agreement for equipment such as attack helicopters – for minimal gain. Moreover, it further strained the relationship between the mission and the Government and became a misguided effort focused on Juba when the real root causes were elsewhere. The debacle was also a clear signal that in the absence of genuine host State consent, there is little a robustly worded mandate for an RPF can do.

In this phase, apart from a fleeting moment where the ARCSS was in place and the transitional Government under formation, the mission never really had a chance to formulate a mission strategy to reflect the new circumstances. As one interviewee described: “we didn’t really have a political framework to work within, and to support, so we were caught. Peacekeeping is not an intervention force...and can only work in support of a peace agreement, and we were really lacking that in South Sudan.”<sup>70</sup> UNMISS clearly struggled to influence the parties and bring about a settlement. Its ability to protect civilians and prevent human rights violations beyond the PoC sites were also limited. Nevertheless, UNMISS provided sanctuary for hundreds of thousands of civilians and its presence may have prevented worse or more widespread violence. As a senior UN official described: “For a long time all [UNMISS] could do was protect the people in the camps. And it did quite well at that. What it could not do was project any kind of political role outside of our own bases.”<sup>71</sup>

## Phase III

### The Emergence of a Peace to Support (2017)

With Riek Machar out of the country and an increasingly fragmented opposition, President Kiir overhauled the leadership of the opposition in the Transitional Government of National

Unity, appointing Taban Deng Gai as First Vice-President. This move cast doubt upon the legitimacy of the transitional institutions and arrangements and the inclusivity of the political process, including among other non-Dinka groups beyond Machar and the opposition’s predominantly Nuer constituency. Despite this bleak outlook, a revitalized peace agreement was struck that allowed UNMISS to formulate a strategy based on a political process. This section looks at how UNMISS carved out a greater role in political engagement and developed a streamlined, iterative and field-focused strategic planning process to guide the mission’s strategic approach, while continuing to focus on the PoC, human rights and facilitating the delivery of humanitarian assistance aspects of the mandate.

## REDOUBLING EFFORTS ON THE POLITICAL PROCESS

Concerned by the political deadlock, the Council requested a strategic assessment of the situation in South Sudan that reported back in late 2016. The review raised questions over the continued viability of the ARCSS, noting that the IGAD-PLUS formula had not generated momentum towards resuscitating the deal. It further noted that UNMISS had been unable to influence the political process to bring an end to hostilities, concluding that “efforts to engage the parties have been desultory and unsynchronized.”<sup>72</sup> It recommended that the UN Secretariat with the AU and IGAD develop a “comprehensive political strategy” toward ending hostilities and reviving an inclusive political process.<sup>73</sup> The review further recommended that the SRSG “engage with the members of IGAD-PLUS, or any future political formation, and other partners on the peace process in South Sudan to ensure coordination and promote sustained and unified political engagement with the parties and to encourage a return to a credible political process and the establishment of inclusive governance. Such efforts would be carried out with support from [the] Special Envoy for the Sudan and South Sudan and [the] Special Representative to the African Union based in Addis Ababa.”<sup>74</sup> In observations based on the review, the Secretary-General implored that: “Immediate steps must be taken to reassert the primacy of the political process.”<sup>75</sup>

However, the timing of the review limited its ability to suggest a political strategy for UNMISS.<sup>76</sup> As one interviewee (one of its chief architects) noted, “the 2016 strategic review came at a time when [the incumbent SRS] had already tendered her resignation and we didn’t know who would be coming to replace her. So, it was a difficult strategic review to do because so much of our political effort gravitates around the persona of the SRS.”<sup>77</sup> This points to the personality, skill-set and management style of particular SRSs as being critical to what might be achievable on the political aspect.

When the new SRS, David Shearer, took office in January 2017, South Sudan was gripped by political volatility, widespread violence and associated displacement, massive human rights violations and a crippling humanitarian crisis.<sup>78</sup> Over 200,000 people were living inside the PoC sites while the remaining nearly one and a half million internally displaced persons were exposed beyond the gates. Disease and malnutrition were compounded by severe food insecurity and looting of humanitarian supplies.

Picking up on the tone and recommendations of the 2016 strategic review, and in an explicit attempt to empower the SRS politically, the Council renewed the UNMISS mandate in December 2016, reauthorizing the RPF and augmenting existing language about the SRS providing the lead for the UN system by reaffirming “the critical role that the UN plays, in coordination with regional organizations and other actors, to advance political dialogue between parties and contribute to achieving an enduring cessation of hostilities and lead the parties to an inclusive peace process.”<sup>79</sup> This was reinforced frequently in Council Press Statements underscoring the need for UNMISS to work closely with IGAD and the AU towards a political solution.<sup>80</sup>

The arrival of new SRS also coincided with the change of the US administration at the beginning of 2017. According to many of those interviewed, this led to a shift in influence over UNMISS’ strategic direction from the Council to the field. While the US Mission to the UN remained engaged on the UNMISS mandate and supportive of the mission, the file no longer had the significance it once did and fell down the list of priorities

resulting in a relative lack of interest or ideas as to what to do on the mandate compared with the previous Administration.<sup>81</sup> As one observer at the time put it: “the new administration had no view at all on South Sudan.”<sup>82</sup>

This combination of Council political backing and the change in US Administration resulted in more autonomy in the mission, allowing the new SRS and Senior Mission Leadership to engage more in ‘managing up’ to a disempowered IOT and relatively disinterested Council. It also, however, meant less robust political support by the pen-holder and traditionally dominant voice on UNMISS in the Council. However, UNMISS still “found it very difficult in 2017 and 2018 to find a hook into the politics between the conflicting parties.”<sup>83</sup> In the region, IGAD continued to drive the political process, supported by the AU and the UN SES/SS. On 18 December 2017, IGAD initiated a High-Level Revitalization Forum on the peace agreement under the stewardship of Dr Ismail Wais of Djibouti. The Forum convened the ARCSS signatories together with a range of newly formed opposition groups for the first time. It quickly generated a new Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities, Protection of Civilians, and Humanitarian Access (ACOH) on 21 December. Following the ceasefire, a second phase of the high-level revitalization forum focused on revising the ARCSS and associated timeframes.

The confluence of changing dynamics in the Council and the opening of a possibility for political settlement heralded a renewed attempt to engage in the political process more substantively by UNMISS. This was a deliberate strategy of Senior Mission Leadership who also lobbied for an enhanced political role to be reflected in the mandate.

## **CARVING OUT MORE POLITICAL SPACE FOR THE MISSION**

While UNMISS’ mandate has swollen with an inflated set of tasks, the core foci have remained the same since 2014. Therefore, while nothing much changed in terms of UNMISS’ specific role in the peace process, a change in leadership and political circumstances led to renewed attempts to carve out a greater role for UNMISS in mediating a political solution to the conflict and



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“gaining a foothold in its own destiny.”<sup>84</sup> Precisely how UNMISS should ‘support the political process’ (i.e. the fourth pillar of mandate) was, however, unclear. In order to translate this into a political strategy for the mission, a new Mission Concept and strategy were developed.

The way this was done constituted a departure from convention in several important ways. First, it was principally developed by the mission rather than the IOT at Headquarters. As one official involved in the process explained: “The IOT and Headquarters didn’t really have anything to do with it.”<sup>85</sup> Second, this Mission Concept was imagined as more of a ‘living’ document than a polished finalized strategy with clear and timebound end states. As one of its architects described: “what is most important is that people in the mission look in the same direction and understand how their work relates to the overall strategy for the mission; not having a finished strategy document. In a fluid context like South Sudan, it’s important that we repeat and iteratively reflect on the strategic vision – this is an ongoing process not a product.”<sup>86</sup> Third, it was a much more straightforward, action-oriented,

succinct and clear vision for the mission. The concept set out a dual-track approach – setting priority action areas of: (1) PoC and (2) building durable peace – under which all other activities and substantive efforts by UNMISS should fall and contribute to those strategic priorities.

Derived from this concept, the Senior Mission Leadership then developed what was referred to as a ‘strategic approach’ for the mission.<sup>87</sup> This, too, followed an unorthodox process whereby consultations across the mission were held and a request was made to each component and substantive section to identify how their respective goals aligned to the two overarching goals in the Mission Concept. An important innovation in this strategy has been acknowledging the significance of field sites and devolved decision-making and management responsibility to heads of field offices. This approach empowered them – each acting as ‘mini-SRSGs’ - to set local priorities and develop an effects-based or outcome-oriented plan as well as enabling them to be more agile and able to intervene politically and mediate in local-level disputes.



This cascading set of strategic initiatives had several effects. First, it diverged from previous practice in innovative ways. Second, it proved useful in ensuring that all mission activities were aligned to strategic objectives and (to some extent) the political strategy of the mission, pegged to the R-ARCSS. Third, it sought to connect this strategic vision to an outcomes- and impact-oriented approach to monitoring and evaluating progress. As noted in the 2018 strategic review, this approach “altered the status quo and sharpened the focus of leaders and managers on the analysis of their operations and what they are or are not achieving.”<sup>88</sup>

In a clear commitment to the primacy of politics, the Secretary-General remarked in the observations section of this review: “I believe that progress in the peace process, leading to a sustainable political resolution of the conflict, should be the key objective of the United Nations in South Sudan, as that is the only way towards a viable exit strategy for UNMISS.”<sup>89</sup> Further noting that there had been a tendency to strengthen the uniformed component rather than its support to the political process, he said: “I encourage the Security Council to continue exerting increased political leverage on the parties, in coordination with regional organizations.”<sup>90</sup>

## SECURITY COUNCIL (DIS)UNITY

At times, the Council has been united on South Sudan - remaining ‘seized of the matter’ throughout the crisis: requesting reporting every 90 days, authorizing six-monthly renewals, getting behind important decisions and passing significant resolutions. For instance, despite the

contentious nature of sanctions in the Council (in general, but also specifically regarding South Sudan later on), Resolution 2206 on 3 March 2015 creating a sanctions regime was passed unanimously (15-0-0). A few months later, in July, a US proposal co-sponsored by the UK and France, imposed targeted sanctions including travel bans and asset freezes on three command-level individuals on both sides (SPLA and in opposition). The Council demonstrated its continued commitment to resolving the crisis in South Sudan through repeated presidential and press statements to pursue negotiations “in partnership with relevant partners,” including IGAD and the AU.<sup>91</sup>

Yet there have also been moments of significant disunity at critical junctures. For example, while the Council was able to find a working majority to pass Resolutions 2241 and 2252 as discussed above,<sup>92</sup> there was a simultaneous difference in opinion between the Permanent Three and others on the Council (China and Russia but also Elected 10 members, Venezuela and Angola) about adding additional individuals to the sanctions list, including then head of the SPLA, Paul Malong. This example is illustrative of a more generalized disagreement on how to approach, leverage and coerce compliance from the parties to adhere to the various ceasefire and peace agreements. The passage of Resolution 2428 in 2018, imposing an arms embargo and expanding a list of individuals subject to targeted sanctions, further evidenced this dynamic.<sup>93</sup> This could be seen as a sign that growing diplomatic pressure was being backed by tangible measures. However, importantly, this resolution was not passed unanimously but with six abstentions. In addition to receiving only the minimum number of affirmative votes



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required for passage, one of the members who abstained was Ethiopia – a neighbouring country and influential member of IGAD and the AU. The precarity of Council consensus on this issue – albeit coloured by other dynamics in the Council on the issue of sanctions – further underscores that Council intent about the best way to support the political process and resolution of the conflict in South Sudan was not always a unified, shared and uncontested position. This division in the Council provided ammunition for the parties to resist accommodation and seek to make further territorial gains rather than come to a settlement. It also further undermined the ability of UNMISS to influence a political solution. As one veteran of many missions and Headquarters roles said: “There is nothing worse for peacekeeping than not to have the unanimous support of the Council behind you.”<sup>94</sup>

## THE ARRIVAL OF A PEACE AGREEMENT

In late 2018 a number of the main parties to the conflict – including the Government and opposition leadership – signed the ‘Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan’. The deal provided a roadmap for the composition of a new Transitional Government of National Unity with associated security arrangements and an agenda for major programmes including DDR and SSR. While some questioned the process, representation and genuine buy-in of sufficient opposition forces in this deal, a mandate renewal in March 2019 adjusted UNMISS’ fourth priority to support the implementation of the Revitalized Agreement and the peace process.<sup>95</sup> The resolution elaborated specific roles for UNMISS

to play in continued support and participation in ceasefire monitoring and verification through support to the Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring and Verification Mechanism and implementation tracking through the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission. It further directed UNMISS to support other implementation mechanisms, including at the subnational level, and the mandate added an explicit role for UNMISS and the SRSg to use “Good Offices to support the peace process, including advice or technical assistance, within existing resources.”<sup>96</sup> The Council backed this up through issuance of a number of Presidential Statements calling on parties to expedite the implementation of the Revitalized Agreement.<sup>97</sup>

The fact that the 2017 Mission Concept was more of an iterative ‘living’ document meant that there was no need to overhaul or replace it, but rather the concept and the strategic approach could be updated in line with advancement in the political process. This approach also allowed for more frequent rebalancing of the political aspects of the mandate with other priorities, including PoC and human rights monitoring and reporting. The two-pillared approach sought to capture a dynamic balance – more violent conflict tips the balance toward PoC, while deescalation and periods of stability resulted in more focus on efforts to build durable peace. Furthermore, UNMISS sought to develop a comprehensive approach to PoC by articulating its PoC mandate to the UN system as a whole in South Sudan as well as a range of different non-governmental organizations partners that also have complementary protection mandates and responsibilities. Making this work has presented

numerous challenges, particularly in the context of UNMISS-UNCT collaboration on internationally displaced persons returns and resettlement from the PoC sites. However, there is a lot that can be learned from this approach. The 2018 strategic review noted that regarding human rights, “public reporting of violations has been relatively scarce and slow.”<sup>98</sup> Member State pressure resulted in mandate language encouraging more public reporting on human rights violations. In response, UNMISS restructured its human rights division to focus more on increasing mobility, pushing higher ranking and more people out to field locations, and shifting the thematic areas of work within the division.<sup>99</sup> Despite continued obstruction by Government and opposition forces denying access to sensitive areas, since then the mission has displayed a greater willingness to go on the record with human rights reports including those critical of the Government.<sup>100</sup> Other studies have shown that UNMISS has increasingly used – rather than avoided – reporting as a way of exerting leverage for movement on political process.<sup>101</sup>

## DEMARCATING POLITICAL SPACE, “LEADING FROM BEHIND” AND GOING LOCAL

As different personalities moved through the regional envoy’s office and the SRSG became more established, including in relation to the President and other principals, the mission carved out additional political space to engage the parties. Constructive working relationships between UN special representatives allowed for a clearer demarcation of turf. The SRSG held political authority and representative duties for the UN in Juba, while the SES/SS led on engagements with regional envoys from neighbouring countries, IGAD and the AU in Addis Ababa as well as parties who were residing outside of South Sudan.<sup>102</sup> This more definite division of labour facilitated the incremental growth of the political mandate for UNMISS and the growing role of the SRSG’s ‘Good Offices’ in supporting the implementation of the Revitalized Agreement. For example, UNMISS brokered and supported (logistically) commander-level meetings between government forces and opposition in field sites around the country. These meetings were an opportunity for UNMISS to facilitate rapprochement and build confidence in the peace process.

The political arena remained crowded and additional players entered the fray, including mediation performed by the Community of Sant’Egidio to foster political dialogue between signatories and non-signatories of the Revitalized Agreement.<sup>103</sup> However, contrary to earlier accounts of crowding out, some interviewed suggested that having other actors leading the political process – in particular IGAD in the lead of the high-level revitalization forum – also benefitted the mission at times. By “supporting initiatives but not getting in front of them”, the mission was able to “lead from behind.” For example, UNMISS could provide enabling logistical and technical support while taking a back seat during major statements by the high-level forum on the peace agreement via IGAD Council of Ministers and other regional leaders during the African Union summit held in Addis Ababa in 2018).<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, citing the likelihood that UNMISS would be *in situ* for some time to come, a number of those interviewed emphasized that this helped the mission retain some distance from the political bargains being struck, and with it a greater claim to impartiality towards the various parties.

The Revitalized Agreement led to a reduction in clashes between formal parties but continued intercommunal deadly violence, including farmer-herder clashes and widespread sexual violence. In response, the mission came up with an innovative approach predicated on deeper political engagement beyond Juba with local authorities and communities. This was for two main reasons. First, to compensate for the reduced leverage in the national-level political process. Second, because there was a realization that intercommunal violence was not distinct or separate from national conflict dynamics. As a member of Senior Mission Leadership put it: “local level conflict was invariably linked to national-level conflict dynamics.”<sup>105</sup> Experts also point to a “diverse set of local-level conflicts that relate to the national crisis in different ways and to different extents.”<sup>106</sup> For instance, there are clearly interconnections between cattle-related conflict across the country and powerbrokers in Juba who own approximately 80 per cent of the cattle in the country. Consequently, the mission developed a strategy to nurture “more peace at any level” using the SRSG’s Good Offices to engage politically with local-level

authorities.<sup>107</sup> UNMISS also carved out a role in local-level conflict resolution and mediation, working toward peaceful coexistence, social cohesion and reconciliation at the community level – primarily through the work of civil affairs, supported logistically by the force and UN police. These efforts have included convening (e.g. conferences and workshops) and mediation efforts spearheaded by the heads of field offices, reducing the immediate effects of intercommunal tensions and contributing from the bottom-up to the overarching peace process.<sup>108</sup> Nevertheless, many still believe that without tackling the macro-level conflict drivers – including arms and ammunition – that support cycles of intercommunal violence will continue.<sup>109</sup>

## A FRAGILE PEACE AND THE WAY AHEAD/OUT

At the time of writing, it seems there is a small but perceptible growth in UNMISS' role in the political process – albeit in implementing someone else's bargain. Questions have been raised over how inclusive and voluntary the Revitalized Agreement agreement was. Some interviewed for this study suggested it came as a *fait accompli* from Khartoum/IGAD; favouring the Government and incentivizing the agreement of Riek Machar but not in a way that will bring along many of his followers or previously loyal forces.<sup>110</sup> Consequently, segments of the Nuer population may view UNMISS as too close to the Government to warrant their trust and support. At the same time, some pro-government actors continue to accuse UNMISS of supporting the opposition by maintaining the PoC sites. While the Agreement may offer the best hope for stability and an immediate end to violence in the short-term, question marks remain over its

ability to provide this over the sustained long-term. In this case, UNMISS' mandate to support its implementation may be a way of addressing the proximate triggers and fast-track to an exit strategy. However, it may not be adequately addressing the root causes and underlying grievances that could lead to recidivism in the future.

Recent mandate renewals have further expanded the SRS's political role to include "advice or technical assistance, within existing resources" as part of the mission's Good Offices to support the peace process.<sup>111</sup> They have also instructed the mission to work on the rule of law sector, community reconciliation, service delivery, and durable solutions for internally displaced persons/refugee returns. These developments suggest that a return to forms of capacity-building will accompany continued progress on the Revitalized Agreement implementation. The bitter lessons of history should dictate that this does not happen quickly or wholesale, but rather incrementally and subject to the strict application of the Human Rights Due Diligence Policy. It is also unlikely that the political appetite exists in the Council for expensive large-scale State-building. Nevertheless, such a return will bring a modicum of political capital and leverage that the mission could use to build out its political influence and strategy.

Time will tell if UNMISS can position itself in a way that makes it more essential to, and in control of, the political process at the heart of its destiny and ultimate exit. In support of this, the lessons identified in the following section may be useful to Member States in the Council, the IOT and others in the Secretariat and mission leadership in the field.



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## II

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# Key Findings

UNMISS was designed as a peacebuilding mission with add-ons. It was transformed on the fly to, in theory at least, become an archetypal multidimensional peace operation. The imperative to protect civilians and the parallel mandates of other peacemakers (such as IGAD, the AU and even other parts of the UN) combined to ensure that UNMISS has played only a peripheral role in the political process. With no peace to keep and no seat at the peacemaking table, the keys to creating a durable protective environment and sustainable peace in South Sudan have been largely out of UNMISS' control. Lacking consistently unified political support – from the Council as well as the region and neighbouring countries – UNMISS has not been empowered to play a more proactive and potentially influential role in the negotiations that led to cessation of hostilities agreements and both the ARCSS and Revitalized Agreement. Until recently, UNMISS has been 'waiting for

peace' overwhelmed by the practical challenges associated with overlapping milieus of violence and the extraordinary phenomenon of the PoC sites. Consequently, UNMISS has been in a position of extreme vulnerability – susceptible to being instrumentalized by many sides – unable to leave but not in control of its destiny. It also runs counter to a cardinal lesson identified in the Brahimi report – if a peace operation (*in situ* or to be established) is to be part of implementing a peace agreement, then the UN should always have a significant role and a seat at the table.<sup>112</sup>

This predicament made it extremely difficult for the mission to develop a mission-wide political strategy that could guide the work of all its components. Over the course of the three moments analysed above, the translation of Council mandates into Mission Concepts/strategies has varied significantly. At mission start-up, the mission was required to develop

key concepts and plans to interpret an ambitious and wide-ranging mandate that quickly became redundant. Following the outbreak of civil war and widespread violence, the mission was forced to adapt quickly and reconfigure in the absence of relevant overarching strategic guidance documents. Later, the mission was able to implement a more methodical and inclusive process to set the course for the mission and gradually carve out space for a more significant, albeit still limited, political role for UNMISS.

However, despite – indeed, because of – the fact that UNMISS’ contributions in the political domain have been circumscribed in these ways, the mission offers several significant and potentially translatable findings for a peacekeeping mission’s political role in situations where there is little or no peace to keep. Given that similar scenarios have afflicted the UN at different times in all of the so-called Big Five missions, the following lessons learned may have utility beyond UNMISS for peacekeeping more generally.

## 1 Process as important as product

When translating Security Council mandates into Mission Concepts and strategies, particularly in mission settings when the political and security context changes regularly and rapidly, key stakeholders (IOT, Senior Mission Leadership) should emphasise how this is done as much as what it produces.

The act of engaging in a mission-wide process to think through the mission strategy, including its political objectives and how all mission efforts align to a political solution, is often as important as any final product. Bringing together key figures across the mission (uniformed, civilian, substantive, support, etc.) at multiple levels (including field sites) in and of itself generated significant cohesion. It shared understanding across the mission, including how each part fits within the mission and relates to each other. Indeed, maintaining this as an iterative process has been both necessary (e.g. due to rotating contingents) and useful (adapting to rapidly changing events). While a simple written-down vision for the mission is generally thought to be

a good idea, the aim of an extensive finalized Mission Concept/strategy – often requiring a lengthy approval process – was seen as useful for compliance purposes but too static and inflexible for planning and guiding mission work. “The value of those paper exercises is in bringing people around the table to set out a common vision rather than the end product,” one interviewee noted.

## 2 Peace in pieces

When sidelined from meaningful engagement in regional and national-level mediation/negotiations, missions should focus on more political engagement aimed at resolving local level disputes that can ‘trickle up’ and contribute to the broader peace process.

While still supporting and cajoling political solutions at the (trans)national level, UNMISS leadership were creative in targeting some of their political work at the local level. Before, during, and (tentatively) after the civil war, intercommunal clashes have accounted for a significant portion of violent deaths in South Sudan. UNMISS recognized that these often have linkages to national-level politics and therefore addressing them could contribute to national-level processes. Even at the extremely local-level peripheries, intercommunal disputes frequently have connections to the centre. For example, roughly 80 per cent of the cattle spread across the vast territory of South Sudan are at least partially owned by elites in Juba, meaning that even the most distant cattle rustling reverberates through powerbrokers in the capital.<sup>113</sup> The lines connecting local and national actors are often invisible to external observers, though crucial to developing effective conflict resolution strategies and supporting the peace process. The most recent work of the mission includes efforts to engage uniformed commanders at the local level to build confidence between parties to the conflict at a subnational level. These initiatives to resolve violence at a local level are more closely linked to the Revitalized Agreement peace process.<sup>114</sup> As a recent study of UNMISS noted: “Understanding how struggles within the SPLM elite [play] out at the local level [has been] key ... to engaging constructively/proactively in the peace process.



