

Denis M. Tull

UN Peacekeeping in Africa: The End of a Cycle?

Between Changing Warfare, Impossible Mandates and Geopolitics

Dr Denis M. Tull

Megatrends Afrika Project Director

Denis.Tull@swp-berlin.org

Executive Summary

UN peacekeeping in Africa is once again approaching a crossroads. In particular, its four largest and most visible operations, all in Africa and accounting for roughly 80 per cent of the total deployed troops worldwide, are facing legitimate questions about their outcomes and effectiveness. After a decade or more of peacekeeping in the Central African Republic (CAR), Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Mali and South Sudan, stagnation or even backsliding cast doubts about the ability of peacekeepers to help move these countries towards a state that resembles peace. In Mali, the mission has even been invited to leave the country.

Three sets of factors put the legitimacy of peacekeeping to the test: First armed conflict and warfare in Africa have become increasingly complex over the past decade, rendering traditional peacemaking extremely difficult. Fragmented, multi-layered and non-permissive warscapes as well as a large kaleidoscope of actors explain why UN missions, still attuned to old established precepts and principles, struggle to implement their mandates. Second, the UN Security Council, as peace operations' political overseer, has obstinately ignored the blatant crisis of the UN's large stabilization missions. Instead of rethinking multidimensional peacekeeping in hostile environments, and stabilization missions in particular, a hypocritical Security Council has happily continued to impose overly ambitious or even unrealistic mandates. Third, the resurgence of international strategic competition means that the global context for UN peacekeeping is increasingly challenging. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has reinforced divisions that will politicize previously relatively uncontroversial peacekeeping efforts in Africa. Moreover, peacekeeping in its current, Western-dominated form is also under pressure from various sides. No longer content with simply contributing troops, states from the "Global South" are increasingly demanding their say in shaping the terms of the peacekeeping debate. Meanwhile, global power shifts and the resurgence of authoritarianism suggest that peacekeeping is gradually moving away from its liberal ideology.

The implications of these developments are that the declining use of UN peacekeepers will continue, the normative ambitions associated with multidimensional missions will be sharply diminished, stabilization missions are likely to disappear, while less risky and costly political missions will remain an appealing option. Joint missions with African organizations, support packages for African-led peacekeeping, or co-deployments with African-led military operations could also gain in importance, provided that the UN and the African Union can reach an agreement on the long-standing problem of financing these missions.

Content

Introduction	1
Challenges from Below: The Evolving Nature of Conflict in Africa	3
Challenges from Above: Strategic Competition and Global Power Shifts	6
The Security Council: Setting Up Missions for Failure	9
The Way Ahead	12

Introduction

The historical record of UN peace operations is much better than their reputation suggests.¹ Several comparative studies have shown that peace is far more likely where peacekeepers are deployed. Levels of violence are lower, civilian casualties are fewer and the prospects for peace in the aftermath of fighting increase.² Yet, there are ominous signs that UN peacekeeping is in trouble. While it has seen ups and downs in the past, the current situation could be the beginning of a more serious and durable test than previous ones. The UN's currently four largest missions – all in Africa and accounting for 80.5 per cent of the total of uniformed troops – are often considered ineffective at best.³ Some observers allude to a crisis of legitimacy.⁴ Even UN officials sense “the end of a cycle” that was characterized by extraordinary ambition and optimism.⁵ The sharp decline in the number of uniformed peacekeepers since 2016, from 107,000 to 75,000 in 2022 does not signal that the world, including Africa, has become more peaceful.⁶

Table 1: The currently four largest UN missions (UNMISS, MONUSCO, MINUSMA and MINUSCA)

Source: UN Peacekeeping, *Peacekeeping Operations Fact Sheet*, 31 October 2022, 2.

<i>Mission</i>	<i>Established</i>	<i>Military Observers</i>	<i>Troops</i>	<i>Staff Officer</i>	<i>Police</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Fatalities</i>	<i>Budget (in bn. USD)</i>
UNMISS	July 2011	202	13,108	401	17,869	17,869	116	1.2
MONUSCO	Jan. 2010	166	12,526	330	17,918	17,918	255	1.12
MINUSMA	April 2013	n.a.	11,827	489	17,613	17,613	292	1.26
MINUSCA	April 2014	148	12,175	415	16,884	16,884	171	1.11

Changes in the nature of armed conflict put long-standing peacekeeping precepts and principles to the test, and UN peacekeeping's capacity to learn and adapt. Moreover, the international context is increasingly unfavourable, with a tension-filled multipolar order affecting the UN, its Security Council and the viability of peacekeeping in its current form. Drawing on recent peacekeeping scholarship as well as research in Bamako, this paper examines three sets of factors that jointly conjure a daring challenge for the resilience and legitimacy of peacekeeping: first, the gradually changing nature of conflicts in Africa, which significantly increases the situational difficulty for peace operations on the ground; second, the hypocrisy of the Security Council which has continued to issue broad and unrealistic mandates despite overwhelming evidence that this practice is leading peacekeeping into a dead end; third, the rising tide of strategic competition between great or emerging powers that will impact peace operations. The three types of factors will be described before teasing out some of the possible mid-term consequences for the UN peacekeeping enterprise.