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While the regional/national level political process is a *sine qua non*, a key lesson from UNMISS is the need to understand the links between the local and national politics/conflict, and how risks and opportunities may present themselves in both spheres.”<sup>115</sup>

### 3 Too many cooks spoil the broth

Lack of clarity over the division of labour between the UN’s various special representatives, and between UN and (sub)regional arrangements, leads to incoherence, dissociation of a mission from a guiding/enabling political strategy and undermining of the authority and political leverage of SRSs to hold parties to any accord once signed. In the case of UNMISS, this has also led to forum shopping and manipulation by parties with no real political will for peace.

Consecutive SRSs have been repeatedly hamstrung by how crowded the political space is in South Sudan. First, lines of responsibilities between SRSs and the SES/SS in mediating have

been unclear. This has become less problematic as the situation has moved from negotiating to implementing the Revitalized Agreement though in practice has remained to a large degree personality-driven. A reality helped by a more proactive approach by the Senior Mission Leadership, underwritten by more expansive mandate language on the political process and support from the Secretariat, and clearer demarcation of political ‘turf’ between the SRS and Special Envoys. Second, the leading role played by regional arrangements – primarily IGAD but also the AU – in multiple bouts of mediation and peacemaking contributed to limiting the role of the UN and UNMISS. At times, this has rendered the mission a ‘glorified travel agent’, dependent on someone else’s success and in effect ‘waiting for peace’. However, once a viable peace is agreed, it may serve the mission to “lead from behind” allowing for greater perception of impartiality towards parties, including those who may be excluded or disenfranchised by any deal.

UNMISS experience suggests at least two key mitigation strategies. First, ensuring clarity and

consensus on the appropriate delineation of responsibilities between the different UN and non-UN stakeholders. Second, providing clear guidance on a 'ripeness' criterion for political engagement by an SRSG in a fragile/tenuous peace process. When that criterion is not met, redirection of attention and resources can contribute to conflict resolution that can trickle up and deliver against mandated objectives to support the peace process (see above). Ensuring that the potential Good Offices and political engagement of an SRSG are not undermined will likely be critical to effectively prioritizing politics in mandate implementation.

## **4 Putting de-centralization at the centre**

The simultaneous localization (including splintering of parties to the conflict) and transnationalization/regionalization of conflict dynamics make strategies that focus political engagement exclusively on capitals and formal political elites likely to be ineffective. Such a shift is particularly important when national processes are stalling, and there is potential to get better traction at a local level that can promote improved protection for civilians and create an atmosphere more conducive to peace nationally.

Consequently, there is a need to de-centralize political engagement by missions. Based on UNMISS experiences, such a policy should be pursued through: (1) the creation of additional political liaison offices in capitals of key neighbouring and regional countries; (2) more methodical engagement in local political spheres through delegation of authority/devolution to heads of field office under an overarching unifying mission strategy; and, (3) increased collaboration between mission political and civil affairs departments while undertaking more focused and strategic work.

## **5 Bringing PoC and political strategies into alignment**

For much of its existence, UNMISS has been preoccupied with saving lives and supporting a more protective environment for vulnerable

populations. The absence of a viable political process has dictated that the mission has had little to align its overall strategy to that looked beyond the short-term horizon.

While the clarion call for the primacy of politics needs to be anchored, and operationalization pathways highlighted, there remains a dilemma at the heart of it. The desire to see a political process sustained - despite the ongoing, sometimes escalating, levels of violence in abrogation of ceasefire agreements - has at times been tantamount to self-delusion for an organization that has a core human rights mandate enshrined in its Charter. Missions need to find ways to ensure that political engagement remains core business but pursued in ways that reinforce rather than undermine operational gains on other mandated priorities such as PoC. Tiers 1 and 3 of the PoC concept reinforce the need to engage politically to pursue political solutions that do not undermine PoC imperatives but instead can be the foundation for a sustainable protective environment. The more recent attempt in UNMISS strategy to counter-balance building durable peace with PoC acknowledges this relationship. However, it remains to be seen if it would be sufficiently robust and decisive when needed most - for example, if the South Sudan People's Defence Forces were to attack a PoC site again. There is a need to interrogate what primacy of politics means when a mission with PoC mandate must risk jeopardizing political relationships and capital to meet its cardinal protection obligations. Tier 2 PoC activities can make political engagement more challenging at times and detract from a mission's ability to negotiate a ceasefire that might save more lives than physical protection. However, when missions are not influential political actors and where violence is likely, focusing on physical protection may be the only choice. Any shift away from prioritising Tier 2 PoC over PoC through political engagement should then occur over time. UNMISS' more recent increase in human rights reporting does not appear to have weakened their political position and, if history is any gauge, relegating protection and human rights is unlikely to be a fast-track to sustainable peace.

## 6 Getting enabling relationships between Member States, IOT and Senior Mission Leadership right

Ineffective, dysfunctional and sometimes openly antagonistic relationships between key actors in the peace operations system – influential Member States, senior headquarters bureaucrats and mission leadership – have made a difficult situation on the ground worse and militated against a clearer political vision and role for missions and all their personnel.

‘Primacy of politics’ at all levels requires better functioning and more consistent relationships between Member States, IOTs and Senior Mission Leadership. At crucial moments in UNMISS’ lifetime, the relationship between the IOT and UNMISS mission leadership has been ineffective. On occasion, it has been wholly dysfunctional. At times the IOT has been influential and, via in-house support from the relevant USGs, held sway over the political role carved out for the mission and afforded to the field level leadership. At other times, mission leadership has circumvented the IOT, leveraging close working relationships with influential Member States on the South Sudan file (e.g. troika). As one interviewee put it: “SRSGs can use their own political leverage to reach around the IOT and into the offices of USGs or even the [Secretary-General] to deal more directly with leadership at Headquarters.”<sup>116</sup> Neither scenario has worked particularly well for smoothly transmitting and interpreting the intent of the Security Council into a strategy for the mission and implementation on the ground. Similarly, the relationships between key Member States, the IOT and the mission have also at times been difficult in the case of UNMISS. As one interviewee explained the relationship between the IOT and the pen-holder (US) “was at times adversarial.” At other times, such as following outbreak of violence in July 2016, Council members largely ignored the IOT and mission leadership. At different points still, for instance following change of the US Administration, power has shifted towards the field, allowing UNMISS to ‘manage up’ to both the IOT and the Security Council. The variation and shifts in these dynamics point to the need for more coherent and joined-up vision for a mission across constituencies and for strong

leadership that can undo bureaucratic blockages but also mediate interpersonal tensions within the chain of command/between field missions, Headquarters and Member States.

## 7 Keep it simple, stupid

‘Christmas tree’ mandates are not an effective means for the Security Council to signal their political intent. They transfer too many priority-setting responsibilities to SRSGs and are not conducive to translation into clear mission strategies and subsequent operationalization into workplans to guide the political work of a mission.

Despite the fact UNMISS started as a complex and ambitious State-building mission, the relatively streamlined seven and a half pages in the original Resolution 1996 had more than doubled to 16 pages by Resolution 2514.<sup>117</sup> This is the archetype of the so-called “Christmas tree mandate”. As per the Secretary-General’s suggestion in launching the Action for Peacekeeping, the time has come to pare back these unwieldy mandates and change the ‘copy-and-paste’ culture.<sup>118</sup> Experts interviewed for this study regularly stated that clear and concise mandate resolutions made for more effective translation into mission strategies. Short is not good if it means ‘thin’, leaving mission leadership without enough sense of the Council’s intent. However, the 6,000-mile screwdriver approach is not helpful either if a litany of taskings obfuscates clear political direction.

## 8 United we stand, divided we fall

Unity in the Security Council is critical to providing clear strategic guidance to missions but also in supplementing mission mandates with complementary actions and resolutions such as arms embargos and targeted sanctions.

As one veteran of many missions and Headquarter roles interviewed for this study said: “There is nothing worse for peacekeeping than not to have the unanimous support of the Council behind you. If we don’t have the Council solidly behind us, it has a very detrimental effect on what we can actually achieve.” In the case of UNMISS, the Council has been divided at critical

moments and on critical issues. The US as pen-holder has not always been on the same page as rest of the Security Council leading to cognitive dissonance when reading and interpreting the mandate alongside US/Member State opinion and influence through other channels. Such discord creates competing demands on mission leadership to dance to the tune of different pipers seeking to simultaneously meet the demands of the pen-holder/Permanent Three, the Council as a whole, and the people on the ground. Division in the Council was also in evidence with the July 2018 US-sponsored arms embargo resolution on which Ethiopia abstained. Stakeholders often exploit this disunity in the mission area. As one interviewee said: “Host country or belligerent parties can suss out very quickly that we have a divided Council and tries to create from fissures grand canyons.” Avoiding this scenario also requires the Council to back its resolutions seriously (see next).

## 9 Back mandates with robust politics

Security Council members must back their own resolutions – i.e. those mandating UNMISS, authorizing the arms embargo, imposing targeted sanctions, etc – more steadfastly (or at least not flagrantly undermine them). Doing so requires strong diplomatic pressure, making clear what the costs and consequences of non-compliance are in order to influence the political calculations of principals, empower/embolden missions and mission leadership to take difficult decisions and smother the drivers of conflict that threaten to unravel fragile settlements. Otherwise, the Council will continue to give missions an impossible mandate while providing incoherent and equivocal support.

A clear political strategy for missions needs to be backed by firm, reliable and consistent political support from the Security Council. A lack of consensus and collective political support from the Council can neuter missions. While the Council devotes much effort when it comes to establishment or renewal of mandates, it often steps away from giving its own instruments full political support. As one UN peace operations veteran put it: “The Council invests heavily in

dollar terms but not political terms.”<sup>119</sup> Too often political strategies for missions are weakened or undermined due to a lack of united political back-stopping by the Security Council.

The UNMISS experience shows that in the absence of more robust political backing from the Council, particularly around key aspects such as demanding accountability for SOFA violations<sup>120</sup> and enforcing arms embargoes,<sup>121</sup> achieving inclusive and durable political solutions to conflict is likely to continue to be a challenge.

## 10 Not everything is political but DDR and SSR are

The Government of South Sudan has largely avoided DDR and SSR since the beginning of the predecessor UNMIS mission, presenting a significant roadblock to any durable peace. Missions require a holistic political vision that situates DDR/SSR at the heart of a long-term strategy rather than an approach that views these efforts as technical add-and-stir programmes to be prioritized/sequenced amongst the many other competing programmes and plans.<sup>122</sup> In the longer term, peace operations are unable to do these things alone but can be instrumental in coordinating the UN system and the broader set of development partners. In the short-term, re-engaging in even small-scale capacity-building and reform after a hiatus has the potential to provide political leverage over parties that should be harnessed and exploited by missions.

UNMISS shows that ensuring the primacy of politics also requires being very clear about what the political work of the mission includes. For example, DDR and SSR are political, not merely technical. Removing of weapons and disbanding of forces alters the battlefield balance of power so – even if hostilities are (temporarily) ceased – is a profoundly political undertaking. So, too, is reorganizing and potentially de-militarizing the security sector (writ large to acknowledge that the public security and justice sectors are also part of this system). Too often, despite the ubiquity of these aspects in peace agreements, peace operations underplay them, seen as too difficult or something to be sequenced and tackled ‘later’ or become moth-balled due to government indifference or resistance.

On the contrary, the establishment of a mission – when parties are (usually) most willing to consent to deployment – is the time when deeply political reforms such as these can be incorporated into a mandate and aligned and prioritized appropriately in a political/mission strategy. As one expert interviewee put it: “when the country is on its knees and really needs a peacekeeping operation, that’s the time when you can extract a commitment to do (or not do) certain things. If you can’t do it when a country’s weak then when can you?”<sup>123</sup> A UN mission such as UNMISS may not be able to undertake such programmes alone. Indeed, they need to be nationally owned to a large extent. However, an *in situ* peace operation can: (1) play a much greater coordination role including maintaining political consensus; and (2) be a fulcrum for sustained political pressure from the UN, Council and major donors. Without genuinely transformational change in the security sector – writ large – whatever political process is underway is unlikely to lead to a political solution that can allow a mission to exit leaving behind a stable protective environment.

Any return to capacity-building by missions in settings where government forces have been culpable for atrocities must be consistent with civil harm mitigation principles and subject to Human Rights Due Diligence Policy and other donor oversight mechanisms. The promise of these activities, however, presents missions like UNMISS with a rare moment of increased political leverage. Donors may be sceptical of re-engaging too quickly and the economic climate is not conducive to the large-scale aid seen in earlier periods in South Sudan. However, the resources that will flow from support to State institutions and the legitimacy a more effective governance/public service architecture could afford the government in the eyes of the population, are significant incentives for the government and therefore provide substantial political capital for the UN. As with focusing on the initial mandating process, major shifts in mandates (particularly when they involve increased financial and material support to signatories of peace agreements) should be exploited to gain leverage, access and influence in the political processes to which mission success and exit are beholden.

## 11 From little things, big things grow

When different permutations of the peace agreement in South Sudan were struck, UNMISS has mostly not been at the table. Short of deeper involvement, missions should use the limited political space they are able to occupy to find entry points that can be developed and expanded to exert more influence over setting expectations for their eventual role in implementation.

Throughout its history, the relationship between UNMISS and the South Sudanese Government has been dynamic. They have been working in close cooperation, direct confrontation and often both at once. Similarly, the interaction with a range of opposition groups has taken different forms at different points in time. These relations have constrained the political space available to UNMISS. It is therefore essential that missions are provided with clear guidance on what Good Offices might look like in circumstances where the political space to operate is small and the relationship to the host government and other parties to the conflict are fraught. The lesson here is that seemingly negligible entry points may lead to more substantive roles. Optimizing these opportunities can eventually get the UN/mission to the table where it can influence the substance of the political process. From this position, missions can also develop a more specific set of shared expectations around its role in implementation that will inevitably become a significant hinge in its exit strategy.

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Case Study 4

# The Political Strategy of the UN Peacekeeping Mission in the Central African Republic


by Aditi Gorur



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**I**n 2013, the Central African Republic (CAR) was engulfed in a crisis when Séléka rebels took over the capital of Bangui. The fighting quickly took on a religious character as widespread violence broke out between predominantly Christian and Muslim armed groups and communities affiliated with them. The UN Security Council authorized the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in CAR (MINUSCA) the following year, amid grave concerns of ethnic cleansing and genocide. The mission worked hard alongside other international partners to halt the violence and bring the parties to resolve their differences through a political process. In 2019, more than four years after MINUSCA began operating, all 14 major armed groups signed a peace agreement with the CAR Government.

This study traces MINUSCA's political strategy as these developments unfolded—how it was developed, what factors shaped it, and how it changed over time. It draws on a desk review of reports of the Secretary-General, Security Council resolutions, Mission Concepts, and expert analysis. It also draws on interviews conducted with MINUSCA personnel in person in Bangui in July 2019 as well as interviews conducted with key informants remotely between May and July 2020.

The study begins with a brief background on the conflict in CAR and the events leading to the deployment of MINUSCA. It then analyses how the Security Council approached the development of MINUSCA's political mandate, focusing on three key points in time: when the mission was first deployed to respond to the crisis in CAR in 2014, the stalling of the peace process and the development of a written political strategy in 2017, and the events that led to the signing of a peace agreement in 2019. These moments were selected as having prompted or marked significant change for the mission's political strategy. The study then analyses how mission leaders in the field developed a political strategy for MINUSCA, looking at the same three moments. It analyses the types of objectives they sought to achieve, the processes they used to formulate their strategies, and how their strategies were supported by the UN Secretariat (including the Integrated Operational Teams or IOTs at the UN Department of Peace Operations that support missions from New York) and the Security Council. Finally, the study offers a brief summary of some key findings about political strategy that can be drawn from this examination of MINUSCA.

# I. Background

The roots of conflict in CAR are centuries-old. CAR was a hub of the slave trade industry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During French colonial rule from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onward, the country was parcelled out to private companies rather than governed, labour was exploited and wealth extracted to an extreme degree and foreign diseases were introduced that ravaged communities.<sup>1</sup> Even after CAR gained its independence in 1960, France continued to exert an anti-democratic influence in the country—for example, by supporting the 1965 coup of Jean-Bédél Bokassa, who went on to reign as “[o]ne of Africa’s most brutal dictators.”<sup>2</sup>

In the decades since its independence, CAR has experienced high levels of instability and insecurity. It has had persistent problems with political coups, mutinies by its armed forces, rebellions by armed groups and failed disarmament efforts, political marginalization of Muslims, pastoralists, women, and other groups, and intercommunal violence. It has also experienced severe poverty (currently ranking 188<sup>th</sup> out of 189 countries on the UN Development Programme [UNDP] Human Development Index)<sup>3</sup> and gender inequality (currently ranking 159<sup>th</sup> out of 162 countries on the UNDP Gender Inequality Index).<sup>4</sup> It was thus no surprise to the international community when the latest crisis developed in CAR in 2013 that led to the deployment of MINUSCA.

MINUSCA is the latest of several UN peace operations deployed to CAR. These include the UN Mission in the Central African Republic (MINURCA), a peacekeeping mission authorized in 1998 in response to instability triggered by conflict between the Central African armed forces and the civilian Government;<sup>5</sup> the UN Peacebuilding Support Office in the Central African Republic (BONUCA), a special political mission that replaced MINURCA in 2000;<sup>6</sup> the UN Mission in the Central African Republic and

Chad (MINURCAT), a peacekeeping mission based in Chad and authorized in 2007 in response to violence against civilians, political instability and a humanitarian crisis in the Central African Republic and Chad;<sup>7</sup> and the UN Integrated Peacebuilding Office in the Central African Republic (BINUCA), a special political mission authorized in 2010 to replace BONUCA in response to rising violence in the country.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Libreville in June 2008, and the subsequent inclusive political dialogue held in Bangui in December 2008, recurring clashes and political tension persisted in CAR. In March 2013, Séléka rebels took over the capital of Bangui and President François Bozizé fled to Cameroon. The rebels accused Bozizé of failing to honour an agreement to integrate them into the national armed forces. The Security Council issued a press statement expressing “their intention to monitor closely the situation and, if required, to consider further steps.”<sup>9</sup>

The African Union developed plans to transition its Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) Peace Consolidation Mission in the Central African Republic (MICOPAX) to a peacekeeping mission, which became known as the African-led International Support Mission in the Central African Republic (MISCA). In December 2013, the Security Council authorized MISCA to support the protection of civilians, stabilization, the restoration of State authority, and Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR).<sup>10</sup> In the same resolution, the Council “[took] note of the position of the African Union (AU) and ECCAS that MISCA may require eventual transformation into a United Nations peacekeeping operation”<sup>11</sup> and welcomed planning for that possibility, and further authorized French forces (dubbed Operation Sangaris) to take “all necessary measures to support MISCA in the discharge of its mandate.”<sup>12</sup>



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In April 2014, the Security Council authorized MINUSCA to take over from MISCA by September of that year. MINUSCA's mandate included the protection of civilians, support to the political transition process, facilitation of humanitarian assistance, promotion of human rights, support for justice and the rule of law and support for DDR.<sup>13</sup> The most unusual aspect of the mission's mandate was the authorization of "urgent

temporary measures" to maintain law and order and fight impunity.<sup>14</sup> Member States added language during negotiations to emphasize that these measures were to be adopted on an exceptional basis, and China and Russia requested and received an official request from the CAR Government for the mission to be granted this authority.<sup>15</sup>



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## II

# Political Mandate in the Security Council

This section analyses how MINUSCA's political mandate was approached within the Security Council. It focuses on three key moments for the mission's political efforts: the initial deployment of the mission in 2014, the stalling of the national process and the mission's adoption of a written political strategy in 2017, and the political process that culminated in the signing of a peace agreement in 2019. The section traces the discussions within the Council over MINUSCA's political mandate as these developments unfolded.

## Firefighting (2014)

Security Council discussions on the response to the crisis in CAR were particularly driven by the interests of France and the United States.

France had a long-standing interest in CAR as a former colony and has served as the pen-holder on MINUSCA's mandate from the outset. The US had relatively little investment in CAR at the time, but quickly placed great emphasis on the moral imperative to prevent mass atrocities in CAR, in part due to the influence of Samantha Power, who was then serving as US Ambassador to the UN.<sup>16</sup>

By early 2014, there was general agreement within the Security Council about the need for a UN peacekeeping mission to take over from MISCA, but disagreement about when and how that should happen.<sup>17</sup> Security Council Report's analysis in January 2014 suggested that "Russia, the US and the African Council members believe [MISCA] and the other international forces should be given time to fulfil their mandates and

restore security in the CAR, while close attention should be paid to ensuring the success of the transitional political process.”<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, France pushed for a UN peacekeeping mission to replace MISCA “to be able to address both the security threats and reforms and assistance needed in the political, institutional and humanitarian spheres.”<sup>19</sup> France was keen to see a UN peacekeeping mission in place soon as it wanted to limit the duration of its own military deployment, particularly as it also had another military operation underway in Mali.<sup>20</sup> It saw a multidimensional UN peacekeeping mission as more capable of maintaining the gains of the French Sangaris intervention than an AU mission.<sup>21</sup>

In February 2014, the chair of the AU sent a letter to the UN Secretary-General suggesting that MISCA could be replaced by a UN peacekeeping mission after it achieved its initial stabilization goals, which it hoped to do within six to nine months.<sup>22</sup> In March 2014, the Secretary-General issued a report offering recommendations on the transformation of MISCA into a UN peacekeeping mission.<sup>23</sup> At this time, some Member States were concerned whether a UN peacekeeping mission was a robust enough measure to address the challenges in CAR, as well as about the budgetary implications of authorizing the mission.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, the mission was authorized in April 2014.

The political context into which the mission was deployed was one characterized by extreme instability. In April 2013, in the wake of the Séléka coup, a National Transitional Council was appointed to oversee CAR’s governance until elections could be held. In the months before the mission deployed, ECCAS and France lost faith in the effectiveness of President Michel Djotodia and Prime Minister Nicolas Tiangaye, due to their inability to control the rising violence in the country, and pressured them into resigning in January 2014.<sup>25</sup> Violence in the preceding months had also “further decimated the already scarce national capacities.”<sup>26</sup> The National Transitional Council selected Catherine Samba-Panza, who was then serving as the mayor of Bangui, to replace Djotodia as President. Samba-Panza formed a new transitional Government, which “provoked dissatisfaction among ex-Séléka and anti-balaka leaders and led to a subsequent spike

in violence in Bangui.”<sup>27</sup> As the March 2014 report of the Secretary-General noted, CAR had by that point “experienced three internal conflicts in 10 years and its third Transitional Government in one year.”<sup>28</sup>

However, the more pressing concern for the Council at the time was the high risk of mass atrocities in the country in the context of violence perpetrated on the basis of religious identity by the ex-Séléka, anti-balaka and civilians. The UN Secretary-General’s Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide said in January 2014 that there was “a high risk both of crimes against humanity and of genocide,”<sup>29</sup> and told the Council again in March that “crimes against humanity are being committed and ... the risk of genocide remains high.”<sup>30</sup> The report of the Secretary-General published in March 2014, just prior to the mission’s authorization, warned of “a serious protection crisis, with civilians being targeted by all armed groups and by civilians on the basis of their religious affiliation.”<sup>31</sup> There also were serious concerns that the ex-Séléka could impose a “*de facto* partition” separating the country along religious majority lines.<sup>32</sup> As a result, the mission’s initial focus was much more on managing the security situation and preventing mass atrocities than on politics. There was relatively little clarity on what the mission’s political approach should be when the Council authorized MINUSCA.

MINUSCA’s initial political mandate focused on supporting CAR’s transitional authorities to manage the transition and hold elections; supporting efforts to address the root causes of the conflict; supporting national- and local-level mediation and reconciliation processes and supporting the “rapid” extension of State authority.<sup>33</sup>

In practice, support to the transition through the facilitation of elections was the most urgent political objective from the Council’s perspective.<sup>34</sup> The report of the Secretary-General issued in March 2014 noted the many serious obstacles to the holding of elections in CAR. It also cautioned that elections should not necessarily be held as soon as logistically possible: “Determining the appropriate timing for holding elections in the Central African Republic will not only be a matter of putting into place the necessary technical capacities and legal arrangements

and of providing a secure environment. It will also depend on *establishing the right political environment*, one in which elections will help to strengthen society and advance stability rather than be a source of conflict and social instability.”<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, the Security Council had a strong interest in elections being organized soon, mainly because the Council saw the lack of legitimate governance in the country as a major conflict driver, and thus saw electing a legitimate government as an urgent necessity to control the violence and insecurity.<sup>36</sup>

## Adoption of Political Strategy (2017)

MINUSCA’s early efforts yielded significant political achievements. In May 2015, with support from MINUSCA, the transitional Government organized the Bangui Forum, an inclusive national political dialogue whose objective was to define a new social contract for the Central African people by exploring sustainable solutions to the conflict.<sup>37</sup> In December 2015, presidential and legislative elections were held, with second round elections and run-offs held in February and March 2016. These elections were an impressive feat given the huge logistical and political challenges involved, as well as serious security challenges that had caused several delays. In April 2016, the Security Council authorized a technical rollover of the mission’s mandate, extending it by three months instead of the usual one year to give MINUSCA additional time to discuss its future role with the new Government, led by President Faustin-Archange Touadéra, who had assumed office the previous month.<sup>38</sup>

The Bangui Forum, the political and DDR agreements that arose from it, and the elections constituted important political advancement, but progress afterward on the political front seemed to stall. Little progress was made on DDR, security sector reform (SSR), political representation and other priorities. Armed groups began to splinter; many armed group leaders had little control over their forces. Fighters who saw little prospect for the political process to yield good outcomes for them began to focus on seeking self-enrichment instead.

In its July 2016 resolution renewing MINUSCA’s mandate, the Security Council introduced language stating that “MINUSCA’s strategic objective is to support the creation of conditions conducive to the sustainable reduction of the presence of, and threat posed by, armed groups through a comprehensive approach and a proactive and robust posture.”<sup>39</sup> In this same resolution, it identified four “immediate priority tasks,” none of which included support to political processes (though it did list “Support for the reconciliation and stabilization political processes, the extension of State authority and the preservation of territorial integrity” later as the first of the mission’s “core priority tasks”).<sup>40</sup> These mandate decisions indicate that the Security Council continued to put a more urgent focus on the security situation in CAR and less immediate emphasis on the political aspects of the mission’s mandate.

Despite the Council’s focus and the mission’s efforts on security, by late 2016, many armed groups reneged from their ceasefire agreements and began engaging in violent competition over resource-rich areas, including lucrative areas for illegal taxation, mining, and cattle migration. This competition, combined with the departures of French Sangaris forces and US and Ugandan counter-Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) forces, led to a surge in violence (see Figures 1 and 2 in the next section). This violence continued despite the July 2017 signing of a roadmap by CAR authorities, the AU, ECCAS, and the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region in Libreville for the African Initiative for Peace and Reconciliation in the CAR (African Initiative). In August 2017, Under-Secretary-General (USG) for Humanitarian Affairs Stephen O’Brien said that there were “early warning signs of a genocide” in CAR, a statement which alarmed Council members and reinvigorated their emphasis on the protection of civilians.

The Council struggled to find solutions to this stalemate. In its November 2017 resolution renewing MINUSCA’s mandate, the Council increased MINUSCA’s troop ceiling by 900 troops,<sup>41</sup> despite generally strong pressure from the US Government to cut the UN peacekeeping budget. Although the resolution welcomed the African Initiative, and called for coordination between MINUSCA and the African Initiative’s

Panel of Facilitators, it did not define any role for MINUSCA in the implementation of the African Initiative. The ongoing violence in CAR that was unlikely to be addressed by the African Initiative, combined with the mission's lack of influence in the African Initiative, prompted the mission to find other ways to use its Good Offices. As the next section of this case study will explore, the mission responded by developing its first written strategy, based on a systematic analysis of sources of violence.

## Signing of APPR (2019)

In 2018, as part of the Action for Peacekeeping initiative, the Secretary-General commissioned Juan Gabriel Valdés to conduct an independent strategic review of MINUSCA. The Valdés report recommended that the mission shift its approach from containment to transformation of the conflict environment. The report identified a strengthened African Initiative process as one of the key means of achieving this transformation. To that end, the Valdés report recommended (among other things) that MINUSCA should play a stronger role in the African Initiative and promote a more inclusive and comprehensive process. The Valdés report was well-received by the Council and its recommendations influenced the Council's thinking on MINUSCA.<sup>42</sup>

In its December 2018 resolution renewing MINUSCA's mandate, the Security Council reaffirmed that "the African Initiative and its roadmap constitute the only framework for a comprehensive political solution in the CAR"<sup>43</sup> and welcomed "the call for MINUSCA to play a greater political role in the African Initiative and the decision to include the [Special Representative to the Secretary General (SRSG)] as a full member of the Panel of Facilitators."<sup>44</sup>

Yet even as the Council took steps to support the African Initiative and elevate MINUSCA's political influence within it, Russia began supporting a parallel process based in Khartoum. In August 2018, it organized a two-day meeting in Khartoum involving five of the 14 major armed groups—at the same time that the AU was organizing a meeting of the same 14 armed groups in Bouar.<sup>45</sup> The Khartoum meeting attracted the

top leadership of the most high-profile armed groups, though not from all 14 groups nor the Government, making it unclear which process was more likely to succeed.<sup>46</sup> Russia's motivation in promoting the Khartoum process appeared to be to demonstrate to the world its political influence in CAR by brokering its own peace process, rather than to achieve any specific political outcome.<sup>47</sup>

Russia had significant weight in these talks since it had gained very significant influence over the previous year within CAR and with the Touadéra Government, as part of a broader Russian strategy to secure strong political influence in Africa and "turn the region into a strategic hub."<sup>48</sup> The Security Council had imposed an arms embargo on CAR since 2013,<sup>49</sup> and in December 2017, Russia secured an exemption allowing it to supply "AK47s, sniper rifles, machineguns and grenade launchers" to the CAR armed forces—a measure long sought-after by the CAR Government and denied by France due to risks that the weapons would be used to harm civilians.<sup>50</sup> Russia also supplied dozens of security contractors to "train local soldiers and secure mining projects."<sup>51</sup> Since then, Russia had developed a close relationship with the CAR Government. In May 2018, the Central African and Russian presidents met in person. Russian nationals took up positions in Bangui, providing security and political support to the Toudéra Government, including as one of the president's national security advisors.<sup>52</sup> In September 2018, the Russian national security advisor "explained the merits of the [Khartoum process] to some 20 CAR Members of Parliament, signalling that the president approved of Russia's initiative."<sup>53</sup>

Russia pushed to have the Khartoum process recognized in MINUSCA's 2018 mandate renewal and for the resolution to link the Khartoum process with the African Initiative, but the other Council members resisted.<sup>54</sup> This resistance was because the other Council members (including the African members) saw the Khartoum process as weakening the African Initiative.<sup>55</sup> The other Council members were concerned that the African Initiative was just beginning to make progress and that any parallel processes might erode it.<sup>56</sup> These disagreements were thus more over form than the actual substance of the talks.

In November 2018, the Council authorized a one-month technical rollover of the MINUSCA mandate; although this delay was widely believed to have been caused by tensions over the Khartoum process, it was in fact done to give the US Executive Branch more time to consult with the Legislative Branch about new provisions related to MINUSCA's support for the redeployment of the Central African armed forces.<sup>57</sup>

During this contentious month, tensions over the Khartoum process mounted. Russia and China abstained from the December 2018 resolution to extend MINUSCA's mandate, in part over the failure to embrace the Khartoum process. Yet, momentum on the ground shifted toward Khartoum. Seeing this shift, the AU and regional powers decided to put their support behind the Khartoum process; it was agreed that they would officially incorporate the Khartoum process into the framework of the African Initiative.<sup>58</sup> This helped to maintain the credibility of the AU and UN and to resolve the challenge that MINUSCA was explicitly authorized to support the African Initiative rather than the Khartoum process.<sup>59</sup> The Russian initiative was thus successful at spurring political movement where the African Initiative had stalled, though ultimately the substance of the peace agreement that resulted was based on the AU-led process.

Although MINUSCA's political role had been strengthened in the African Initiative through its inclusion in the Panel of Facilitators, it continued to have little influence or role in the Khartoum

process. In January 2019, USG Jean-Pierre Lacroix and AU Commissioner for Peace and Security Smail Chergui visited Bangui and urged the parties to the conflict to stay committed to the Khartoum process and reach a peace agreement. Later that month, the parties convened in Khartoum for AU-led negotiations, and in February the Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation (APPR) was signed in Bangui by the CAR Government and 14 armed groups.

In its November 2019 resolution renewing MINUSCA's mandate, the Security Council welcomed the agreement and explicitly authorized the mission to support its implementation of the APPR.<sup>60</sup> The Council did not, however, make the APPR the central focus of the mission's political efforts in this resolution—the section of the mandate dealing with the APPR tasked the mission with “Good Offices and support to the peace process, including the implementation of the Peace Agreement, elections, national reconciliation, social cohesion and transitional justice at national and local levels.”<sup>61</sup> This broader approach was urged by the Secretariat, particularly the IOT, partly to avoid the impression that MINUSCA (rather than the signatory parties) would become responsible for the implementation of a peace agreement, and partly to avoid the impression that the issues covered by the APPR were the most important ones for the mission to support.<sup>62</sup> The Secretariat saw this approach as contrasting with the Council's approach toward the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali, whose mandate was much more centrally focused on the peace agreement.<sup>63</sup>



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### III

## Political Strategy in the Mission

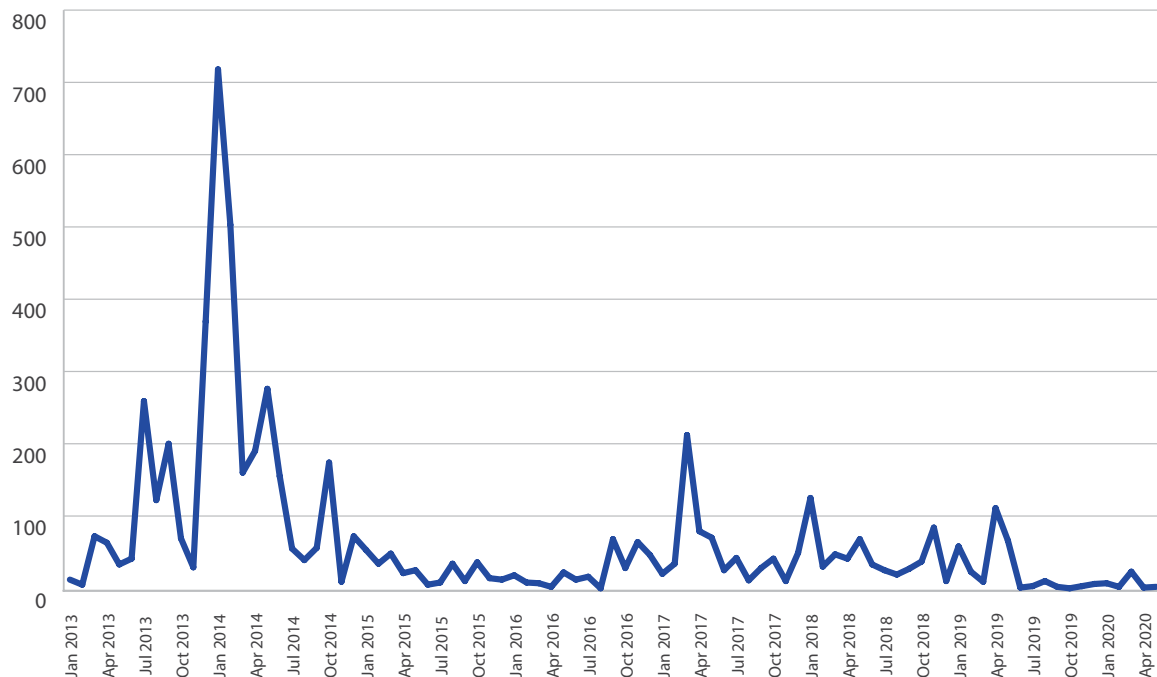
Despite strong support from the Security Council and relative unity within the Council on the mission's political strategy, MINUSCA has faced significant challenges in supporting a political resolution to the conflict in CAR. It was deployed at a time when violence and the risk of atrocities was high and there was no clear political process underway, let alone a signed peace agreement to support. The mission was able to help organize the Bangui Forum, an inclusive national dialogue that led to a series of political agreements, but these agreements stalled. When a new peace process began, in the form of the African Initiative, MINUSCA had a limited role and influence in the process.

Despite these challenges, MINUSCA worked creatively to support political solutions and,

since 2017, has defined its political role using a comprehensive approach based on a systematic analysis of the sources of violence. The signing of the APPR in 2019 injected new energy into political reform efforts and has created a more cohesive framework for the mission's national and local efforts. However, the process was much less consultative and inclusive than the Bangui Forum and some of the agreement's provisions are considered unrealistic. This section analyses how MINUSCA has defined its political strategy during its deployment, focusing on the same three key moments analysed in the previous section.

The analysis in this section is informed by trends in violence as recorded by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). The data is based on figures published in "news reports,

Fig. 1: Civilian Fatalities from Direct Targeting by Month in CAR



Data taken from ACLED. These figures include “all events in which civilians were the direct or only target of violence” recorded in the ACLED database (<https://acleddata.com/curated-data-files>).

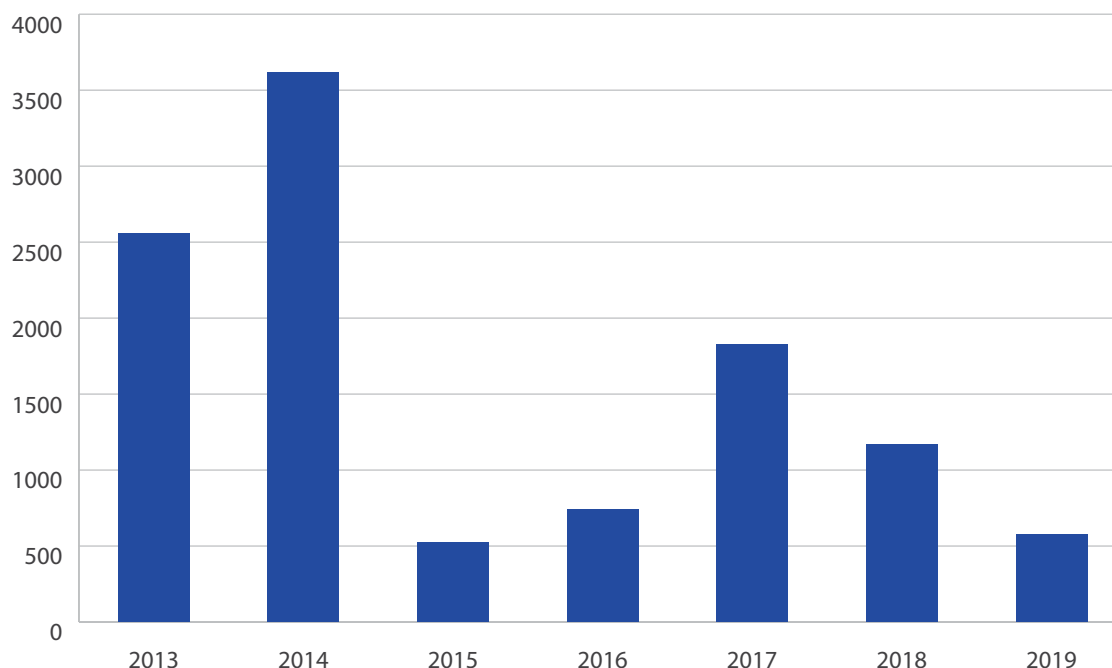
publications by civil society and human rights organizations, and security updates from local and international organizations.”<sup>64</sup> The ACLED methodology skews toward more conservative fatality estimates and real fatalities are likely higher than what is captured in the ACLED database. The ACLED data shows very high fatalities in 2013 and 2014 during the peak of the CAR crisis, with a sharp decline in 2015 when the Bangui Forum and elections were held. Targeted violence against civilians began increasing in the second half of 2016, as the political agreements resulting from the Bangui Forum stalled, intercommunal violence grew, and armed groups’ motivations to use violence changed. Fatalities rose very sharply from 2016 to 2017 but fell successively in 2018 and 2019, by which time they had fallen to nearly the same low point as 2015. Reported violence against civilians appears to have remained low from mid-2019 through May 2020.

## Firefighting (2014)

The mission’s main focus in the months after its deployment was not to achieve any specific political objective, but to protect civilians and prevent mass atrocities in order to create the space for a political process to take shape.<sup>65</sup> The message the mission was receiving from the Security Council was to focus on absorbing and deploying as many troops as possible to manage the violence to the best of its capabilities.<sup>66</sup> It was considered premature for the mission to try to hold discussions about a peace process while violence was so active and atrocities were ongoing.

MINUSCA’s SRSG, General Babacar Gaye, headed BINUCA prior to MINUSCA’s authorization, and thus was deeply engaged in MINUSCA’s political strategy development and outreach from the start. When MINUSCA was first authorized, several personnel from UN Headquarters

Fig. 2: Fatalities by Year in CAR



Data taken from ACLED. These figures include all fatalities recorded in the ACLED database (<https://acleddata.com/curated-data-files>).

were deployed to Bangui to serve in temporary positions as part of the mission's start-up team.<sup>67</sup> These personnel had been involved in analysis and planning before the mission had been authorized and also influenced the mission's strategy.<sup>68</sup> The mission thus had the benefit of a leader and personnel with expertise in Central African politics. Yet, with intense violence still ongoing, resources and attention were stretched thin in the mission's early deployment. Although a Mission Concept was developed, there was no other document in the mission describing its political strategy.<sup>69</sup>

As the violence started to decrease in the second half of 2014, the mission had more space for its political engagement, which coalesced around two related initiatives: a national dialogue and elections. First, the mission aimed support an inclusive national dialogue that would allow many different stakeholders to express their views, even though a peace process had not yet

taken shape. This strategy was developed by SRSF Gaye in consultation with the International Contact Group and key stakeholders in CAR and the region. The mission anticipated a three-stage process in which there would be first a cessation of hostilities, then a series of public consultations, and then a forum for discussion.<sup>70</sup>

In July 2014, an international mediation team brokered a meeting in Brazzaville with representatives of the transitional authorities, the ex-Séléka, the anti-balaka, and international stakeholders, where participants agreed on the need for a "forum on national reconciliation to be held in Bangui ... to forge a national-level consensus on key issues such as disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, security sector reform, including the reconstitution of the Central African armed forces, the rule of law, and political and economic governance."<sup>71</sup> The armed group participants also agreed to a cessation of hostilities.<sup>72</sup>

In January 2015, CAR authorities organized popular consultations in 64 locations across CAR and within refugee and diaspora communities in the region.<sup>73</sup> MINUSCA played a “vital role” in enabling these consultations by providing political, technical, logistical and security support.<sup>74</sup> The Forum was held in May 2015. MINUSCA’s efforts in service of the Bangui Forum included “substantial political and logistical support,” broadcasting the discussions live across CAR through its radio station and serving in the follow-up committee established afterwards.<sup>75</sup> The Forum resulted in the signing of the Republican Pact for Peace, National Reconciliation and Reconstruction, a political agreement addressing the themes of peace and security, governance, justice and reconciliation, and economic and social development.<sup>76</sup> It also resulted in the signing of an agreement on DDR principles by nine of the 10 recognized armed groups.<sup>77</sup> These documents created a framework for the mission’s political engagement on some of the most critical drivers of violence in CAR, even in the absence of a more comprehensive peace process.

Second, the mission aimed to facilitate the holding of presidential and legislative elections. MINUSCA chaired a One United Nations Elections Task Force and worked with the UN Development Programme to develop a “multi-disciplinary operational plan and concept of operations to support the Transitional Authorities on the electoral process.”<sup>78</sup> MINUSCA’s logistical and technical support for elections preparations included supporting the establishment of National Electoral Authority offices, reinforcing these offices’ capacity, and supporting the establishment of a “national database of women for potential leadership roles.”<sup>79</sup> On a more substantive level, MINUSCA worked to “promote a political and security environment conducive to the holding of the elections, including support for the development and dissemination of the code of good conduct, training for political party election monitors and information sessions for presidential candidates ... MINUSCA also held informal meetings with presidential and legislative candidates throughout the country ... to impress on them the importance of issue-based campaigns responding to the aspirations of Central Africans, including with regard to the

implementation of the recommendations of the Bangui Forum on National Reconciliation.”<sup>80</sup>

Throughout the process, there were serious concerns about whether the elections were being held too soon and whether the outcome would be seen as legitimate. In particular, the exclusion of refugees could have very significantly threatened prospects for inclusive governance and peace in CAR, because estimates suggested that 80 per cent of CAR’s Muslim population had been forced to flee the country by the end of 2014.<sup>81</sup> In June 2015, the transitional Parliament tried to pass a law preventing refugees from voting in the upcoming presidential elections, which would have significantly reduced the Muslim share of the vote and seriously undermined the legitimacy of those elections, but this decision was overturned by the judiciary.<sup>82</sup>

In December 2015, CAR held a constitutional referendum, and between December 2015 and March 2016, it held presidential and legislative elections. MINUSCA undertook significant efforts to provide security for the elections. Although there were security challenges during the referendum, the elections were peaceful.<sup>83</sup> Central African refugees voted in Cameroon, Chad and the Republic of Congo, but were not permitted to register to vote in the Democratic Republic of Congo by that country’s Government.<sup>84</sup>

The Council had taken an extraordinary step in authorizing the urgent temporary measures mandate, in part because it saw impunity and the absence of rule of law as a critical driver of violence in CAR. In this sense, the Council saw the urgent temporary measures as constituting an important part of the mission’s political impact, especially in a context where there was no meaningful peace process underway prior to the mission’s deployment for it to support. However, the mission did not make as much use of the urgent temporary measures mandate in its first year of deployment as the Council may have expected. The mission first had to agree with the national authorities on processes for arresting, detaining and handing over suspected criminals to the State.<sup>85</sup> By the beginning of April 2015, the mission reported that it had arrested 283 suspects and transferred them to

State custody, but noted that only 24 had been accused of serious crimes and observed that “overcrowding of the Bangui Central Prison and the severe lack of operating correction facilities outside of Bangui” had limited their efforts.<sup>86</sup> The State’s very weak capacity to issue warrants, conduct investigations and try cases also limited MINUSCA’s ability to conduct arrests; despite the unusual mandate, there was little that MINUSCA could do on its own to create the rule of law in a way that would significantly alter the conflict dynamics. The urgent temporary measures may thus be seen as an area of divergence between the Council’s expectations and the mission’s delivery with respect to its political approach—though not one that caused serious concern within the Council, since elections remained the political priority at the Council.<sup>87</sup>

## Adoption of Political Strategy (2017)

The mission had prioritized support for elections to be held in its initial political efforts, with the belief that a peace agreement would be difficult to achieve with only a transitional administration in place. Yet immediately after the elections, the mission found it faced a new political challenge. The newly elected Government, which had received the blessing of the population, was not keen to make concessions to armed group leaders who had not received this legitimization, and armed groups were reluctant to adhere to their DDR commitments.<sup>88</sup> A political stalemate emerged. Various regional actors initiated a range of political processes to try to break the stalemate, among which the African Initiative gained the backing of the UN and AU. But the African Initiative was moving slowly, and MINUSCA’s influence over the process was limited, in part because it was not among the actors included in its Panel of Facilitators (though it was mandated in 2017 to act “in partnership” and “in cooperation” with it).<sup>89</sup> In September 2017, President Touadéra negotiated the appointment of several former armed group leaders into government positions—yet this concession had little impact on armed group fighters on the ground, many of whom were by this point driven more by economic motivations than political ones.