¹ This paper is based on a presentation by the author in the Federal Foreign Office, Berlin, 27 January 2023.

² Barbara F. Walter et al., “The Extraordinary Relationship between Peacekeeping and Peace”, *British Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 4 (2021): 1705-1722.

³ UN Peacekeeping, *Peacekeeping Operations Fact Sheet*, 31 October 2022.

⁴ Center for International Peace Operations, *White Dove Down? Peace Operations and the Zeitenwende*, Berlin, 2023, 27.

⁵ Author's interview, MINUSMA official, Bamako, 24 November 2022.

⁶ UN Peacekeeping, *Monthly Summary of Military and Police Contributions to United Nations Operations*, 28 February 2023.

Challenges from Below: The Evolving Nature of Conflict in Africa

The nature of warfare in Africa has gradually evolved over the past 10 to 15 years, posing significant challenges for peace operations.⁷ This is certainly evident in the theatres where the four largest UN peace operations are currently deployed – the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Mali and South Sudan – and it is precisely the argument that the declining fortunes of these missions are in part attributable to the changing nature of conflict. Incremental changes have brought certain conflict characteristics into sharper focus, while new elements such as jihadism and new technologies in civil war are undeniable.⁸

Increased complexity can be thought of as fragmentation, both of conflict and of the actors involved.⁹ Armed conflict itself is fragmented in the sense that multiple types of conflict coexist within one larger civil war setting. Put simply, most contemporary conflicts in Africa combine the following three types of conflict:¹⁰

- **State-based armed conflict** describes conflict between two or more parties, at least one of which is a government. In Africa these are frequently symmetrical, non-conventional conflicts, characterised by low military capacities by both ill-equipped armies and insurgents and preventing a decisive victory by either side.¹¹
- **Non-state conflict** refers to the use of violence between two or more organised armed groups, neither of which is the government of a state.
- **Intrastate, internationalized conflict** involves a government and non-state parties, and the warring parties receive material support from foreign governments, and sometimes from foreign or internationalized non-state armed actors.

The traditional understanding of civil war as a contest between a government and one or two insurgent groups has been outdated for some time, but recent trends have further highlighted this trend. For instance, in a sample of the world's 46 most war-affected countries (2018-2022), only 23 per cent of violent events involved rebel or insurgent groups in the traditional sense, that is, groups engaged in an armed national contests over political power at the centre. Stunningly, only a tiny fraction of violent events (12%) opposed non-state actors and state security forces. The bulk of political violence (77%) takes place outside or beyond the confines of nationally-oriented contests traditionally coded as “civil war”, involving other types of violence and armed actors (militias, criminal gangs, etc.).¹²

⁷ In this paper, the author is concerned with the UN's largest multidimensional missions. Since all of these are in Africa, this analysis does not make claims beyond the continent.

⁸ Barbara F. Walter, “The New New Civil Wars”, *Annual Review of Political Science* 20 (2017): 469-486; see also Benedikt Erforth et al., *Megatrends and Conflict Dynamics in Africa: Multipolarity and Delegation in Foreign Interventions*, Megatrends Working Paper no. 2, Berlin, 2022.

⁹ Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, *Understanding Fragmentation in Conflict and its Impact on Prospects for Peace*, Geneva: Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2016.

¹⁰ Based on the definitions of the [Uppsala Conflict Data Program](#).

¹¹ Stathis N. Kalyvas and Laia Balcells, “International System and Technologies of Rebellion: How the End of the Cold War Shaped Internal Conflict”, *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 3 (2010): 423.

¹² ACLED Conflict Severity Index, [A New Measure of the Complexities of Conflict](#), 19 January 2023.

In the countries where the four largest UN peace operations are currently active, this mosaic of different types of conflict and actors influence and reinforce each other. Terms like “the Mali conflict” are therefore simplistic shortcuts to what is a complex web of interlocking conflicts escaping neat classifications. These contemporary configurations are not so much bounded units of “civil war”, but rather warscapes shaped by various, fluid and hybrid conflicts. Nonetheless, these settings share common characteristics, such as low-capacity states with enormous legitimacy deficits as well as vast national territories with long borders and problematic neighbours. Much of the violence originates in areas on the margins of the state, where absent or ineffective state institutions are as much a cause of grievances as they are a factor facilitating the organization of violence.¹³