This period was overseen by a new SRSG. In August 2015, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon had requested Babacar Gaye’s resignation in response to public criticism that the mission had done too little to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse by UN peacekeepers.<sup>90</sup> Gaye was replaced by SRSG Parfait Onanga-Anyanga, whose approach placed “nationally-led inclusive dialogue at its core.”<sup>91</sup> The Mission Concept developed under Onanga-Anyanga identified three strategic priorities for the mission: security, protection, and human rights; sustainably reducing the threat of armed groups; and peacebuilding.<sup>92</sup>

Since the mission had limited opportunity to engage at the national level via the African Initiative, much of its political focus was in achieving these strategic priorities through a wide range of political engagements with national and subnational actors. The mission placed a heavy focus on local-level mediation, reconciliation, and peacebuilding, including by supporting local peace committees to manage disputes within communities, or between communities and armed groups. It supported the deployment of State authorities (such as local administrators, magistrates and police) to different parts of the country. It supported livelihoods programmes to ensure that former combatants could support themselves without rejoining armed groups. It also intervened militarily to stop armed groups from attacking civilians or expanding their areas of control. But these various local responses were disjointed and reactive.<sup>93</sup> There was not a strong link between the work of the mission’s civilian and uniformed components, and some critics raised concerns to the Secretariat that the mission was driven too much by military rather than political objectives.<sup>94</sup> This contributed, for example, to challenges the mission faced in supporting the extension of State authority; many authorities deployed into areas affected by violence were unable to work effectively or even left their posts and returned to Bangui.

In late 2017, SRSG Onanga-Anyanga tasked recently appointed Deputy SRSG Kenny Gluck to initiate consultations on the development of a comprehensive mission political strategy. Based on initial consultations with the mission’s senior leadership, drafts developed by his office were shared with heads of sections and field offices during a short period of consultation.

The SRSRG presented the final product in a senior leadership retreat, after which it was endorsed by the SRSRG and distributed to the mission. Based on the political strategy, the mission leadership developed a strategic objectives matrix for each field office. This translated the political strategy into practical objectives for each field office, which were reviewed every month or two months, depending on developments on the ground. These reviews were undertaken by the two Deputy SRSRGs, heads of field offices, and senior military, police, and civilian components from mission headquarters and the relevant field office, to determine their relevance and feasibility as well as the required resources.

The mission's new political strategy was based on the recognition that national political agreements had very limited ability to change patterns of violence outside Bangui, due to the proliferation of locally-driven conflicts, the heavy involvement of armed groups in economic predation, and the lack of effective command and control in most armed groups. This required the mission to develop a strategy which integrated support to the African Initiative and efforts to address these fragmented and diverse patterns of violence.

The strategy was founded on a perpetrator analysis: who was perpetrating violence in CAR, what was motivating them, and what was the strength of their chain of command. Based on this analysis, the mission developed approaches to influence each of these actors, broken down into four components in the political strategy: local dialogue initiatives, military or police actions, programmatic tools such as community violence reduction, and State-building support. As such, the political strategy was closely linked to the mission's protection of civilians (PoC) objectives. The strategy also included an analysis of the presence, capacity and inclusiveness of the State in different parts of the country, to inform analysis of the drivers of violence and decision-making about effective responses. This helped link the mission's efforts to support the extension of State authority more closely with its broader political objectives. Another notable aspect of the strategy is that it capitalized on the mission's comparative advantage—there was little movement possible through the African Initiative, but the mission did have a strong influence at the field level through its widespread presence there.

This multidimensional approach helped reduce violence in former hotspots like Bria and Bangassou. Fatalities, which had risen sharply from 2016 to 2017, declined significantly in 2018 (see Fig. 2 above); although it is not possible in the scope of this study to establish causality, it is likely that the mission's change in strategy contributed to this improvement. The State-building support component of the strategy presented serious challenges that made it difficult to maintain some of the gains the mission was making. Despite the efforts of MINUSCA, the European Union Training Mission and a host of bilateral actors to strengthen the Central African security sector, it remained too weak to maintain security in many areas where MINUSCA had intervened to reduce violence. Components of the strategy relying on MINUSCA's own military or police operations also proved challenging due to the mission's limited assets and resources distributed over a huge terrain.

The Secretariat strongly supported the 2017 strategy, though some were concerned that it had not been developed in consultation with them.<sup>95</sup> The message the mission received from influential Council members (particularly from the embassies of France, Russia and the US in Bangui) in response to these initiatives was that they were reassured to see the mission applying a strategy rather than reacting to crises as they arose.<sup>96</sup> However, Security Council members also repeatedly asked the mission how it was linking its local efforts to the African Initiative, and some in the mission perceived concern from New York that their efforts at the local level were seen as undermining the African Initiative.<sup>97</sup> The mission found this expectation challenging, since there was so little movement happening in the African Initiative and AU and regional interlocutors were not necessarily capable of engaging with the local-level issues on which MINUSCA was working.<sup>98</sup> The Council's concern over the disconnect between the mission's local-level work and the national-level process was ultimately resolved when the mission was asked to support the implementation of the APPR, which included local mechanisms in its framework.

One important driver of violence in CAR over which the mission had limited political influence was related to the question of Central African identity. Conflicts over who counted as Central

African (including anger on the part of Muslim Central Africans whose Central African identity and voice in Central African politics had been denied for decades) lay at the heart of the crisis that erupted in 2013.<sup>99</sup> The Touadéra Government made gestures toward greater inclusiveness, including the appointment of some Muslims to the cabinet, inclusive rhetoric during the Bangui Forum and increased recruitment of Muslims into the Central African armed forces. But these efforts were very limited given the scope of the problem and, in some cases, misguided (for example, the Muslims appointed to the cabinet were all former armed group leaders instead of coming from diverse backgrounds). Minority groups were threatened by bigoted messages from political and religious leaders, faced hurdles in receiving national identity cards, and continued to experience serious social and political marginalization.<sup>100</sup> MINUSCA's political strategy established inclusive governance as one of its objectives and made efforts to promote greater representation of Muslims in the security sector, accountability for security sector abuses against Muslims, the right of return for Muslim internally displaced persons, the rights of Muslim Central Africans to free movement and property rights and more. But the mission had limited impact on this issue for several reasons: by definition, the issue had to be owned by the national Government for meaningful progress to happen, there was strong resistance from some segments of the population and the mission was frequently accused of failing to remain impartial in the conflict, and the issue was a deeply-rooted one that was difficult to influence in the span of a few years.

## Signing of APPR (2019)

The Security Council mandated MINUSCA specifically to support the African Initiative in its December 2018 resolution.<sup>101</sup> This was in contrast to previous resolutions that had mandated MINUSCA more generally to use its Good Offices to support political processes and efforts to address the root causes of conflict. But there was little movement within the African Initiative framework, and the mission was unable to generate faster progress. As the Khartoum process gained momentum, the mission suddenly found itself supporting that process instead.

The mission's shift in focus to the APPR was driven largely from UN Headquarters, including through the visit of USG Lacroix and Commissioner Chergui to Bangui (for which the mission was given little notice). One MINUSCA representative described the mission as having been "sidelined" in the negotiations that led to the signing of the APPR; the SRSG was mindful of the AU's leading role in the process and did not want to undermine that.<sup>102</sup> Although an earlier draft of the peace agreement produced by the CAR Government had included the mission as a signatory, the document developed in Khartoum did not; this too reinforced the mission's lack of influence over the contents of the agreement. At the same time, the APPR included several provisions that MINUSCA would inevitably be called upon to support since no other actor operating in CAR could support them on their own, such as the creation of mixed security units.

The APPR was the first peace agreement reached, out of the numerous political processes initiated by various actors, that secured the signatures of all 14 major armed groups in CAR and had the support of the CAR authorities (both the Executive and Legislative Branches) as well as the relevant regional powers. Yet there were also good reasons to be pessimistic about its implementation, including attacks by signatory armed groups in the weeks and months following the signing of the APPR and the fact that several prominent armed group leaders did not attend the signing ceremony. Its DDR provisions were largely based on the same DDR framework that emerged from the Bangui Forum and on which progress had been very slow.

The mission was at first concerned about the legal implications of supporting the implementation of the APPR when it was explicitly mandated to support the African Initiative (whose link to the Khartoum process was tenuous).<sup>103</sup> It sought advice from the Secretariat, which in turn consulted with the Council.<sup>104</sup> The Council was not keen to reopen negotiations on a new mandate that explicitly tasked the mission with support to the APPR, especially after such contentious negotiations a few months earlier.<sup>105</sup> The French Mission to the UN informally communicated to the mission that it should take advantage of its Good Offices mandate to support the implementation of the APPR and that the Council would support



it in that endeavour.<sup>106</sup> A particular issue arose with respect to the mission's role in chairing local mechanisms to monitor the implementation of the APPR. The mission was told by the embassies of the US, Russia and France in CAR that they saw this role for the mission as important to the successful implementation of the agreement, but received advice from the Office of Legal Affairs in the Secretariat that the mission could not play this role since it was not tasked with support to the APPR in its mandate.<sup>107</sup>

In addition to standard agreements to disarm and resolve disputes peaceably, the APPR also contained more concessions to armed groups than previous government-backed agreements.<sup>108</sup> For example, the agreement created mixed security units combining elements from armed groups and CAR defence forces. It also included a commitment by President Touadéra to increase armed group representation in the CAR Government.

Shortly after the APPR was signed, in early 2019, the mission's political strategy was revised and renamed a comprehensive mission strategy. Although the previous political strategy had covered a similarly mission-wide scope, some in the mission had been concerned that the name "political strategy" gave the impression that different parts of the mission would follow different strategies—an impression that SRSG Onanga-Anyanga had worked to combat.<sup>109</sup> The development of the comprehensive mission strategy was, like the previous political strategy, led by the mission—though this time there was a secondary process of consultation and approval at UN Headquarters in New York after SRSG Mankeur Ndiaye approved the strategy.<sup>110</sup> The

IOT provided strategic guidance to try to promote buy-in across the mission and the humanitarian country team.<sup>111</sup>

The comprehensive mission strategy was written to accommodate provisions of the APPR, that MINUSCA would be expected to help implement. The new strategy removed support for the African Initiative and added in support for the APPR, but its other pillars remained largely the same. The APPR offered the mission an opportunity to implement one of the key recommendations from the Valdés report, namely to ensure that its local efforts were connected with the national-level process and the comprehensive mission strategy reflected that connected approach.

However, the mission moved away from a focus on this document, in large part because of changes in leadership styles. SRSG Mankeur Ndiaye succeeded Parfait Onanga-Anyanga in February 2019 and Deputy SRSG Lizbeth Cullity succeeded Kenny Gluck in January 2020. The new leadership had different approaches and preferred to focus on the APPR itself as their point of departure, rather than a document detailing the mission's political strategy.<sup>112</sup>

One positive outcome of the APPR was an improved relationship between MINUSCA and the AU. The mission's relationship with the AU had been at times tense during the negotiations under the African Initiative and the Khartoum process. The reasons for this included that the mission's relationship with the AU Special Envoy had sometimes (especially in earlier days) been weak, that the mission did not have a strong or clearly defined political role to play in the processes, and that some in the mission found



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the AU's efforts to facilitate the processes slow at times.<sup>113</sup> However, once the APPR was signed, the mission and the AU found a renewed spirit of cooperation on the implementation of the agreement.<sup>114</sup> A new AU Special Envoy arrived in Bangui, with whom the mission enjoyed a strong relationship.<sup>115</sup> Mission leadership conducted joint visits to different parts of the country together with the AU Special Envoy and the Representative of ECCAS to encourage implementation of and adherence to the APPR.<sup>116</sup>

Another positive outcome of the APPR was that it gave MINUSCA an opportunity to formally link its local-level political dialogues with the national-level process. After the signing of the APPR, the CAR Government announced the creation of mechanisms to monitor and support the implementation of the agreement. These included prefectural implementation committees, "comprising local authorities, women's associations, civil society and armed group representatives to serve as dispute resolution, conflict prevention and de-escalation mechanisms and to evaluate the implementation of the Agreement,"<sup>117</sup> and technical security committees, comprising Central African security forces and armed group members, to monitor and support the implementation of the APPR's temporary security arrangements.<sup>118</sup> The mission supported the CAR Government to set up these mechanisms, drawing on and linking them to the more informal structures MINUSCA had helped create through its earlier efforts to reduce violence at the local level. MINUSCA

was thus finally able to address the Council's concerns about the mission's local efforts being disconnected from the national level.

Some mission personnel were concerned that the Security Council, the CAR Government, the armed group signatories and the CAR population may hold unrealistic views of what the APPR could achieve, and could blame MINUSCA if its implementation does not go smoothly.<sup>119</sup> Several provisions of the agreement, notably the creation of mixed security units, were considered very unrealistic.<sup>120</sup> Council members have informally attempted to reassure the mission that they understand the complexity of the situation, including how rushed the process was and how challenging some provisions will be to implement.<sup>121</sup>

Violence against civilians has remained relatively low in CAR since mid-2019 (see Fig. 1). While it is impossible to attribute these low figures to any particular cause in the scope of this study, the mission's adoption of a political strategy based on analysing sources of violence and the APPR may both have contributed to the reduction in violence. However, to the extent that the APPR has contributed, its weaknesses, including the lack of inclusivity in its process and the unrealistic nature of some of its provisions, make this relative peace a fragile one. Since the signing of the APPR, MINUSCA has made the agreement's implementation its priority; if the agreement falls apart, the mission will have to rethink its strategy once again.



## IV

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# Key Findings

**M**INUSCA's political strategy was slow to emerge and the mission struggled for some time to articulate a common political vision for the mission and unite all its components behind that vision. Yet, from the development of the 2017 strategy onward, through the signing of the APPR, to the present, the mission's efforts appear to have paid off with a significant reduction of violence. This section highlights some key findings from the examination of MINUSCA's political strategy.

### 1 A political role prior to a peace agreement

There was very little clarity on what the mission would achieve politically and how at the time when it was deployed and the mission's initial focus was undoubtedly to halt mass atrocities in the short term. There were also multiple actors engaged politically in CAR in sometimes

competing processes. Nevertheless, a political process emerged gradually, first leading to the Bangui Forum and its related political agreements, and later yielding in the APPR a peace agreement that offered a clear framework for MINUSCA's role in implementation.

### 2 Focusing on violent actors, not parties to a peace process

Perhaps more importantly, MINUSCA worked to find political solutions through its local and national-level efforts aimed at addressing the drivers of violence in CAR. These efforts both complemented the African Initiative and Khartoum process and also targeted actors and issues that were unlikely to be adequately addressed by those processes. In developing its 2017 strategy, MINUSCA focused on an analysis of the perpetrators and drivers of violence—understanding what motivated them, what

factors were likely to influence them, and which of the mission's capabilities might persuade them to stop using violence. As time has passed and conflict dynamics have evolved in CAR, many of the perpetrators of violence have changed—armed groups have fragmented, motivations of armed group members have changed and, in some cases, become less political—command and control structures have deteriorated, and intercommunal violence has grown. The mission recognized that a process that focused on the elite leaders of 14 armed groups, while very important, was unlikely to influence these varied actors to stop using violence—and without a cessation of violence, many of the mission's and UN Country Team's other objectives could not be advanced.

### **3 Uniting mission components behind a common political objective**

Like most large multidimensional missions, MINUSCA has sometimes struggled to ensure that its various components, sections and offices are working in concert. It has in particular been criticized for a disconnect between the activities and objectives of its military and civilian components. The 2017 strategy was a significant step in addressing these problems, since it identified an overarching political objective and analysed how different mission components and capacities could be used individually and in combination to achieve that objective in different areas. Importantly, since the strategy involved strong efforts at the local level, it placed heads of field offices in prominent roles to execute the strategy, ensuring that they were leading and making use of all the components under their command and giving them a clearer sense of how their activities fed into a common mission strategy. This approach to political strategy could be seen as a good practice to tackle the problem of disjointed activities that other missions face.

### **4 Using comparative advantages**

MINUSCA was not given prominent roles in the African Initiative or the Khartoum process, but found many useful ways to achieve political progress by drawing on its comparative

advantages—its military capacities (especially compared to the Central African security forces), its technical capacities (including to strengthen the capacities of civil society and government actors), and its considerable presence across the country. These advantages enabled some of the mission's early successes (including the Bangui Forum and the 2015-16 elections), and also guided the mission toward a more comprehensive approach in 2017. Since the signing of the APPR, the mission has drawn on its presence across the country and its relationships with local actors to support the monitoring and implementation of the agreement.

### **5 Strong host State consent but a weak State**

MINUSCA has been fortunate to enjoy strong consent and cooperation from the Touadéra Government, but its political strategy has been shaped and limited by the very weak capacity of the CAR State. The State's weak governance and the absence of the rule of law were identified as one of the main causes of the 2013 crisis and this was the rationale behind the mission's extraordinary urgent temporary measures mandate as well as the heavy emphasis on the extension of State authority. Yet, even when the mission was mandated to partially substitute for the State by conducting arrests, the State's weak capacity to support the mission with the rest of the criminal justice process limited the mission's ability to exercise that power. Similarly, even though the mission crafted a multidimensional strategy in 2017, the strategy still relied in part on the State's ability to deploy authorities into conflict-affected areas, which has continued to prove challenging.

### **6 Addressing “root causes”?**

Although some peacekeeping missions' mandates (including MINUSCA's) reference language about addressing the “root causes” of conflict, it is not clear whether this is something that can or should be expected of peacekeeping missions. These references to addressing root causes also cause confusion when considered alongside Member State expectations that peacekeeping missions will leave within a few years, since addressing

root causes of conflict is often a multigenerational endeavour. In MINUSCA's case, the mission made relatively little impact on issues of Central African national identity and citizenship. While these are issues that must be owned by the national Government, some have argued that MINUSCA could have done more to put pressure and support behind the Government to tackle them. It remains an open question whether it is appropriate for peacekeeping missions to address the "root causes" of conflict—some might argue that missions' political strategies should aim to address only the immediate drivers of violence and not their deeper root causes. But if missions are expected to address root cases, then it is worth considering why the Council explicitly mandates missions to address some root causes (such as the weakness or absence of State authority) and not others (such as the exclusionary conception of Central African identity).

## **7 Leveraging UN-AU partnerships**

The AU-UN relationship in CAR has at times been tense, due to conflicts over political roles and personality clashes. The efforts by Russia, Sudan and others to promote a peace process that competed with the African Initiative exacerbated those tensions. However, the political process also benefited from UN-AU partnerships, collaboration, and unity of message

that enhanced the legitimacy of the processes. These collaborations include joint AU-UN visits to CAR, notably the January 2019 visit of USG Lacroix and Commissioner Chergui. They also include the strong partnership between the AU and MINUSCA on the implementation of the APPR since its signing.

## **8 Benefiting from a united Security Council**

The Council has been relatively united and engaged on MINUSCA. Russia (and to a lesser extent China) split from the rest of the Council over the question of whether to embrace the Khartoum process, and the disagreement even led to two of the Permanent Five abstaining from a mandate renewal resolution. There have been other disagreements as well, including concerns from the US over adding tasks to the mission's mandate or increasing the troop ceiling because of its desire to reduce costs, and concerns from Russia over the appointment of SRSNG Ndiaye whom they worried was too close to France. Yet, none of these have been disputes over substance. On the contrary, the Council seems to have been largely comfortable taking a hands-off approach to political matters in CAR and letting MINUSCA guide its own political strategy. The Council's unity on MINUSCA's political strategy has helped the mission send strong messages to the CAR Government, regional governments and armed groups.

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Case Study 5

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# The Political Strategy of the UN Peacekeeping Mission in Mali


by Aditi Gorur



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In 2012, a crisis developed when secessionist armed groups took control over northern Mali and began moving toward the centre of the country, triggering a French military intervention. In response to the crisis, the Security Council authorized the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). The mission was deployed when the situation in Mali was unstable, before a final comprehensive peace agreement had been signed, and the mission was initially consumed largely with operational matters. Nevertheless, the mission facilitated the holding of elections and supported an Algeria-led political process that ultimately brought about the signing of a peace agreement in 2015. The Algiers Agreement was hailed as a major turning point for the country and made the centrepiece of MINUSMA's political work, but the mission has struggled to support its implementation due to delays by the Malian Government and signatory armed groups. Moreover, the Agreement dealt with only a limited set of grievances and actors. In particular, it did not include groups designated as terrorist armed groups, which have continued to perpetrate violence in northern Mali, and did not address grievances in central Mali. In 2019, in response to high levels of violence in central Mali, the Security Council instructed MINUSMA to treat managing the violence in central Mali as a second strategic priority, alongside the implementation of the Algiers Agreement. Insecurity remains a very serious problem in Mali; at the time of writing of this study, Mali has just experienced a military coup in part driven by dissatisfaction over the president's security and governance record.

This study traces MINUSMA's political strategy as these developments unfolded—how it was developed, what factors shaped it and how it changed over time. It draws on a desk review of reports of the UN Secretary-General, UN Security Council resolutions, Mission Concepts and expert analysis. It also draws on interviews conducted with MINUSMA personnel in person in Bamako in August 2019 as well as interviews conducted with key informants remotely in May and June 2020.

The study begins with a brief background on the conflict in Mali and the events leading to the deployment of MINUSMA. It then analyses how the Security Council approached the development of MINUSMA's political mandate, focusing on three key points in time: the moment when the mission was first deployed to respond to the crisis in Mali in 2013, the moment when the parties to the conflict signed the Algiers Agreement in 2015 and the moment when the Security Council introduced an additional strategic priority for the mission to address rising threats in central Mali in 2019. These moments were selected as having prompted or marked significant change for the mission's political strategy. The study then analyses how mission leaders in the field developed a political strategy for MINUSMA, looking at the types of objectives they sought to achieve, the processes they used to formulate their strategies and how their strategies were supported by the UN Secretariat (particularly the Integrated Operational Teams or IOTs at the UN Department of Peace Operations that support missions from New York) and the Security Council. Finally, the study offers a brief summary of some key findings about political strategy that can be drawn from examining the Mali case.

# I. Background

In 2012, a crisis engulfed Mali that took the world by surprise. Though it was a poor country and had experienced several uprisings by its Tuareg population in the recent past, it was not viewed by most outsiders as fragile or at high risk of violent conflict. Like many of its neighbours, Mali was a former French colony. In addition to exploiting Mali's wealth, French colonial rule had also set in motion divisions between south and north Mali by creating "a ruling class almost exclusively composed of majority black southerners."<sup>1</sup> After its independence in 1960, Mali was governed by a succession of autocratic leaders. Yet, since 1992, when the country held its first multiparty elections, Mali had been seen as a relatively stable democracy.

This stable appearance masked a very serious problem of poor governance and in 2012 several factors combined to turn that problem into a full-blown crisis. These factors included the marginalization of the Tuareg population and other minority groups that lived in the north and centre of the country; the absence of rule of law and governance mechanisms in the north of the country, which created room for violent extremist groups and a flourishing illicit trafficking network; and the movement of weapons and trained fighters into Mali in the aftermath of the 2011 crisis in Libya.

In January 2012, a Tuareg armed group called the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) led an effort to take control over parts of northern Mali, seeking to create an autonomous State as an alternative to the political repression and marginalization they had experienced from the Malian Government in Bamako. They were supported in their operations by temporary allies in the form of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Ansar Dine and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa—groups that were broadly speaking motivated by the desire to impose

Islamic fundamentalist ideologies.<sup>2</sup> The Malian Government was unable to quash this rebellion and maintain control over northern Mali.

The weak State response led the population to lose confidence in the Government and the Malian army conducted a coup that removed President Amadou Toumani Touré from power. The northern coalition expanded its operations to control northern Mali and, in April 2012, announced the creation of the independent State of Azawad. The coalition then fell apart as the Islamist groups started to impose a fundamentalist interpretation of sharia law on unwilling populations in the towns they controlled. The Islamist groups took over MNLA-controlled towns and began to expand their territory further, moving toward central Mali.

These developments caught the Security Council off-guard and it hastened to respond. In July 2012, the Council adopted a resolution on Mali which identified the restoration of constitutional order, the protection of territorial integrity and countering terrorism as the major problems needing to be addressed in Mali.<sup>3</sup> Discussions began about a regionally-led military intervention to respond to these problems. In August 2012, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) shared a concept paper with the Security Council for a regional military intervention in Mali. While some Council members, including France, supported this idea, others preferred to try "a more vigorous diplomatic effort towards the separatists in the north" first.<sup>4</sup> Through the second half of 2012, debates continued at the Council about the nature of the military intervention by ECOWAS, the speed at which it should be authorized, whether a Council resolution should be under Chapter VII (Action with Respect to the Peace, Breaches of the Peace and Acts of Aggression), whether a UN Special Envoy for the Sahel should be appointed, and the legitimacy of the Malian



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transitional authorities and their authority to request such an intervention.<sup>5</sup>

Despite these disagreements, in December 2012, the Council authorized the African-Led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), with a mandate to “contribute to the rebuilding of the capacity of the Malian Defence and Security Forces ... support the Malian authorities in recovering the areas in the north of its territory under the control of terrorist, extremist and armed groups and in reducing the threat posed by terrorist organizations ... [and] support the Malian authorities in maintaining security

and consolidate State authority.”<sup>6</sup> The same resolution also established the United Nations Office in Mali (UNOM), a small “multidisciplinary United Nations presence” tasked with supporting the security and political processes.<sup>7</sup> In January 2013, at the request of the Malian authorities, France deployed a military intervention, dubbed Operation Serval, to contain and roll back the spread of violent extremist groups which had begun expanding into central Mali. Finally, in late April, the Security Council authorized MINUSMA to absorb UNOM and take over from AFISMA as of 1 July 2013.<sup>8</sup>



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## II

# Political Mandate in the Security Council

This section analyses how MINUSMA's political mandate was approached within the Security Council. It focuses its analysis on three key moments for the mission's political strategy: the initial deployment of the mission, the signing of the Algiers Agreement in 2015, and the introduction of a second strategic priority focused on central Mali in 2019. Although the mission has been controversial and provoked disagreement within the Council in several areas, these disagreements have largely been over matters of security, principle or finances (such as how robust the mission should be, how to clarify the line between peacekeeping and counter-terrorist efforts and whether the mission's outcomes justified its cost).

For the most part, the Council has been united on the political objectives the mission

should endeavour to meet. The Council has been very unified in its support for the Algiers Agreement as the framework for the mission's political engagement since 2015, despite the Agreement's considerable limitations. However, the Council's decisions have sometimes been influenced by France's interests in supporting its counter-terrorist mission in the region, and it has sometimes missed opportunities to pressure the Malian Government to implement its commitments under the Algiers Agreement. Over time, disagreement emerged between the US and France over whether and to what extent the mission should address the violence that emerged in central Mali, particularly after 2016. Although this was not the conflict with which the Council was originally concerned when it authorized MINUSMA in 2013, it became clear to the Council over time that it was a conflict

that could derail peace in Mali and one that the mission could not ignore. The section traces the discussions within the Council over MINUSMA's political mandate as these developments unfolded.

## Firefighting (2013)

The African Union (AU), ECOWAS and the Malian authorities had requested that a UN peacekeeping operation should eventually take over from AFISMA. Council members agreed that a UN mission was needed, but disagreed over how quickly it should be authorized, where it should operate (largely in the north, or with a strong presence also in Bamako) and how robust or offensive its mandate should be, including against violent extremist groups.<sup>9</sup> These negotiations were occurring at the same time as the Council authorized an offensive "Force Intervention Brigade" as part of MONUSCO, raising the prospect of a similar offensive force in Mali. One of the strongest voices in these discussions was France, which wanted to make sure a UN peacekeeping operation was in place to ensure that Operation Serval could withdraw without a lengthy deployment and without a relapse into violence.

In March 2013, the Secretary-General produced a report with two options for a UN mission in Mali: strengthening the existing political mission to operate alongside AFISMA, or authorizing a robust UN peacekeeping mission that would subsume UNOM and take over from AFISMA, and operate alongside a parallel counter-terrorism force.<sup>10</sup>

The Security Council preferred the second option, and negotiations began over the mandate of the peacekeeping mission. The Council was relatively united, but a few contentious issues emerged. One bloc of Member States, led by France, urged the transition to a UN mission as soon as possible, while another bloc, led by Russia, believed more time was needed to develop a clear assessment of the situation on the ground.<sup>11</sup> Russia, Argentina, Guatemala and Pakistan also called for a clearer elaboration of the mission's tasks and a reaffirmation of the basic principles of peacekeeping, both in an

effort to ensure that the mission would not be interpreted as a counter-terrorist mission or some other new and more offensive type of peacekeeping mission.<sup>12</sup> France advocated the concept that there would be a clear division of labour, with the mission securing population centres and protecting civilians in the north and Serval conducting counter-terrorist operations, but many Member States were concerned about the risk that the mission's operations would creep toward counter-terrorism.<sup>13</sup>

In late April, the Security Council authorized the MINUSMA. The mission's original mandate listed the stabilization of key population centres and support for the reestablishment of State authority throughout the country as the mission's first task. The second task in the mandate was for the mission to support the implementation of the transitional road map, including the national political dialogue and the electoral process.<sup>14</sup> The transitional roadmap constituted the backbone of the mission's political engagement in this mandate, since there was no peace agreement nor a clear peace process for the mission to support.

In June 2013, the interim authorities and two Tuareg armed groups signed the Preliminary Agreement on the Presidential Election and Inclusive Peace Talks in Mali in Ouagadougou ("Ouagadougou Preliminary Agreement"). This was an agreement brokered by Burkina Faso that provided a framework for short-term measures (such as the return of the Government to the north and an inclusive dialogue to address grievances of northern communities). Importantly, it provided for a ceasefire long enough for presidential and parliamentary elections to be held in Mali in July and August, giving the mission a window of opportunity to support elections. In the absence of a longer-term and more comprehensive peace agreement, the Security Council viewed the Ouagadougou Preliminary Agreement as the main political framework for the mission's engagement during this initial period. The agreement also included a commitment that political negotiations aimed at a comprehensive peace agreement would begin within 60 days of the installation of a new president, explicitly tying the political process to elections.

In practice, the strongest political priority for the Security Council was for the mission to facilitate the holding of elections as quickly as possible.<sup>15</sup> The Council saw elections as critical for a return to constitutional order and to ensure the legitimacy of the Malian Government as a party in future peace talks.<sup>16</sup> France also saw elections as a major objective for the deployment of Operation Serval, and there was strong pressure within the French Government to ensure that elections in Mali were held as soon as possible.<sup>17</sup> The Council also expected the mission to support other aspects of the transitional roadmap and use its Good Offices to promote dialogue, though it did not expect that a peace agreement would materialize very soon.<sup>18</sup>

Though the Council listed a set of tasks for the mission to support the transitional roadmap, experts noted that there was not an overriding concept for the role MINUSMA would play in the broader political process.<sup>19</sup> In July 2013, as AFISMA transitioned to MINUSMA, security conditions in Mali were highly volatile. A great deal of the Council's attention was occupied with the issue of MINUSMA's operational capacity. However, in its June 2014 resolution renewing MINUSMA's mandate, the Council requested the Secretary-General to develop "benchmarks to assess progress on the implementation of the priority tasks of MINUSMA's mandate" and to report on progress toward those benchmarks every three months.<sup>20</sup>

The mission and the Malian Government agreed to develop these benchmarks jointly.<sup>21</sup> The benchmarks were developed around three categories: "security, stabilization and protection of civilians; support to the national political dialogue and national reconciliation; and support to the restoration of State authority throughout the country, the reconstruction of the Malian security sector, the promotion and protection of human rights and humanitarian aid."<sup>22</sup> The Council has over time found these benchmarks a valuable way to keep track of the mission's and the parties' progress; to clarify the Council's expectations and reduce misunderstandings between the UN and the Malian Government; and to help the Council identify ways to use its political pressure strategically to advance areas that were lagging.<sup>23</sup>

In July 2014, France ended Operation Serval and the next month replaced it with Operation Barkhane, a counter-terrorist force deployed in Mali as well as several other Sahel countries.

## Implementing the Algiers Agreement (2015)

In January 2014, the Algerian Government initiated a political process with armed groups in northern Mali, with the goal of brokering a peace agreement. These talks continued even as the parties continued engaging militarily on the ground. In May 2014, government forces attempted to launch an operation in the northern town of Kidal but were defeated and pushed out by a coalition of armed groups. This confrontation and the Government's retreat significantly altered the parties' negotiating positions and influenced the Algiers process.<sup>24</sup> The armed groups now organized themselves into two coalitions: the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), primarily comprising armed groups that had fought against the Government in 2012, and the Platform, primarily comprising armed groups that had not clashed militarily with the Government.<sup>25</sup>

In May and June 2015, the Government and the Platform and CMA armed group coalitions signed the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali Resulting from the Algiers Process ('the Algiers Agreement').<sup>26</sup> The Agreement captured parties' shared commitments to recognizing Mali as a unified State, more decentralized decision-making power for the north, greater representation of the north in the national Government, reducing economic inequality between the south and the north, and initiatives for national reconciliation and accountability for human rights violations committed during the armed conflict.

Yet, the parties were unable to reach agreement on specific details in many critical areas. As Boutellis and Zahar note, while it "covered the broad outlines of the changes required to achieve a durable solution in Mali, a number of its provisions were framed in aspirational terms and left much to be clarified during implementation."<sup>27</sup>



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These unspecified details included how ex-combatants would be disarmed, demobilized, reintegrated and reinserted; the Agreement envisioned mixed units of Malian armed forces and former armed group members, but without a clear plan for how these would materialize.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the signing of the Algiers Agreement represented a major achievement and a pivotal shift for the mission's political focus. The Security Council renewed MINUSMA's mandate in June 2015 and listed the mission's first two tasks as supporting the ceasefire between the Government, CMA and Platform, and supporting the implementation of the Algiers Agreement.<sup>28</sup> It also authorized the mission to receive at least 40 additional military observers to monitor the ceasefire.<sup>29</sup>

The Agreement also calmed some of the earlier Council debates about whether it was appropriate to deploy a UN peacekeeping mission to a context like Mali. The signing of the Agreement demonstrated the important value that a UN peacekeeping mission could bring,

and the presence of a clear political framework for the mission's future work reassured Council members that there was a political solution at the heart of the mission's work.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the signing of the Algiers Agreement, insecurity persisted in the north. In April 2017, the AU Peace and Security Council authorized the G5 Sahel Joint Force, a mission comprising personnel from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger.<sup>31</sup> The mission's mandate included combating terrorism and organized crime in the Sahel and supporting the restoration of State authority.<sup>32</sup> This mechanism has struggled to become operational and has sometimes been a source of tension between France and the US on the Security Council. France sees the G5 Sahel Joint Force as providing critical support to Operation Barkhane and perhaps facilitating an exit strategy for Barkhane.<sup>33</sup> Although all Council members support the G5 Sahel Joint Force, France has pushed (with support from the Secretariat) for it to be funded through a UN support package, while the US has strongly argued for it to be funded through bilateral assistance.<sup>34</sup>

## Shifting to the Centre (2019)

In 2015, though violence was relatively low, some personnel within MINUSMA began to see serious challenges emerging in central Mali. By early 2016, MINUSMA's leadership had become very concerned about the situation in central Mali, and conveyed to the Council via the Secretariat that this conflict would likely require attention from the mission.<sup>35</sup> The Malian Government, however, was highly resistant to the idea of the mission engaging in the centre; it did not consider the stakeholders in that violence to be politically significant and wanted the mission to focus its efforts on the parties in the north, which could potentially pose a threat to Bamako.

The Council was initially reluctant to put heavy political pressure on the Malian Government to allow the mission to take greater action in the centre. In 2016, it added new language to MINUSMA's mandate, instructing the mission to adopt a "more proactive and robust posture to carry out its mandate."<sup>36</sup> In 2018, after attacks against civilians in the centre had grown to alarming levels (see Fig. 1 below), the Council added support to the restoration of State authority in central Mali as the second "priority task" for the mission (after support to the implementation of the Algiers Agreement).<sup>37</sup> However, Council mandates continued to identify support to the implementation of the Algiers Agreement as the mission's sole strategic priority.

Within the Council, France in particular was concerned that adding a new focus in the centre would detract from the mission's efforts in the north, which would also undermine Operation Barkhane. Although the US was receptive to the argument that the mission should take greater action in the centre, it had also raised repeated questions about whether MINUSMA's value was commensurate with its cost and raised concerns several times about supporting a lengthy mission deployment in Mali. The challenges in central Mali were related to complex intercommunal conflicts that were unlikely to be resolved by a short intervention, which created some confusion with regard to the US position.<sup>38</sup>

Other Council members and Secretariat representatives were also concerned that the centre presented greater unknowns and risks of complication.<sup>39</sup> For example, much of the violence in central Mali was perpetrated by militias, many of which were affiliated with specific communities and which originated as self-defence groups. In order to protect civilians in central Mali, it was conceivable that the mission might have to disarm those militia groups—but the Council had not expressed any position on militia groups in Mali.<sup>40</sup> There were concerns that the mission may get itself involved in activities with a high risk of unintended consequences.

The very high and rising number of civilian casualties in the centre ultimately made the pressing needs there too alarming to overlook. In particular, the shocking massacre that killed more than 157 civilians in the Fulani-majority town of Ogossagou in central Mali in March 2019,<sup>41</sup> three months before MINUSMA's mandate was due to be renewed, convinced stakeholders that mission needed to act in the centre. Finally, in June 2019, the Security Council authorized a resolution that added a second strategic priority for MINUSMA: to "facilitate the implementation of a comprehensive politically-led Malian strategy to protect civilians, reduce intercommunal violence, and reestablish State authority, State presence and basic social services in Central Mali."<sup>42</sup>

Even after consensus was reached about adding central Mali as a new strategic priority, there was disagreement between the US and France over how the two should be prioritized against each other. France held strongly that the north should remain the most important strategic priority, while the US raised questions about whether the centre (the arena for the greatest violence) should be treated as a higher priority.<sup>43</sup> Ultimately, the mandate somewhat confusingly listed the north first as the "primary" strategic priority and the centre second as the "second" (not "secondary") strategic priority, making it ambiguous whether the Council was rating them as equally important or identifying the north as a higher priority.<sup>44</sup>



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### III

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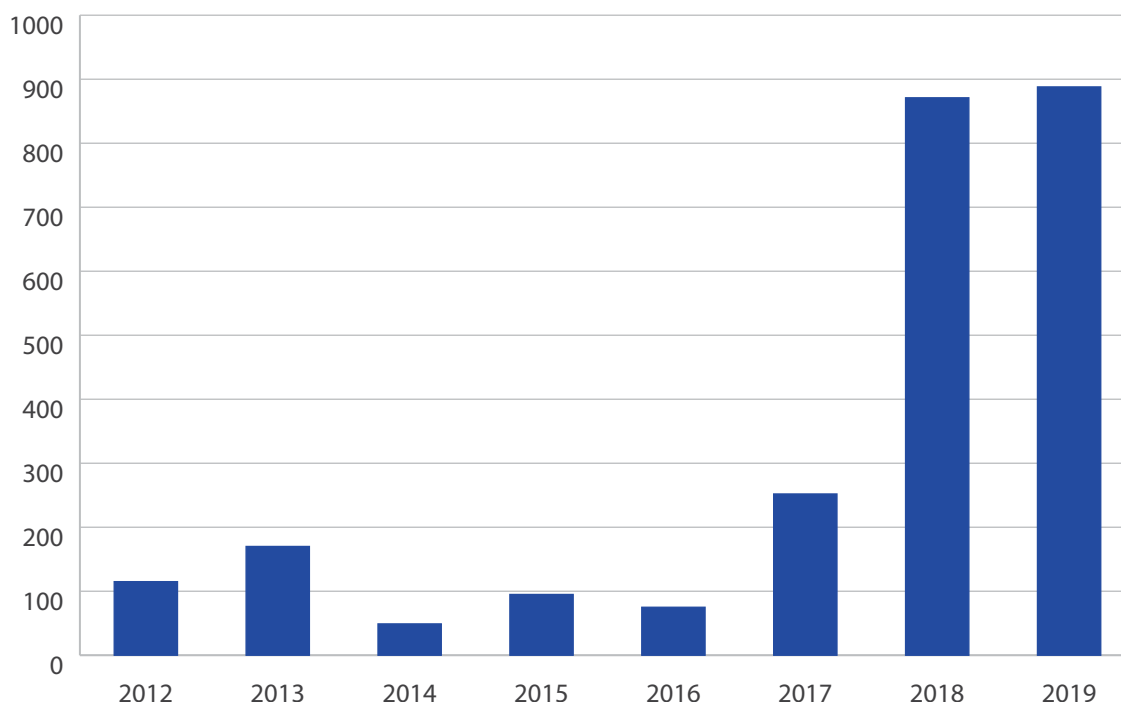
## Political Strategy in the Field

**M**INUSMA has faced enormous challenges with supporting a transformation of the conflict in Mali, despite relative unity within the Security Council in support of the mission. The mission was able to define and execute clear short-term political objectives despite volatile security conditions when it first deployed, but had limited influence or role in the Algeria-led political process. After the signing of the Algiers Agreement in 2015, the mission had a clearer framework for its political engagement, but the Agreement's limitations and weaknesses made supporting its implementation very difficult. The Malian Government and signatory armed groups have been extremely slow to execute their commitments on the administration of northern Mali, the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of former combatants, and other critical components of the Algiers Agreement. These

challenges have been exacerbated by rising violence related to issues that are not addressed by the Agreement: attacks by violent extremist groups in northern Mali and complex violence perpetrated by a range of actors in central Mali. MINUSMA has tried to adapt its political strategy to deal with the violence in central Mali, but it remains unclear whether these efforts will succeed, and whether and how the mission could play a political role in managing violence perpetrated by violent extremist groups in the north.

This section examines how MINUSMA defined its political strategy through these events, focusing on the same three key moments examined in the previous section. The analysis in this section is informed by trends in violence as recorded by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). This data is based on figures published

Fig. 1: Civilian Fatalities from Direct Targeting in Mali



Data taken from ACLED. These figures include “all events in which civilians were the direct or only target of violence” recorded in the ACLED database (<https://acleddata.com/curated-data-files>).

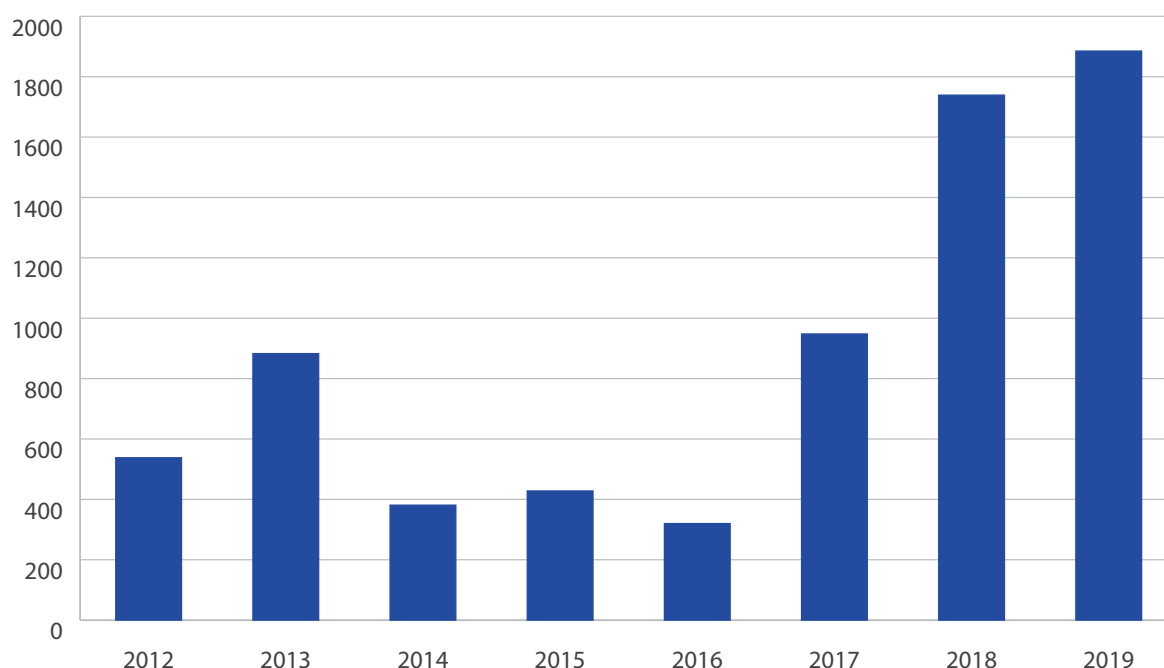
in “news reports, publications by civil society and human rights organizations, and security updates from local and international organizations.”<sup>45</sup> The ACLED methodology skews toward more conservative fatality estimates, and real fatalities are likely higher than what is captured in the ACLED database. The ACLED data shows high fatalities in 2012 that grew significantly in 2013; civilian fatalities from direct targeting events also grew from 2012 to 2013 but remained a relatively low share of overall fatalities as civilians were not particular targets during this period. Fatalities fell in 2014 and remained relatively low through 2016 but increased in 2017 to levels slightly higher than 2013 fatalities. In 2018, fatalities surged to roughly double their 2013 levels, and rose slightly higher in 2019. Civilian fatalities from direct targeting constituted a significant proportion (roughly half) of the 2018 and 2019 fatalities, demonstrating a shift in violence toward more deliberate attacks against civilians.

## Firefighting (2013)

When the mission first deployed, much of its work was focused on operational issues, including securing sufficient troops and assets and deploying them to towns in the north. The parties to the conflict were still engaging in violent clashes and the path to a comprehensive peace agreement was unclear. As a result, the mission had limited capacity to develop a political strategy.<sup>46</sup>

Although the mission did not have a written political strategy, it did have a few clear political objectives. The mission’s earliest political efforts fell into three major streams. First, there were efforts to ensure that elections could be held and the transitional authorities replaced with a legitimate elected government. Despite immense logistical, security and political challenges, the mission was able to support presidential elections

Fig. 2: Fatalities in Mali



Data taken from ACLED. These figures include all fatalities recorded in the ACLED database (<https://acleddata.com/curated-data-files>).

in July and August 2013 and legislative elections in November and December 2013, which were considered free and fair with strong turnout.

Second, the mission worked to monitor ceasefires and intervene in clashes to encourage parties to adhere to the Ouagadougou Preliminary Agreement and other ceasefire arrangements. This was related to the elections stream, in that it was partly done to ensure a sufficiently secure environment for elections to take place in 2013 but went beyond that. In accordance with the Ouagadougou Preliminary Agreement, MINUSMA was appointed to chair the Mixed Technical Commission on Security, responsible for monitoring hostilities and a ceasefire, as well as the Monitoring and Evaluation Committee, responsible for monitoring the implementation of the preliminary agreement.<sup>47</sup> A stalemate emerged in early 2014 as the Malian Government pushed armed groups to disarm but appeared reluctant to fulfil its political commitments per

the Ouagadougou Preliminary Agreement. These tensions boiled over in May 2014 when clashes in Kidal between the Malian defence and security forces and the MNLA armed group nearly derailed peace talks, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) teamed up with Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, President of Mauritania and Chair of the African Union, to negotiate a ceasefire.<sup>48</sup>

Third, the mission's Political Affairs Department led an inclusive dialogue to understand why previous attempts at political processes to address grievances in northern Mali (including an earlier Algiers Agreement signed in 2006) had failed, and what could be done to make the next peace agreement successful. To do this, it organized discussions bringing together ex-combatants, representatives of different political parties, representatives of civil society groups including women's and youth associations, academics and administrators that had

participated in the previous Algiers process. The goal was to develop a common understanding among these different stakeholders about why previous attempts at peace had failed, and what should be done differently this time around.<sup>49</sup>

The mission saw this effort as especially critical to ensure the viability of a future peace agreement because many key stakeholders at the time said that they distrusted the Algerian Government as a mediator and wanted a stronger role for other international actors.<sup>50</sup> The Secretariat supported this initiative including by providing additional capacities, including a dedicated staffer from the Department of Political Affairs who conducted regular visits to Mali to help frame the process.<sup>51</sup> These efforts led to a more inclusive framing for the Algiers negotiations than past attempts, but ultimately had limited impact since Algeria ultimately asserted a leading role in the political process and MINUSMA's leadership was not able to define an influential role for itself.

These lines of effort accorded with the Security Council's expectations. The Council was particularly impressed with MINUSMA's and others' successful efforts to ensure that elections could be held, despite serious doubts about the logistical feasibility of elections in 2013.<sup>52</sup> Although there was no prospect of a signed peace agreement until 2015, the Council did not expect the mission or the other actors on the ground to be able to achieve a peace agreement during the volatile years of 2013 and 2014.<sup>53</sup>

In October 2013, the mission developed its first Mission Concept, which laid out four priority tasks: supporting the political transition and the restoration of constitutional order; stabilizing key population centres in the north; protecting civilians and promoting human rights; and catalysing early recovery in the north.<sup>54</sup> With respect to the first task, the Mission Concept identified supporting parliamentary and local elections as the most immediate priority (presidential elections had already been held when the Mission Concept was drafted), and supporting dialogue between the Malian authorities and armed groups in the north as the other major line of effort. These priorities were consistent with the mission's activities on the political front during its early deployment.

## Implementing the Algiers Agreement (2015)

The holding of presidential and legislative elections in 2013 ensured that there was a legitimate Malian Government to participate in negotiations. In early 2014, Algeria initiated a new political process to resolve the conflict in the north. MINUSMA was not in the lead in this political process. Algeria was the "lead facilitator" during the negotiations, while the UN was only one of several co-facilitators alongside the AU, ECOWAS, The European Union, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, Niger and Nigeria.<sup>55</sup> This left the mission with very little space to influence the substance of the Algiers process. Given these limitations, the mission instead chose to take full advantage of its technical and supporting roles in the process.<sup>56</sup> This included, for example, conducting informal meetings with the parties and working through side channels to ensure the parties understood proposed components of the agreement.<sup>57</sup>

The mission recognized that, notwithstanding its limited role in the Algiers process, it would be called on to play a large role in the implementation of the flawed agreement.<sup>58</sup> This put the mission in a difficult position, as Boutellis and Zahar argue, since taking the lead came "with the risk of being faulted for either doing too much or not doing enough."<sup>59</sup> It is worth noting that the mission's leading role in implementation was mainly operational in nature; its political influence, even at the implementation stage, was limited. For example, in the committee structures created to oversee the implementation of the Agreement, MINUSMA was assigned only to co-chair the subcommittee on security and defence.<sup>60</sup> Although MINUSMA had been widely expected to chair the overarching committee, Algeria made a last minute push for this role and MINUSMA's leadership at the time did not successfully challenge this move.

Political support from the Security Council, especially through Council visits to the field, helped the mission pursue its political strategy during this period. For example, while both the Council and the mission had attempted to press



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the newly elected Malian Government for a road map of how they would lead the country out of the crisis, they did not receive one until the Council arranged a visit to Mali in February 2014.<sup>61</sup> However, the Council also missed opportunities to support the mission's political role during this period. For example, the Ouagadougou Preliminary Agreement established a leading role for MINUSMA in launching the subsequent political dialogue, but when Algeria and the newly elected president of Mali pushed the mission into a more supporting role in the Algiers Process, the Council did not back the mission with strong political pressure.

In August 2015, Koen Davidse was appointed Deputy SRSG and in December 2015, Mahamat Saleh Annadif was appointed SRSG of MINUSMA. These leadership changes also had a significant impact on the way the mission developed and implemented its political strategy. His predecessor had a mixed relationship with Algeria, sometimes perceived as too close to the country and not sufficiently asserting MINUSMA's interests. SRSG Annadif struck a delicate diplomatic balance—on one hand, recognizing

Algeria's leading political role as a regional powerhouse and as a long-time mediator of conflicts in Mali, with institutional memory and long relationships, and on the other hand, persuading the Governments of Algeria and Mali that MINUSMA also had a valuable role to play in support of the process.<sup>62</sup> Annadif is described as having a very clear political vision and a particularly strong talent at maintaining access to a wide range of stakeholders.<sup>63</sup> On the other hand, he is described as not emphasizing the managerial dimensions of his role, placing less importance on written strategies and structured delegation of effort within the mission.<sup>64</sup>

The signing of the Algiers Agreement was a defining moment for MINUSMA's political work. The agreement became a central pillar around which to build the mission's political strategy, which was welcomed by the mission, the Secretariat and the Security Council. In November 2016, the mission led the development of a new Mission Concept, in consultation with the Secretariat, to reflect the centrality of the Algiers Agreement. The new concept identified three "core objectives" for MINUSMA to achieve over



the subsequent 24-36 months: (1) a “sustainable, credible, and inclusive peace process to hasten the implementation of the peace agreement;” (2) security, including support for the deployment of the Malian defence and security forces; and (3) full operational capacity for the mission itself.<sup>65</sup>

A detailed description of the first objective included a dizzying number of tasks: supporting the parties to develop benchmarks and timelines, using Good Offices to build consensus on institutional reform, promoting inclusivity of the process, providing technical support to the parties on mediation, DDR, security sector reform (SSR), rule of law, human rights, reconciliation, justice, and elections, continuing support to facilitate future elections, coordination with international partners to ensure a common approach, raising awareness of the peace agreement with key stakeholders, supporting the establishment of interim authorities, supporting the effective presence of the State, supporting stabilization and recovery in coordination with the UN Country Team, and supporting interim security measures.<sup>66</sup>

In practice, MINUSMA’s strategy to support the implementation of the Agreement can be described as having two main prongs. The first prong focused on promoting ownership and buy-in of a range of stakeholders on the implementation of the agreement. This effort can be thought of as a kind of retroactive effort at inclusiveness, since the mission had had very limited impact on making the Algiers process inclusive prior to the signing of the Agreement. Many of the stakeholders that the mission had held workshops with prior to the Algiers process were unhappy with the Agreement, in part

because they were not included in the process. These stakeholders included many members of Parliament and youth associations, both of whom were critical to implementation. The mission was ultimately able to persuade members of political parties to tour the country to meet with diverse constituencies, explain the contents of the Agreement and discuss the possible roles they could play in its implementation.

The second prong focused on using the SRS’s Good Offices and the mission’s technical capacities to ensure that the Malian Government (and particularly the Parliament) and the interim authorities in the north had the right incentives and capacities to implement their commitments so that parties would maintain faith in the agreement.<sup>67</sup> The mission worked with the interim authorities to build their governance capacities, and worked with the Government to strengthen its institutions (e.g. to establish mechanisms foreseen by the Agreement and strengthen capacities of their members such as the members of the truth and reconciliation committee).<sup>68</sup> This line of effort also included preparing Members of Parliament to assess the implementation of the Agreement. Whereas MINUSMA had at first been making presentations to Parliament about progress on implementation, the Malian Parliament was able to establish an *ad hoc* committee tasked with monitoring implementation, which has so far presented its findings twice.<sup>69</sup> The mission’s efforts on this front also included technical and political support to DDR and SSR efforts required to implement the Agreement.

Despite MINUSMA’s many efforts to create a conducive environment for the Algiers



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Agreement's implementation, the parties were extremely slow to act on their commitments, causing stakeholders to question whether the Agreement was still relevant. The Agreement hinged on the political will of the Malian Government, and "called on Malian State institutions to take all necessary measures to adopt the regulatory, legislative, and even constitutional changes needed for implementation."<sup>70</sup> Yet the Malian Government delayed and resisted many of these required actions. Some of the delays were caused by security conditions or weak capacity, but others were caused by a lack of political will on the part of a Government that did not feel ownership over the Agreement. Where the Government did act to implement the Agreement, it sometimes did so without sufficient consultation with the other parties.<sup>71</sup> Meanwhile, clashes between, and fragmentation among, the armed group signatories caused insecurity that derailed the implementation of the Agreement and shifted armed group leaders' attention toward competing over perks rather than securing peace dividends for their constituencies.<sup>72</sup> As Boutellis and Zahar argue, the parties tended "to understand Mali's problem through either a security lens (for the Government) or a political-institutional lens (for the armed groups)," leading each to prioritize very different aspects of the Agreement and causing mistrust and major blockages on implementation.<sup>73</sup>

In 2018, an independent strategic review of MINUSMA led by Ellen Margrethe Løj noted considerable challenges with the Agreement's implementation. It recommended, among other things, that the mission should "refocus on its political role, support of the peace

process and stabilization and develop a pact for peace between the Government, the Security Council, the UN and international partners, and supporting a national dialogue."<sup>74</sup> The review also highlighted the lack of coherence between the mission's political and military strategies and activities as a major problem. Looking more broadly at the challenges MINUSMA had faced, the review raised critical questions as to whether a peacekeeping mission was the right political tool to address the conflict in Mali. The review was perceived as highly controversial by many in the mission, the Secretariat and the Security Council (including France). Despite fierce opposition by some members of the Council (including the US), the Secretariat decided not to publish the review and only to adopt some of its recommendations. The controversy raised questions about how open-minded or adaptable the UN system could be about political strategy.

One recommendation of the review that was adopted was for the mission to refocus on its political role. In October 2018, the Government of Mali and the UN signed a pact for peace which was "intended to serve as an accountability tool against which the UN Security Council expected to witness significant progress in the implementation of the Algiers Agreement."<sup>75</sup> The report of the Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network argues that this initiative may have spurred progress on DDR later that year.<sup>76</sup> The recent redeployment of the Malian defence and security forces to northern Mali has quelled some concerns from the Council (particularly from the US) about the mission's slow progress on the political front.<sup>77</sup> The mission has somewhat expanded its outreach to address roadblocks on implementation. For example, the mission had



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observed that despite the progress made, there was growing resistance to the Agreement from some segments of society, including religious leaders and intellectuals.<sup>78</sup> It has therefore been reaching out to these influential figures (including from neighbouring countries) and bringing them together for discussions on how to strengthen Mali—both for the country's own sake and for the region's.<sup>79</sup>

The Algiers Agreement was successful by one important metric: namely, stabilizing the situation in northern Mali. Although the Agreement's signatories violated their ceasefire commitments on a few occasions, they have not relapsed into large-scale violence. Nevertheless, as Figures 1 and 2 above illustrate, violence increased significantly in Mali after 2016. The Agreement left largely unaddressed three major issues that were important drivers of violence in Mali. First, it did not deal with political marginalization and lack of responsive governance in central Mali, an issue that is now being addressed through a separate strategy for the centre (much of the increased violence in Mali after 2016 was concentrated in

central Mali; this challenge is discussed further in the next section). Second, it did not address the organized crime and illicit trafficking that constituted a major motivation for armed groups to engage in violence as well as an enabler that allowed armed groups to fund their violence.<sup>80</sup>

Third, the Agreement did not address the problem of terrorism in northern Mali. Violence in northern Mali has increased in recent years—not because of fighting among the Agreement's signatory parties, but because of attacks by violent extremist groups. Groups designated as “terrorist armed groups” were not invited to be part of the Algiers process. Even if there had been strong political interest from the Malian Government and international stakeholders to include them, their inclusion would have been incompatible with the most basic terms of the talks since these groups refused “to accept a solution that is commensurate with preserving the secular sovereign State of Mali.”<sup>81</sup> Thus a distinction has been drawn, whereby MINUSMA supports a political solution to address the grievances of the “compliant armed groups,”

while the French counter-terrorist operation Barkhane and the G5 Sahel Joint Force support a military solution to address the “terrorist armed groups.”

This approach has not proven successful—partly because of the very limited operational capacity of the G5 Sahel Joint Force but also because these groups are complex, fragmented and fluid in their goals, allegiances and compositions. These “blurred lines between different groups render categories, like compliant armed groups (CAGs) and terrorist armed groups (TAGs), such as used by some in MINUSMA, artificial.”<sup>82</sup> The strengthening and expansion of violent extremist groups in Mali since the signing of the Agreement negatively affected its implementation (for example, the mixed patrol unit established pursuant to the Agreement in Gao suffered a serious attack that slowed the rollout of these units)<sup>83</sup> as well as contributing to threats against civilians in central Mali, forcing the mission to spread its resources over a wider area. After mounting public pressure, President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita announced in early 2020 that his Government had commenced talks with influential figures from violent extremist groups and was open to further discussions with al-Qaeda linked groups so that “by one means or another, some kind of appeasement can be achieved.”<sup>84</sup> These plans were of course been derailed by the coup in August 2020 that ousted President Keita – but even with a new government in place, it is unclear whether and how MINUSMA could support political engagement with extremist groups.<sup>85</sup>

In addition to these limitations, the agreement also created several unintended consequences for the mission’s political work. First, the mission has shaped its political strategy around supporting the implementation of a peace agreement whose viability is highly questionable. This puts the mission in a fragile position. One of the main criticisms of the Algiers Agreement’s implementation is that it has become too mired in technicalities (such as the creation of committees and subcommittees) and too little focused on delivering meaningful outcomes. While the mission and its partners have tried to find creative ways to exert pressure on the parties, five years later, the Agreement’s implementation remains extremely slow and inconsistent. Provisions of the

Algiers Agreement related to DDR and SSR have proven particularly challenging to implement. The Malian Government has strongly resisted the reforms required on its end for these agendas, the mission has had limited leverage to influence the Government, and the Security Council has not consistently exerted strong pressure on the Malian Government on these issues to add political weight to MINUSMA’s advocacy.

Some critics contend that the Algiers Agreement is fundamentally unviable and continuing to push for its implementation is a wasted effort.<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, there is a widespread belief that negotiating a new and better peace agreement is not possible in Mali and would, in fact, be counter-productive to attempt, and so the mission has remained focused on trying to support (and urge the parties to adhere to) the Algiers Agreement. Thus, although the Algiers Agreement has provided the mission a much clearer roadmap for what it should try to achieve politically, it could also be seen as an example of a situation where having a peace agreement has locked the mission (and the conflict parties) into an unviable process.

Second, the Algiers Agreement may have contributed to a greater disconnect between the mission’s efforts to support political solutions and its efforts to protect civilians. The Algiers process succeeded in getting the parties to largely abide by their ceasefire agreements. Fighting that has occurred since the signing of the Agreement has largely been among parties that were not signatories to the agreement. This has had the unexpected side effect of contributing to the existing disconnect between the activities undertaken by the mission’s uniformed components and its political efforts. Before and during the Algiers negotiations, the mission’s military component was regularly intervening to protect civilians from, and deter violence by, parties to the Algiers process. In other words, the mission was using its uniformed capabilities to keep the parties committed to the Algiers process. Since the signing of the agreement, the opportunities for the mission to use its uniformed capabilities to support a specific political outcome have been less obvious.

Third, the implementation of the Algiers Agreement has at times been in tension with the mission’s other political activities related to the



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strengthening of the State. In theory, the Algiers Agreement helped bring together the mission's two main lines of effort: supporting the political process and supporting the restoration of State authority. In practice, the Government resisted implementing provisions of the Agreement related to governance reform and accountability, while strongly advocating for the restoration of State authority outside the framework of the Algiers Agreement. The central question of the Algiers process was how to approach power-sharing between the Malian Government and the CMA and Platform armed group coalitions. The Agreement addressed this issue in part by creating interim authorities who would be selected through consensus by the signatory parties, and who would administer contested areas to provide a more inclusive form of governance. Due to the Malian Government's strong resistance to reforms aimed at more inclusive and accountable governance, the mission has found tensions arising between its work to support the Algiers Agreement, on one hand, and its efforts to support the deployment of Malian Government authorities, on the other hand. The deployment of government authorities

in the absence of reforms has not been popular with the Malian people. As the report of the Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network notes, "the population's satisfaction with the Government, while initially increasing in most regions after the deployment of MINUSMA, decreased almost everywhere after the Algiers Agreement."<sup>87</sup> The mission's efforts in support of the State have particularly caused problems as it has expanded into the centre, since abuses by Malian defence and security forces have made the State highly unpopular in those areas.

MINUSMA's Mission Concept was revised in August 2019. The new Mission Concept recognized the limitations of the Algiers Agreement, noting that it "lacks buy-in from large segments of the population," and that critical reforms envisioned by the Agreement had not been implemented.<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, the Mission Concept continued to identify supporting the implementation of the Agreement as the mission's first strategic objective and said that MINUSMA would promote political solutions in line with the Agreement in addressing "all aspects of its mandate," as a guiding principle.<sup>89</sup>

## Shifting to the Centre (2019)

Despite the clear framework for political engagement provided by the Algiers Agreement, violent clashes in Mali did not stop; on the contrary, they increased significantly after 2016. Most of this increased violence originated in central Mali. The causes of violence in central Mali are complex and overlapping, but mainly relate to: disputes over land rights, including disputes between farmer and herder communities with affiliated militia groups over access to land for growing crops and grazing cattle, and cycles of retaliatory violence between these communities; human rights violations perpetrated by Malian defence and security forces against communities in central Mali; weak presence of the State in central Mali and its failure to deliver basic services; and the spread of violent extremist groups from the north into the centre, where they have offered communities protection and basic governance and thus secured some popular support.

The mission had attempted small-scale responses to manage the violence in central Mali, despite strong resistance from the Malian Government, in the years before the 2019 mandate made it a strategic priority; it already had a protection of civilians mandate that enabled this work. In the lead-up to the 2019 mandate renewal, as it heard that the second strategic priority was likely to be introduced, the mission began actively planning for the major logistical and political effort that would be required.<sup>90</sup> The Council knew about these efforts; as one Council member said, “In a way, I think it helps for MINUSMA to be ahead of what the Council does, and for the Council to validate the mission’s actions.”<sup>91</sup>

In light of the introduction of the new strategic priority, a new Mission Concept was developed for MINUSMA in 2019. While developing Mission Concepts is always a consultative process, this marked the first time that the IOT rather than the mission took the lead in developing the Mission Concept.<sup>92</sup> This shift was in line with a broader trend across peacekeeping missions to have IOTs lead on the development of Mission Concepts, linked to the Action for Peacekeeping reform

initiative. In deference to the field’s leading role on politics, while also respecting the idea of the “primacy of politics,” the IOT’s Mission Concept was kept short and strategic-level, with a brief section outlining political strategy and guiding principles.<sup>93</sup> The Mission Concept treated the mission’s two strategic objectives—support to the implementation of the Algiers Agreement and support to the development and implementation of a strategy in the centre—as two separate initiatives, with separate lines of effort.<sup>94</sup>

The mission’s political approach in the centre echoed its effort in the north to build the capacity of the relevant authorities. In order to encourage national ownership (and in light of the Government’s previous reluctance to the allow the mission to engage in the centre), the mission requested the Malian Government to develop a national strategy for the centre, which the mission could also use as a framework for its own engagement. Pursuant to this strategy, the Government created a permanent secretariat to manage issues related to the centre.

The mission knew from its earlier experience supporting interim authorities in the north that the secretariat would very likely lack the capacity it needed to carry out its work. It worked with the secretariat to provide human resources, support on strategic communications (for example, help organizing a press conference to launch the Government’s strategy for the centre) and support for outreach to key stakeholders.<sup>95</sup> At the same time, the mission also worked to build civil society capacity to raise awareness of what was happening in the centre and hold the Government and armed actors accountable. This line of effort included training and mobilizing journalists, supporting radio broadcasts in multiple languages describing the Government’s strategy for the centre, and establishing community watchdog groups to monitor the implementation of the strategy.<sup>96</sup>

The mission and the IOT engaged in close communication, including through bimonthly meetings, to support the mission’s shift to the centre. These meetings allowed the mission to share progress updates with the IOT to inform discussions within the Secretariat and among Member States in New York. They also allowed the IOT to share views from the Council,

offer a more strategic-level perspective, and pose questions that challenged the mission's assumptions. For example, the IOT noted that the mission had made progress in supporting the Malian Government to create a secretariat to manage issues in the centre, but that the structure had little operational capacity. This prompted the mission to think more carefully about how it could ensure that the strategy for the centre was Malian-led while also avoiding the issues with slow implementation that had caused so many difficulties in the north.<sup>97</sup>

The mission's expansion into the centre has contributed further to the disconnect between the mission's support to the implementation of the Agreement and its other lines of effort. One mission representative said that the mission had a number of different strategy documents whose development was led by different mission components, including a political strategy, a communications strategy, a police strategy and a military strategy, that were articulated in separate documents and implemented through separate processes with little coordination.<sup>98</sup> The mission continues to face challenges in bringing together the activities of its uniformed and civilian components behind unified political goals,

particularly in light of the different dynamics and separate mission responses in the centre and the north.

MINUSMA has also struggled to translate its strategic priorities into more actionable plans. The mission tried to address that problem when translating its new Mission Concept into a mission plan. In doing so, it took advantage of its unusually large strategic planning unit (which also has the benefit of integrating military and police planners alongside its civilian planners). It also took advantage of being an early implementer of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment System (CPAS), a Secretariat initiative to help missions more systematically plan for their activities and track their own progress toward achieving their objectives. The strategic planning unit translated the Mission Concept into a clear mission plan, identifying six priority areas for the mission, designating an individual to oversee progress on each area.<sup>99</sup> It developed a set of outcomes under each priority area in order to track progress using the CPAS framework.<sup>100</sup> This process helped the mission to define its priorities and manage its different components contributions toward achieving them.



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## IV

# Key Findings

**M**INUSMA's political efforts have been remarkably successful in some ways. Its support for the holding of elections in 2013 meant that there was a legitimate State authority to participate in the Algiers process. The Algiers Agreement itself has largely held—despite significant delays and shortcomings in its implementation, the armed group signatories and the Government have largely respected their ceasefire commitments and have attempted to resolve their grievances through political engagement with each other. By supporting the Algiers Agreement, the mission has a large extent thus helped to contain the conflict that originally provoked the international community's concern in 2012.

Yet, the political outcomes of the mission's work can also be heavily criticized. As the time of writing, Mali is undergoing significant political turmoil, with a military coup that forced President Keita out of office. The coup

was preceded by protests by tens of thousands of people in Bamako and around the country demanding the president's resignation.<sup>101</sup> These developments highlight the enormous gap between what the population demands and what the Malian Government and the international community, including MINUSMA, have been able to deliver. The rising violence in Mali from 2017 onwards raises the question whether it was wise for the Council and the mission to make the Agreement such a central focus of the mission's efforts. This section highlights some key findings from the study regarding MINUSMA's political strategy.

### 1 The primacy of politics can still happen without peace agreements

MINUSMA did not have a clear political strategy when it first deployed. Armed groups and



government actors were still engaged in violent clashes and it was not clear what shape a peace agreement might take. Nevertheless, the mission was able to define political objectives that would allow it to create space for a political process: facilitating elections so that the political process would have legitimate government representation, monitoring ceasefire violations to keep the parties engaged in talks and leading an inclusive dialogue to understand the necessary elements of success for the future political process. Ultimately, these efforts paved the way for the Algiers Agreement, which became the defining focus of the mission's efforts from 2015 onward.

## 2 A peace agreement may not bring peace

The mission has pushed consistently and from many angles to convince the parties to implement their commitments, but progress has been very slow and security has deteriorated significantly since the signing of the Agreement. Violence has increased significantly both in the north (perpetrated by violent extremist groups) and in the centre (perpetrated by self-defence militias community groups, violent extremist groups, and Malian armed forces). In other words, the Algiers Agreement was successful at reducing violence between the signatory parties, but not at reducing violence overall. Neither the extremist violence in the north nor the much of the complex violence in the centre are conducive to being resolved through additional peace agreements. MINUSMA is not the first peacekeeping mission to find itself managing violence from very different

sources and with very different dynamics than the original conflict that it was deployed to resolve. The mission's experience highlights that there are risks attached to building a political strategy too closely around support to a specific peace agreement, when that peace agreement deals with a very limited set of the drivers of violence.

## 3 The pros and cons of an agreement with a narrow scope

There may be very good reasons for one peace agreement not to try to address all issues that have triggered or may trigger violent conflict—in particular, trying to make the peace agreement comprehensive may require the inclusion of so many parties and grievances that the process becomes dysfunctional. The obstacles to reaching the Algiers Agreement were already so numerous that it likely would not have been constructive to also add in the grievances and constituencies related to the conflict in the centre. For these reasons, developing two separate processes for the north and the centre may have been preferable. However, the Algiers process became such a major focus for all the stakeholders—including the Government, the Security Council and the mission—that mission was unable to address the challenges in the centre until they already constituted a crisis. By the time the mission started treating the centre as a strategic priority, ethnic divisions had been reinforced by traumatic massacres, self-defence militias had taken root and violent extremist groups had cultivated support among communities. The international community correctly diagnosed that there were problems of corruption, poor



governance, political marginalization and impunity driving violence in the north. Yet, it did not push hard to address those same problems in the centre until skyrocketing civilian casualty figures forced the issue. In retrospect, the Security Council could have pushed the Government to engage in a political process for the centre soon after the Algiers Agreement was signed.

## 4 Who gets a seat at the table?

The mediators responsible for developing the Algiers Process made the decision to exclude violent extremist armed groups. This decision was very reasonable given that many violent extremist groups had no interest in negotiating with the Government, and also that these groups' objectives were not compatible with the continuation of a secular Malian State. But many MINUSMA personnel acknowledge the reality that the groups are overlapping and fluid on the ground, the goals of Malian-origin violent extremist groups are often quite different from the goals of groups with foreign origins, and individuals may be affiliated with more than one type of group. Attacks by violent extremist groups against the State, compliant armed groups, and MINUSMA have increased in the north and these groups have also expanded their influence in the centre. The Malian Government, Operation Barkhane, and the G5 Sahel Joint Force have been unsuccessful at resolving the violent extremist threat through military means. The Malian Government has recently taken some initial steps to engage with violent extremist groups politically, but it remains very unclear where this dialogue will lead and what role (if any) MINUSMA will play.

## 5 Implementing a peace agreement from the margins

MINUSMA's leadership during the development of the Algiers process was not able to push back against Algeria and assert the leading role that had been established for the mission by the Ouagadougou Preliminary Agreement. The mission worked to identify useful contributions it could make to the process in the absence of that leading role—for example, by conducting outreach to the parties to reduce misunderstandings, advocating for greater inclusiveness during the process, monitoring ceasefire arrangements while talks progressed, identifying pitfalls that have undermined past processes, and conducting outreach to diverse stakeholders after the signing of the Agreement to encourage more inclusive awareness and buy-in. However, these efforts have had limited impact. For example, the Algiers process was not considered very inclusive and repeated many of the mistakes that caused past processes to fail—in part because the mission did not have a leading role in the negotiations. Since the signing of the Agreement, SRSB Annadif was able to define a role for MINUSMA in supporting its implementation and persuade Algeria to accept that role. This means that the mission is playing a leading role in supporting the implementation of an agreement over whose contents it had little influence. In short, the mission is in the position of being (partly) blamed for failures to implement the Agreement but had little opportunity to set it up for success.

## **6 Aligning mission components behind a common political vision**

For much of its deployment, MINUSMA has faced serious challenges with unifying its work around a political strategy. It has struggled to connect its political efforts with its military operations and it has also struggled to connect its work in support of the Algiers Agreement with its other lines of effort, particularly the protection of civilians. In part, these difficulties have arisen from the complexity of its many tasks, some of which can be in tension with one another. For example, its work in support of the Malian State have caused tensions with its efforts to protect civilians from violence perpetrated by the State in the centre, and to support interim authorities in the north. Even where its activities are not in conflict, like many large multidimensional missions, MINUSMA has struggled to line up its civilian, military and police capacities behind a unified political strategy. The mission's recent efforts to adopt CPAS and link this to strong planning efforts through its strategic planning unit may help strengthen planning and coordination processes and enable the mission to unify its many lines of effort around a political strategy.

## **7 Council divisions on security and finances but unity on politics**

MINUSMA has provoked several heated disagreements within the Security Council, including on the mission's relationship to counter-terrorism efforts and whether it should expand its efforts to the centre. But by and large, the mission has enjoyed a unity of vision from the Council, especially with regard to its political strategy. Most of the Council's disagreements on MINUSMA have related to security issues (e.g. whether and when it was appropriate for the mission to deploy while violence was still active) or financial matters (e.g. whether the mission was delivering value for money, whether its resources should be reduced, whether funding for the G5 Sahel Joint Force should come from the UN or from bilateral sources). Council members were united behind the Algiers process and have remained committed to the Algiers Agreement, and once the Council was able to

agree that the mission should act in the centre, it has supported the mission's political approach to managing violence in central Mali. Given that Council members have much stronger interests in Mali than in many other African peacekeeping contexts, this unity on politics is remarkable. One important area of disagreement that emerged in recent years over politics was the question of whether the mission should remain focused on the implementation of the Algiers Agreement as the political focus of the mission, or whether it should also treat the deterioration of security in central Mali as a high priority. The rising rates of violence against civilians in central Mali eventually brought about consensus within the Council that the mission should treat transforming that conflict as a strategic objective even though it was not the conflict on which the Council was originally focused when it authorized MINUSMA. At the same time, many of the Council's decisions on MINUSMA have been driven by the interests of France, including its interest in supporting its own parallel counter-terrorist force. These interests have influenced the Council not to pressure the Malian Government as strongly in some areas as it could have, in order to enable strong security cooperation, including against violent extremist groups in northern Mali. Although MINUSMA has benefited from the Council's unity, it could have benefited further from stronger political pressure from the Council to influence the Malian Government when the mission encountered political roadblocks.

## **8 Strategic use of political pressure to move unwilling parties**

The international community has been strategic in its efforts to maintain pressure on the parties to support the Algiers process. These efforts range from small and precise (e.g. the rapid ceasefire negotiation by MINUSMA's SRSB and the AU Chair in 2014 to prevent the derailing of the Algiers talks) to more strategic and comprehensive (e.g. the signing of the pact for peace in 2018 to refocus the Malian Government and the mission around their political commitments). MINUSMA has also enjoyed several visits from the Security Council, which have helped spur movement from the parties on important issues. (This can, however, be a double-edged sword; one MINUSMA official estimated in 2019 that the

mission received approximately one delegation a week and that the number of visits seriously taxed the mission's capacity.)<sup>102</sup> However, as noted above, the Security Council has at times been reluctant to use its political weight to pressure the Malian Government—including to implement some of its reform commitments under the Algiers Agreement and to allow the mission to act more quickly to prevent the crisis in central Mali.

## 9 Benchmarking

Benchmarking is not a new idea in peacekeeping, but in the past the Council mainly requested benchmarks in the context of mission transitions, as a way to measure the mission's progress toward a point when it could exit. MINUSMA's benchmarks were introduced early on and have helped give the Council a clearer sense of what progress has been made and where the roadblocks are. They are also seen as useful for the mission, the Malian Government, and the parties to the conflict, because they clarify roles, responsibilities and expectations as well as reducing uncertainty. At the time of writing, the Council was considering introducing additional benchmarks for the challenges in central Mali, which might also help to put political pressure on the Malian Government to implement its national strategy for the centre.

## 10 The overlooked role of organized crime

There is broad consensus that violent conflict in northern Mali is inextricably bound up in organized crime and illicit trafficking. Trafficking revenues enable armed groups to fund their violent activities and motivate young people to join armed groups. Conflicts over control of trafficking routes frequently trigger violent clashes. MINUSMA's activities touch on this challenge tangentially (e.g. its human rights section may report on violations that occurred in the context of organized criminal activity, or its police component might support training on border protection), but in general the mission has no mandate to address this issue—either through support to the implementation of the Algiers Agreement or through its other mandated tasks. The exclusion of this issue

from MINUSMA's work is not because other actors with stronger comparative advantages are already addressing it. In theory, the G5 Sahel Joint Force has a mandate that includes addressing organized crime, but its operations are extremely limited. It may be that issues like organized crime and corruption, which touch on the Government's financial management, are considered too sensitive for UN peacekeeping missions to address.

## 11 The problem of missing peace dividends

MINUSMA has worked hard to promote national ownership of both the Algiers Agreement (including mechanisms to oversee and evaluate its implementation) and the response to violence in the centre. However, the parties have not made much progress in moving beyond technicalities toward delivering meaningful outcomes. The Malian people have seen few peace dividends either in the form of improved security or in the form of access to basic services. The severe delays, especially on the Malian Government's side, in implementing the peace agreement have created anger and mistrust among the population toward the Government and the mission. Although MINUSMA has tried to use Quick Impact Projects managed through its stabilization and recovery section to deliver improvements to some areas, these small-scale efforts cannot compensate for the failures of the parties to deliver the expected peace dividends. UN agencies, funds and programmes are much more significant actors than MINUSMA in supporting peace dividends; however, coordination between the mission and the UN Country Team could be improved to better address the issue of peace dividends, including through the office of the Deputy SRSG/Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator. There are also a range of non-UN actors—including regional powers and donors such as the African Development Bank and the EU—that share responsibilities for delivering peace dividends and could benefit from better strategic coordination with the mission and the country team. Notwithstanding the mission's limited influence over this issue, losing the support and trust of the population will have knock-on effects for the mission's ability to implement its mandate.

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# Assessment Tool for Measuring the Political Impact of Peacekeeping Operations

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USER'S GUIDE

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## I. Background

The 2018 Action for Peacekeeping Declaration (A4P) commits UN peace operations to pursue political objectives based on integrated strategies and solutions. It also demands a greater focus on impact and performance across peacekeeping. Together, these commitments require that peacekeeping places greater focus and resources on its political engagement and that this is translated into improved performance and impact on the ground. While much emphasis has been placed on the military performance of peacekeeping, the political performance of missions presents an especially important and challenging area. Often, the Good Offices/political engagement of missions is done behind closed doors or is part of a much larger constellation of actors working to influence peace processes in a positive direction. In this context, **what evidence demonstrates that political engagement is having an impact?**

Significant scholarship has examined the extent to which peacekeeping in general results in a lowering of overall rates of relapse,<sup>1</sup> reductions in rates of violence,<sup>2</sup> and improvements in the stability of fragile settings.<sup>3</sup> Recent initiatives, such as the Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network, promise further in-depth measures of peacekeeping's impact.<sup>4</sup> Within the UN, too, the Comprehensive Performance Assessment System (CPAS) offers peacekeeping a much deeper set of context-based data to demonstrate the impact of missions. Already rolled out in eight missions, CPAS has put in place

an important framework for gathering information and analysis. By basing itself on the full mandate of peacekeeping operations, CPAS may also generate useful data for the political work of missions. Alongside existing sources of information about the effects of peacekeeping, more data is becoming available to make evidence-based analyses of the political impact of peacekeeping. However, the process of drawing that information together into a cogent, defensible argument about impact is challenging, and thus far the UN has not reported systematically on the political impact of peacekeeping, as required by A4P.

The present project was designed in consultation with the UN Department of Peace Operations and specifically aims to support A4P and CPAS in the area of political engagement. Drawing on existing methodologies in the social science and development fields,<sup>5</sup> it offers a **Tool for assessing and describing the political impact of peacekeeping missions**. Designed for practitioners and policymakers, it will offer a set of steps that can be taken to build, synthesize and organize information to make the strongest possible claims about causality in complex socio-political settings. The following is a “user’s guide” to help practitioners undertaking assessments of UN peace operation, identifying the main challenges, methodological considerations and approaches that will allow for rigorous evidence-based assessments. The Tool itself is attached as an annex to this document.

## II. Challenges in Assessing Political Impact

Any attempt to assess the political impact of peace operations faces significant definitional, practical and methodological challenges. This section offers a brief overview of the main challenges, with a view to informing how the Tool can be developed and implemented.

### DEFINING “THE POLITICAL” AND ITS OBJECTIVES

There is no consensus on what a “political objective” means in peacekeeping.<sup>6</sup> In fact, most UN policy-level work tends to restate the term rather than define it.<sup>7</sup> For example, the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) states that “political solutions should always guide the design and deployment of UN peace operations,” but offers little sense of what political solution should entail, other than something comprehensive. One of the authors of the HIPPO report offers some insight by suggesting that a political solution needs to address “the legitimate interests and grievances of all parties,” but again this does not offer a clear definition.<sup>8</sup>

In some cases, a peacekeeping operation will have an explicitly political goal, such as free and fair elections, an inclusive peace process or national-level reforms. Other goals may seem less overtly political but still require significant engagement by the national leadership of a country, such as a successful Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) process, effective protection of civilians, and human rights. This does not mean that other goals should be divorced from the political: the highly technical exercises of border demarcation, demining and infrastructural projects may carry enormous political consequences and be essential to a broader peace process. Even the work of development and humanitarian officials, while ostensibly eschewing the political sphere, is often deeply enmeshed in relations with political representatives in country.

Likewise, some peacekeeping tasks are clearly political, such a diplomatic overture, mediation, provision of Good Offices, support to a peace process, and convenings of national/regional stakeholders. But as some experts have pointed

out, even the concept of Good Offices – arguably the most overtly political aspect of the UN’s work – can mean “almost anything,”<sup>9</sup> while support to peace processes can take a variety of forms, including very technical activities. Moreover, many of the most important political efforts take place below the visible surface, behind closed doors, and necessarily without a public record. As Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuellar acknowledged, “No one will ever know how many conflicts have been prevented or limited through contacts which have taken place in the famous glass mansion, which can become fairly opaque when necessary.”<sup>10</sup>

Compounding this amorphous definition, peacekeeping operations are often mandated with fairly imprecise tasks, such as “supporting,” “encouraging” or “assisting” parties. It can be difficult to know when such mandates are achieved, and especially complicated to identify an appropriate timeframe for measuring impact (e.g. two parties could agree on a ceasefire one week and then reject it one month later). This is due to the fact that the success or failure of the political mandates of peacekeeping operations – more so than any other aspect of their work – rests almost entirely in the hands of other players.

For the purposes of this Tool, and drawing from the policy paper associated with this project, we here **define “political solution”** as follows:

A political solution in a peace operations context is one where parties reach negotiated, inclusive agreements to halt the killing and attempt to address the major grievances that triggered the violent conflict or are likely to trigger further violent conflict. As such, a political solution offers a comprehensive framework for a sustainable transition to peace, and a clear set of commonly agreed elements for achieving it.

Under this definition, ceasefires or cessations of hostilities typically would only be part of a broader political solution, unless they were considered sufficient to sustainably end a conflict; likewise, protection of civilians, stabilization and State-building could be part of a political solution,



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but would not in and of themselves constitute one. In line with the HIPPO report, this definition demands that a political solution be negotiated, not merely the outcome of force, and that it be inclusive, representing more than just the interests of the belligerents.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, it allows for military and technical engagements that could be used to incentivize parties to reach a political solution.

We are not here advocating for the UN to adopt a static definition of political solution, as many contexts may require a more flexible set of characteristics. However, it is useful when developing an assessment Tool to have a common starting point.

## ESTABLISHING THE FACTS

Effective assessments must be based on a sound evidentiary basis. However, evaluating any intervention in conflict settings presents inherent challenges; peacekeeping is no exception. Acquiring first-hand data in conflict-affected areas can be dangerous and difficult,

while the situation on the ground can change quickly without warning. Fragile conflict-prone countries often have poor national-level data, and conflict actors themselves may control access to information.<sup>12</sup> Even where relevant data does exist—related to socioeconomic conditions, violence levels, access to arms or other drivers of conflict<sup>13</sup>—crucial indicators of political mood, dissatisfaction amongst certain populations and risks of imminent violence are typically unknown. But these more nebulous pieces of information are often crucial for understanding whether a peace operation is succeeding in its political work.<sup>14</sup>

Shortfalls in baseline data is a chronic issue when it comes to political work as well: *how can the UN describe what would have happened if the peace operation had not intervened?* Here, evaluation designs from other disciplines might build a partial answer to the question, but many of these involve rigorous pre- and post-intervention control group testing, and/or generation of significant amounts of new data.<sup>15</sup> It is unrealistic to demand that Department of Peace Operations (DPO) conducts such time- and resource-

intensive evaluation methodologies. But it is equally important that any assessment exercise take on this counter-factual question in creative and compelling ways, if it is to meaningfully show the impact of peacekeeping on its political mandates.

**CORRELATION, CAUSATION, CONTRIBUTION**

UN peace operations work alongside (and sometimes in competition with) a wide range of international, regional and national actors. In many settings, the UN is a relatively minor player, supporting national institutions, providing logistical support to local stakeholders or convening regional players. Examining this crowded field, it is difficult to assess the degree to which a UN operation may have influenced the situation, and even harder to claim that the UN was either necessary or sufficient to any concrete outcome. This can be called a problem of correlation rather than causation: **UN activities are often correlated with change, but seldom the immediate cause of it.** In situations like these, it may make more sense to think of the UN's *contribution* to change, rather than attribution *per se*.

Typical UN evaluation approaches—such as the results-based budget—leave little room for such nuanced distinctions, while even more scholarly approaches tend to use outdated methodologies.<sup>16</sup> Take, for example, a standard peacekeeping mandate to help a country build an effective police force. A results-based assessment for measuring progress towards this goal would look something like this:

Here, the underlying assumption is that a peacekeeping operation undertakes activities, which cause a result, which in turn contribute to a desired change. This linear causal thinking underlies most UN evaluations, and is the basis upon which peacekeeping (and aid and development agencies worldwide) usually assesses progress and allocates funds. It avoids the thorny issue of causality by presupposing it: An increased number of police trainings by a peacekeeping operation is assumed to contribute to a reduction in criminality, which in turn leads to improved stability. None of the causal links are established via this approach.<sup>17</sup>

At best, peacekeeping assessments follow poor logic to get around the problem of causality, stating that (1) the mandate objective was achieved, and (2) the UN did a good job in various ways, therefore (3) the UN was effective. This tends to dramatically overstate the UN's contribution to the outcome, giving it credit (or blame) for a range of events beyond its control.<sup>18</sup> For example, the UN might play a distinctly positive role with two conflict parties, convening their leaders, producing incentives, coordinating with other actors and providing logistical support to implementation of an agreement. Nonetheless, the analysis might determine that none of these activities played a significant role in influencing their decision to honour the peace agreement, given the much weightier role of other actors in the process. Well-informed counter-factual analysis is thus crucial in making an accurate assessment of the political impact of peacekeeping.

Input Indicator	Output Indicator	Outcome Indicator	Impact Indicator
Number of police trainings conducted by the UN	Number of police trained to international standards	Reduction in instances of criminality	Improvements in stability in the country

Finally, linear approaches to evaluation such as results-based budgeting (RBB) treat issues like political will of the parties, socioeconomic changes, and shifting public opinion as beyond the scope of analysis, either presumed as unchanging, or listed as “external factors.” But in peacekeeping’s political work, these are precisely the issues at the heart of the story: the Good Offices work of peacekeeping is meant to generate political progress, establish leverage and ultimately affect decision-making.

### **INCLUSIVITY AND THE PROBLEM OF ELITE-DRIVEN PEACE PROCESSES**

There is a strong trend in the UN towards inclusivity when it comes to understanding and preventing conflict.<sup>19</sup> Some experts have suggested that those designing and evaluating interventions in conflict should “start with a problem as defined by the society itself and then generate a theory of change for how to address the problem.”<sup>20</sup> Wherever possible this

Tool encourages such an approach, including by posing specific questions regarding the extent to which the UN’s intervention may have addressed deeper issues of socio-political exclusion.

However, the reality is that peacekeeping operations are mandated by the Security Council, a Member State-driven organization with a strong tendency toward State-level actors. Peacekeeping mandates are usually focused on the elite actors in conflict—government, opposition parties and military leaders—and the need to implement agreements at the highest level. There may be important roles that civil affairs and other subnational parts of peacekeeping missions play in supporting such peace processes (and these are highlighted in the case studies), but typically a peacekeeping mandate will focus overwhelmingly at the national level. This may at times create a tension between the principle of inclusivity and the mandate of peacekeeping operations, complicating an evaluation of impact.

## **III. Methodology**

The above challenges underscore the need for an evaluation approach that (1) imposes minimal additional burdens on DPO and field missions; (2) is complementary to existing evaluation tools, such as CPAS and the RBB; and (3) can be done with existing resources and data. The Tool should see the assessment process as a form of communication, rather than mere self-critique: telling a compelling evidence-based story of how peacekeeping is having an impact (or indeed why it is not having the intended impact). And importantly, the Tool should help to place the peacekeeping intervention in context, weighing its impact against the other (frequently far more influential) factors that cause change in a given country setting.

### **COMPLEX SYSTEMS ANALYSIS**

This Tool recognizes that the challenges of attributing impact to a UN peacekeeping operation cannot be addressed in a purely linear input-output fashion. There is almost never a

convincing case to be made that a peacekeeping mission delivered a political outcome on its own. Instead, we take as a starting point that political processes in peacekeeping settings are part of complex and overlapping social, political and economic systems, appearing more as interdependent “messes” than solvable “puzzles.”<sup>21</sup> Change in these systems results from a combination and interrelation of underlying structural patterns and the actions of individuals. What Jane Boulton eloquently calls complexity’s “dance between detail and structure, between science and history, between form and individualism” means that change can never be isolated as between two variables; the way complex systems self-organize is always contingent upon both the patterns in a system and the specificity of the moment.<sup>22</sup>

This Tool therefore resists input-output calculations and instead enables a description of a given setting as a complex system of interrelated actors, each of which influence each

other in different ways. It requires the assessor to embrace uncertainty, to accept that there will never be a perfect alignment between what is put into an intervention and what is achieved by it. Instead, the Tool encourages assessors to look for:

- **How the system self-organizes and adapts:** Societies, as complex systems, self-organize in a number of ways, often through feedback loops that regulate behaviour. Corruption offers a good example of a positive feedback loop: the more government officials direct money into their personal coffers, the weaker State institutions become, further encouraging corruption and leading to still weaker institutions.<sup>23</sup> Here, a mandate to build more effective State institutions may not be possible merely by funnelling money into national reform programming, but may require an adjustment of the underlying economic incentives, disrupting the feedback loop in society. This Tool encourages assessors to examine the main ways in which a given society tends to self-organize, providing a context for evaluating impact.
- **Indirect consequences:** There is a tendency in peacekeeping to assume that impacts are the result of incremental achievements added together. As described above, a typical RBB approach will assume that the number of police trainings aggregates into an improved rule of law capacity in a given setting. However, the interrelated nature of complex systems means that actions often have unintended consequences well beyond their immediate target.<sup>24</sup> For instance, improved policing capacity may, in fact, lead to greater arrests and longer pre-trial detentions, potentially leading to growing resentment against the State and a rise in tensions.<sup>25</sup> This Tool provides some guidance for how an assessor might include analysis of such indirect consequences in an evaluation.
- **Multiple causes:** Interdependence in complex systems means that outcomes are never the result of a single cause. This

is especially relevant for peacekeeping, where a mission operates alongside a range of actors and in a context where long-standing structural dynamics play a crucial role. In some cases, the UN may do a superlative job but be a minimal influence on a given outcome. In others, even small actions by the UN could have an outsized impact. Getting out of the linear framing of the RBB and staying open to multiple causes is a key function of this Tool.

- **Localized perspectives:** Complex systems are not driven from the top down, but experience change at multiple levels as they interact. This means that local experiences of conflict, and indeed local conflict actors, are extremely important to the overall system. Wherever possible, data should be drawn from local perspectives if the assessment wishes to accurately portray impact on the ground. This is particularly relevant when local decision-makers influence the trajectory of a given setting, which is often the case in peacekeeping settings.<sup>26</sup>

Taken together, this approach aims to provide assessors with a **viable theory of change** for describing the impact of peace operations. Rather than placing the causal emphasis on the peace operation itself, it allows for a contextual understanding of a given situation, a description of how change happens within the system and a sense of what kind of actions generate change.

## ADAPTIVE ASSESSMENT APPROACHES

Some peacekeeping interventions deliver clear results: a signed agreement, a national dialogue, a ceasefire. Others may be nearly impossible to determine, such as building trust between parties, defusing tensions, or advancing a national reform agenda. Where there is a tangible result, generally it will be easier for the assessment to conclude that the UN contributed to a specific impact. But it is often the UN's quieter role in building trust and defusing tensions that is its real value added in many situations.

This Tool follows the Humanitarian Dialogue Centre and other experts in suggesting an adaptive approach: Where results are easily defined, greater focus should be placed on the impact of the intervention. Where results are more difficult to identify, greater focus should be placed on how the intervention was conducted, whether it was appropriately designed and implemented.<sup>27</sup> For example, if a peace operation is asked to broker a ceasefire between parties, the question can easily be asked “was a ceasefire achieved?” If a peace operation is mandated to support a national reform agenda aimed at the improvement of rule of law nationwide, the question may be a twofold one, “did the national reform agenda progress positively, and what role did the UN play in this advancement?” In the latter case, the assessment might focus more on how well the UN performed, given that much of the onus for change lies with other actors. Adaptation does not mean the basic structure of the assessment needs to be changed, only the emphasis within it.

## TIMEFRAME

Findings on the impact of peacekeeping will be strongly influenced by the time-window chosen. Support to a national reform agenda, for example, may show little signs of progress for decades, or may even coincide with significant periods of relapse before taking root in a country (e.g. the 20 year history of security sector reform in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which still has very little to show for it). Much of the political work of peacekeeping is of this nature, supporting national-level processes that extend well beyond the expected life of the mission. A given intervention may not generate an immediate impact (positive or negative), but could contribute to stability in the longer term, a gain that would not be captured by an assessment done too early on. Conversely, if an assessment attempts to capture too much time, the number of intervening factors may become overwhelmingly, making impact difficult to ascertain.

This Tool proposes a relatively small timeframe for analysis, examining the political impact of a mission within a single year period, and focusing largely on the extent to which the UN facilitated progress on a peace process. This aligns with the other UN reporting processes and would thus not create a separate assessment timeline for practitioners; it would also allow for this Tool to be used alongside both CPAS and the RBB if needed. However, the Tool includes questions around the potential longer-term impacts of a given intervention: how was the political intervention linked to longer-term objectives of the UN? Sustainability and prevention of relapse are two key guiding concepts.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PEER REVIEW AND INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING

Who should use this Tool? There are benefits and drawbacks to the use of either external or internal evaluators. External evaluators would provide the assessment with greater impartiality, avoid the issue of DPO congratulating itself and could possibly engage greater monitoring/evaluation expertise than the staff within the department. But external consultants may also require greater time to familiarize themselves with the case, face constraints in access to confidential information or key actors and can tend to provoke the defences of those who designed and led the intervention. The use of external evaluators may also limit the internal learning of the UN.<sup>28</sup> This Tool does not take a position on whether external or internal evaluators should lead assessments and is designed for use by both. However, to avoid some of the pitfalls of either choice, we suggest a process *complemented by peer-review*, where preliminary findings of the assessment are discussed amongst a group of experts in diplomacy and mediation.<sup>29</sup>

Secondly, there is a growing recognition across peacebuilding that assessments should feed institutional learning.<sup>30</sup> This Tool is designed to create the kind of empirically-based, consistent studies that will allow for cross-case comparison and longer-term learning for the UN.

## IV. Using the Assessment Tool

The Assessment Tool is designed for practitioners to develop convincing rigorous analysis of the political impact of peacekeeping operations. It can be used to evaluate a specific activity (e.g. support to elections) or a broader set of linked activities (e.g. support to a peace process). While each setting will require a bespoke approach and different weighting within the analysis, the Tool offers six key question areas to be addressed in every assessment:

1. A **contextual analysis** of the peacekeeping setting, which identifies the main factors driving change and the desired objectives of the peace operation;
2. A **causal analysis**, identifying the major factors that influenced a particular outcome;
3. Analysis of the extent to which the **UN contributed** to that outcome, weighted against other factors;
4. A **counter-factual argument** describing what would have happened if there had been no UN intervention;
5. An analysis of what **enabled and/or inhibited the UN's** ability to achieve its desired impact;
6. An assessment of what the UN can **learn** from the experience.

Taken together, these elements form the backbone of a story of impact, allowing assessors to marshal data and perceptions into a cogent and rigorous evaluation that can increase learning across the UN system.

### 1. CONTEXT ANALYSIS

This Tool uses the term “context analysis” rather than the more commonly used “conflict analysis.” This builds on the key elements of conflict analyses but suggests that a broader lens may be needed to describe how change takes place in different settings. Conflict analyses vary, from that of the World Bank,<sup>31</sup> to those of major development agencies,<sup>32</sup> to several

different approaches within UN agencies.<sup>33</sup> Drawing from these, a Secretariat planning cell identified four minimum elements to be included in all analyses: (1) situational profile; (2) conflict drivers; (3) stakeholder analysis; and (4) overall conflict dynamics.<sup>34</sup> This Tool builds on these four elements and expands them slightly:

- **Situational profile:** The profile provides a snapshot of the setting at the moment of the assessment. It offers a mini-narrative of the conflict and the basic issues involved in driving risks (e.g. interparty animosity, regional dynamics, key events).
- **Drivers of change:** the context analysis should cover the so-called “root causes” of conflict e.g. long-standing grievances, socioeconomic inequalities, competition over natural resources, demographic shifts) as well as the more immediate “triggers” that led to the need for a peacekeeping operation.<sup>35</sup> But wherever possible, it should aim to describe how change takes place within the country. How has the country responded to economic shocks? How do communities deal with rises in violence? What kind of patterns can be established to make a case for understanding how the system responds to new inputs.
- **Stakeholder analysis:** Typical stakeholder analyses cover all those who can influence the course of the conflict or are affected by it. Usually these are high State officials, leaders of opposition movements, military leaders and/or heads of large coalitions. But it can also be influential local leaders, or even the broader relationships between communities. There may be cases where undefined groups can affect the course of a peace process—such as unruly mobs or displaced populations—but these are less typical. Most important is to understand what motivates these actors, what inhibits their action, and what factors are most important in their decision-making around conflict.

- **Conflict Dynamics:** The heart of the analysis should capture the distribution of power amongst different actors, their ability to drive a situation toward or away from violence and the forces that influence change. In terms of the UN's intervention, this establishes the degree of difficulty in terms of prevention, as well as the focus of the assessment.<sup>36</sup>

## 2. CAUSAL ANALYSIS—A THEORY OF CHANGE

At the core of any impact story is a **theory of change**,<sup>37</sup> a set of evidence-based assumptions concerning what caused a change in circumstances on the ground. In terms of peace processes, the theory will often rest largely upon the will of the key parties to an agreement, the underlying animosity between communities, and the ability to deliver on key provisions. Crucially for this Tool, the assessment should identify what the peace operation's theory of change was at the time: what theory was driving their activities and did it reflect a realistic understanding of how change takes place in that setting? In the cases of bad outcomes, this will allow an assessment to distinguish between "theory failure" (a poor understanding of how change takes place) and "implementation failure" (poor execution of a course of action).<sup>38</sup>

Of course, conflict settings are inherently complex, there may be several factors influencing a given period. Some of these might be short-term and specific—such as the views of a leading individual or the position of a political party. They also could be immediate to the setting on the ground, such as the removal of small arms or the interposition of forces to prevent confrontation. Or a premise could be broader and more societal, like breaking down ethnic divisions, addressing grievances or fostering socioeconomic progress.

Here, we offer an example drawn from United Nations University Centre for Policy Research's prior case study on Sudan.<sup>39</sup> In 2010, UNMIS was mandated to support the final phase of Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the Government of Sudan and the Juba-based Southern People's Liberation Movement. The key process at the time was a national referendum

to determine whether southern Sudan would become an independent country or remain part of Sudan. A major risk to the overall peace process was the possibility that Khartoum (President Omar al Bashir) might refuse to recognize the outcome of the referendum, or indeed prevent it from taking place. In building a theory of change that would describe how the UN could contribute to a peaceful process, the following elements were considered:

- Agreement by Khartoum to recognise the results of the referendum was a determinative factor in implementing the peace process fully;
- President Bashir needed to receive credible assurances of his own political future after the referendum;
- For Khartoum and Juba to agree on the referendum process, post-referendum issues needed to be addressed in an agreed forum;
- For the referendum to take place peacefully, the two armies needed to be kept from confrontation in Abyei;
- Maintaining the ability for southerners and northerners living in border areas to continue to trade and retain relations was crucial for both sides to peacefully get through the CPA period.

Taken together, these factors offer a theory of change related to the southern Sudan referendum, contributing to the statement: If President Bashir receives credible assurances about the referendum and is willing to recognize the outcome, Khartoum and Juba have a viable process to resolve outstanding CPA issues, the two armies are kept from confrontation around hotspots, and citizens of both areas are able to continue economic relations, then there is a high likelihood that the referendum can take place peacefully. This analysis also suggests the key entry points for UNMIS and its partners: the UN needed to find actors capable of offering credible assurances to President Bashir, support the process of resolving other outstanding CPA issues, deploy troops to monitor the movements of the respective armies, and help ensure the northern and southern communities saw a viable

future after the CPA. As the case study concluded, UNMIS played a small but important role in all of these areas, thus contributing to a successful conclusion of the CPA peace process.

### 3. A COUNTER-FACTUAL ARGUMENT

To determine the impact of an intervention, an assessment should establish what would have happened if an intervention by external actors had not occurred. While this does not need to be a particularly detailed element of the assessment, a counter-factual argument should indicate the most likely course of events absent outside intervention.

Counter-factual statements are notoriously difficult to make with any certainty.<sup>40</sup> In many cases, the UN peace operation may have conducted scenario planning that helpfully identifies a range of likely outcomes.<sup>41</sup> And often a strong case can be made based on the risk analysis and the positions of the key conflict actors at the time. Using the above example of the southern Sudan case study, southern Sudan President Salva Kiir publicly announced he was ready to return to war if Khartoum did not accept the referendum process.<sup>42</sup>

When crafting a counter-factual argument, it is important not to place the UN peace operation too centrally in it. In many cases, the UN is but one of many other external actors (regional, international, bilateral) involved in supporting a peace process. Taking into account the possible effects of these actors will result in a more accurate and realistic analysis, also avoiding the trap of making the UN appear overly responsible for events well beyond its control.

### 4. THE UN'S CONTRIBUTION

Following from the counter-factual statement, the assessment then should describe the UN's contribution to change, weighed against the other factors at the time. Contribution may be quite direct: for example, a peace operation might oversee a ceasefire process and provide a forum for de-escalation when incidents occur. Or it might be indirect: the use of Good Offices could affect the posture of the parties; communications work could slightly alter public perceptions about

talks; behind-the-scenes diplomacy could alter regional positions in small but important ways.

Returning to the above example of the southern Sudan referendum, the theory of change was roughly, if President Bashir accepts the referendum process, the CPA is far more likely to conclude peacefully. In order for President Bashir to agree, the case study suggested he needed to receive credible assurances of his own political future (i.e. that there would be no economic isolation, that the post-referendum arrangements would not be biased against his party, and that economic incentives like sanctions relief were viable). UNMIS' contribution to this outcome could be identified by asking questions like:

- *Was the UNMIS SRSG considered a trustworthy interlocutor for Bashir to receive assurances?*
- *What role did UNMIS play in facilitating talks between Bashir and those actors who could offer assurances to his future?*
- *What role did UNMIS play in gathering international and regional actors towards a common position that would influence Bashir's decision?*
- *What other factors beyond UNMIS' control were influencing Bashir's decision-making?*

From these lines of questioning, an argument emerges that the UNMIS Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) was considered a trustworthy interlocutor, uniquely placed to bridge to other key stakeholders with leverage over President Bashir (in the African Union and Intergovernmental Authority on Development), and able to bring international actors together around common messaging to influence Bashir's views.<sup>43</sup> While there were of course many other factors that influenced the outcome, this kind of analysis helps to articulate the specific impact of the UN in a given setting.

### 5. ENABLING/INHIBITING FACTORS FOR THE UN

A UN peace operation's ability to impact a given conflict setting depends upon a range of factors, which roughly fall into two categories:

(1) degree of difficulty, and (2) effectiveness of mission's approach.

### 1) Degree of Difficulty

Some peacekeeping operations are deployed in settings where the parties are highly receptive to UN engagement. Others face the challenges of “no peace to keep,” parties reluctant to allow the mission to operate and/or poor starting conditions for achieving their mandates. Some of the issues that should be considered here are:

- Existing violence levels in country and the apparent willingness of the parties to enter into a negotiated political process;
- Willingness of the parties to accept a UN role;
- The UN's perceived legitimacy amongst the population;
- Access of the UN to key conflict actors;
- Relationship between the UN and regional organizations and bilateral donors.

These factors are not static and the UN mission can take proactive steps to improve its chances. But as a starting point, they offer a sense of how much leverage and room for manoeuvre the mission will have on its political objectives.

### 2) Effectiveness of UN Approach

Many assessment approaches on an organization's effectiveness are based on its use of resources, coherence across different agencies and internal coordination.<sup>44</sup> This is important in a UN peacekeeping context, as the assessment will feed the UN's broader justification for resources. Having a clear sense of what was an efficient use of resources will play a central role in this justification and also will make the assessment useful to more system-wide, comparative evaluations.

Key considerations here include:

- Appropriateness of the mandate given to mission;
- Degree to which the UN strategy matched the situation on the ground;

- Cohesion of the peacekeeping effort alongside other UN actors;
- Resourcing for the mission;
- Mission leadership.

It is worth noting that some of these are within the mission's control and others are either shared or beyond its control. Separating these will allow missions to prioritize their actions.

## 6. SUSTAINABILITY

While the timeframe for assessing peace operations is often fairly limited in scope and restricted to mandate areas, it is also important to examine the extent to which missions also contribute to longer-term outcomes. This responds to the Secretary-General's call to break down the divisions between conflict prevention and development, and also to the criticism of peacekeeping that it will be ineffective unless accompanied by national-level institutional reforms.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, UN peace operations should not be held to too high a standard: demanding that they influence multi-decade structural reforms with limited resources may create unrealistic expectations.<sup>46</sup> Particularly given the focus of this Tool on the political work of missions, much of the immediate focus of a UN mission will be on reducing the risks of escalation into violent conflict.

This Tool suggests that UN peace operations may not deliver longer-term sustainable outcomes, but should be assessed on the extent to which they link their engagements to processes and capacities that will outlast the mission.<sup>47</sup> Examining the exit strategy of the mission will help identify whether the UN has meaningfully planned for its work to transition into viable national and local capacities, and whether its approach has successfully promoted inclusion in the peace process.

# Assessment Tool for Measuring the Political Impact of Peacekeeping Operations

## V. Objectives

This Tool provides DPO with an approach to: (1) evaluate the political impact of its peacekeeping interventions; (2) build a rigorous knowledge base of best practice; and (3) communicate the impact of its work both internally and externally. The following document constitutes the Tool itself, offering general guidance and indicative questionnaires for conducting research. It is meant to be implemented in conjunction with the above User's Guide.

Ultimately, this Tool is guided by the question, *How did the UN peace operation contribute to the prospects for sustainable peace in a given setting?* Within this, however, the specific goals will be determined by the peace operation's mandate. Tailoring the assessment around the mission's mandate and identifying the political objectives of the UN is therefore the first step.

When conducting the assessment, the Tool is built around six core question areas:

1. A **contextual analysis** of the peacekeeping setting, which identifies the main factors driving change and the desired objectives of the peace operation;

2. A **causal analysis**, identifying the major factors that influenced a particular outcome;
3. Analysis of the extent to which the **UN operation contributed** to that outcome, weighted against other factors;
4. A **counter-factual argument** describing what would have happened if there had been no UN intervention;
5. An analysis of what **enabled and/or inhibited the** UN's ability to achieve its desired impact.
6. A description of what the UN more broadly should **learn** from this experience.

These six areas of inquiry form the basic structure of the assessment. To answer each of these questions, the Tool here provides an illustrative questionnaire, which will need to be adapted to the specific conflict, interlocutors and available information sources.

## VI. Questionnaire for Conducting the Assessment

### 1. *Contextual Analysis*—What are the main factors driving change?

This section can cover deeper root causes of conflict, but should relate those to the more immediate risks, the triggers and the positions of the parties.

Questions	Possible Key Indicators
What were the major drivers of conflict/tension in country?	Socioeconomic divisions, ethnic tensions, political divides, climatic changes.
What were the triggers that create heightened risk?	Elections, political upheaval, violent incidents, economic shocks, disasters.
What best describes the way in which conflict has developed and changed over time?	Historical analyses of the country; political-economic analysis.

### 2. *Causal Analysis*—What influenced change?

This section should draw directly from the contextual analysis in terms of identifying what ultimately drove the major changes on the ground. Importantly, this section should attempt to weight different factors, describing which of the broader range appeared to be the most important in the outcome.

Questions	Possible Key Indicators
What were the interests of the conflict actors at the time of the crisis?	Political survival, military advantage, interpersonal disputes, economic incentives, intercommunal issues, legacy.
What were the most important factors influencing the conflict actors' decisions?	Pressures from within a political party or from opposition groups, sanctions/economic issues, military pressures, battle fatigue, bilateral relations, relations with regional/international entities.
Who were the most important third parties with influence over the conflict actors?	Political allies, bilateral heavyweights, regional bodies, Security Council, sometimes broader international opinion.

Questions	Possible Key Indicators
What were the conditions necessary for the situation to move towards peaceful resolution?	Agreement between two opposing parties, interruption of an escalatory dynamic, face-saving, political/economic assurances, reduction of personal risk.
Why did the situation play out as it did?	A culmination of the above points.

### **3. Counter-factual Analysis—What are the most likely scenarios that would have taken place absent external intervention?**

This section takes the full range of external interventions by international, regional and other actors and asks what would have happened if the intervention had not occurred. This does not need to be overly detailed, and often the UN will have conducted scenario planning ahead of an event to capture likely outcomes. The risk analysis carried out in the earlier sections should also provide an evidence base for arguing the most likely course of events.

Questions	Possible Key Indicators
What are the most likely scenarios absent external intervention?	Widespread violence, inter-State war, continued confrontation in the streets, sporadic killing.
Why are these the most likely scenarios?	Rhetoric/actions by the conflict actors, military posture by conflict groups, history of violent conflict in similar moments in country.
What are the likely costs saved?	Expert estimates of costs of violence; human costs; broader regional instability

### **4. The Peace Operations' Contribution—To what extent can the outcome can be attributed to the UN's engagement?**

This section identifies the extent to which the UN's intervention played a role in the outcome. In many cases, the UN is but one of many preventive actors, and it is crucial that the analysis focus in on how the UN contributed. It can cover a wide array of difficult-to-measure issues, such as the impact of coordinated international messaging or the role the UN as an impartial intermediary between conflict

parties. Getting the views of the conflict actors themselves, or those most close to the decision-making process, is often the best way to address this question convincingly.

Questions	Possible Key Indicators
To what extent did the UN achieve what it was mandated to do?	Written understandings between conflict parties; reduction of tensions; statements of intent by key actors; statements by the Security Council on continuing risk levels.
What was the UN's leverage over any of the parties? What helped/hindered leverage?	UN actions to coordinate international and regional positioning/messaging; UN role in sanctions/economic issues; UN leverage through impartiality; etc.
What other factors alongside the UN drove the decision-making of the conflict actors?	International, regional, national actors; bilateral sanctions; financial incentives; arrest warrants; personal relationships; external military pressures; etc.
Were there any unintended results from the intervention?	Heightened expectations amongst population leading to greater tensions; etc.
To what extent was the UN's intervention a factor in the decision-making of the conflict actors?	Statements by the conflict actors; expert opinion; views of others directly involved in the process.

## 5. *Enabling/Inhibiting Factors*—What enabled and/or inhibited the UN's capacity to contribute to preventing violence?

This section aims to identify the key conditions that helped or hurt the UN's chances of success through a description of the UN's role. Sometimes the conditions are outside the UN's control. The willingness of the parties to avoid or end the violence is something the UN is only marginally able to influence in most cases. Focusing on those actions the mission took (or could have taken) to increase influence and positively affect the situation, while acknowledging those issues beyond the UN's control, is a goal of this section.

Questions	Possible Key Indicators
How receptive were the parties to the UN's involvement?	Willingness of the parties to meet the UN; ability to enter the country in question; public statements by parties about UN role; competing mediation initiatives.

Questions	Possible Key Indicators
How was the UN perceived more broadly, including by the population and/or regional actors?	Statements by leaders and civil society groups; statements by regional organizations; population surveys where available.
How ready were the parties to enter into a negotiated settlement?	Stated willingness of parties to avoid or end the violence; willingness to meet with UN and/or face to face; public and private statements.
How well did the UN's approach/strategy match the needs at the time?	Security Council/other mandate; statements by the conflict parties and civil society leaders; peer review assessment.
Was the UN sufficiently resourced for the task?	Results-based budget; comparison with other similarly placed interventions in the past; assessment of envoy as to what resources were required.
Was there unity of effort across the UN system?	Unified strategic plan across UN entities; lack of duplication of resources.

## 6. *Learning*—What can the UN more generally learn from this experience?

Are there comparable peace operations settings where this experience might have application?	Mandates, Secretary-General reports, expert interviews
Did the mission/leadership develop innovative solutions that could become policy?	End of assignment reports, strategic reviews

## VII. Sustainability

While the Tool focuses on the intervention at the most immediate periods before and after a high risk of violent conflict, it should include an evaluation of the extent to which the intervention was linked to longer-term capacities and activities (see User's Day). Key questions in this regard include:

Questions	Possible Key Indicators
Did violence resume soon after the intervention, and if so, why?	Levels of violence pre- and post-intervention; statements by the conflict actors about intentions to resume violence; extent to which agreements were implemented.
Was the work of the peace operation linked to longer-term UN engagements?	Capacities left in place following the intervention; existence of a strategy showing handover of tasks from diplomatic intervention to other actors (UN and non-UN); national conflict prevention capacities in place.
How were root causes impacted by the intervention?	

## VIII. Conclusions

Each assessment should include a set of conclusions based on the above analysis. These can describe what worked particularly well in an intervention and/or what inhibited success. To the extent possible, these conclusions should be generalizable for use by mission leadership in other conflict settings and for the development of policy guidance by DPO.

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