The second element of complexity is the proliferation and fragmentation of actors, and their behaviour.¹⁴ Defining features of a fragmented warscape are shifting and opportunistic alliances. As Seymour writes “unstable alignments among fragmenting factions are more than just a characteristic of these wars—in many ways, they are the war.”¹⁵ Low military capacities on all sides are conducive to the persistence of low-intensity conflict at the margins of the central state, which may not necessarily be threatened.¹⁶ The stupendous variety of different types of armed actors (insurgents, vigilantes, militias, gangs, armed smugglers, etc.) is multiplied by the number of organizations falling under each of these categories. Illustrating the point, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) data base now includes over 3,000 organized non-state armed groups, a number which has roughly doubled since 2019.¹⁷ In 2022, these groups were involved in 64 per cent of all armed, organized activities and committed 76 per cent of all violence against civilians. The protracted conflicts in the eastern DRC illustrate both the exacerbation of fragmentation and its longer trajectory. While there were as many as 20 armed groups in the region in 2008, by 2015 this number had jumped to at least 70 and to over 120 by 2022.¹⁸

At present, the landscape of political violence seems more populated than ever by actors with a sub-national, local horizon of action and a fair degree of autonomy, even if they often have ties to national elites. A low degree of organizational cohesion, limited unity of purpose and unstable political agendas are prevalent. Fragmentation of actors is particularly pervasive in Africa, although conflicts elsewhere (e.g. Syria, Yemen) provide similar examples.

In this context, old recipes for peacemaking and peacebuilding are largely ineffective.¹⁹ When armed groups have ill-defined political agendas and are prone to fragmentation and opportunistic behaviour, mediators face significant hurdles to craft roadmaps towards peace. Cooptation strategies building on power-sharing formulas are unfeasible in such an environment. They may even have counterproductive consequences. Ambitious individuals may defect from established armed formations to form their own groups in order to gain a seat at the negotiating table.²⁰

¹³ Paul D. Williams, “Continuity and Change in War and Conflict in Africa”, *Prism* 6, no. 4 (2017): 35.

¹⁴ Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, *Fractionalization and Civil War*, 2017; Johan Brosché et al., “Conceptualizing Civil War Complexity”, *Security Studies* 32, no. 1 (2023): 137-165.

¹⁵ Lee J. Seymour, “Why Factions Switch Sides in Civil Wars: Rivalry, Patronage, and Realignment in Sudan”, *International Security* 39, no. 2 (2014): 92.

¹⁶ Stathis N. Kalyvas, “The Changing Character of Civil Wars, 1800–2009”, in: Hew Strachan and Sibylle Scheipers (eds.), *The Changing Character of War*, Oxford, 2011: 217.

¹⁷ ACLED Conflict Severity Index, *A New Measure of the Complexities of Conflict*, 19 January 2023.

¹⁸ Jason K. Stearns and Christoph Vogel, *The Landscape of Armed Groups in Eastern Congo*, Congo Research Group, New York 2015; Ed Ram, “‘Anything to Stop the Massacres’: Peace Still Eludes DRC as Armed Groups Proliferate”, *The Guardian*, 11 February 2022.

¹⁹ Williams, “Continuity and Change in War and Conflict in Africa”, 42.

²⁰ Allard Duursma and Feike Fliervoet, “Fueling Factionalism? The Impact of Peace Processes on Rebel Group Fragmentation in Civil Wars”, *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 65, no. 4 (2021): 781-788.

While most of the changes described above have unfolded over time, the emergence of violent jihadist groups on the scene over the past 10 to 15 years represents the most significant new element of armed conflict in Africa. In contrast to the pre-2000 period, when the phenomenon was largely restricted to Algeria and Somalia, jihadist groups are involved in nearly every major armed conflict in Africa today. They pose a unique challenge. While their political objectives are sometimes hard to discern, jihadists have as a common denominator a political-ideological agenda that is often difficult to reconcile with prevailing political systems. Radical revolutionaries with transnational connections, these groups often lean more towards displacing existing state institutions rather than integrating or reforming them.²¹ Thus, bargaining over political power within the structures of extant political structures is an unlikely option both for revolutionary jihadists, incumbent elites and most members of the international community of states.²² As a result, for UN peace operations the “primacy of politics” becomes difficult to pursue. Yet, when jihadists are excluded – or exclude themselves – from any political solution, any effort to build peace will prove partial at best, futile at worst.

Jihadists also pose a direct security threat to the safety of blue helmets. Fatalities caused by malicious acts have risen in the period between 2011 and 2017, accounting for more than 20 per cent of all peacekeeping fatalities since 1948.²³ Jihadist attacks in Mali have been the main driver of this trend, but missions elsewhere have also been the target of jihadists and other hostile forces, notably in Darfur, the CAR and the DRC. Risk mitigation such as bunkering have reduced the number of fatalities, but it remains higher than in the decade (2000-2010) preceding the upsurge.²⁴

In summary, the situational difficulty for peace operations has further increased over the past 10 to 15 years. The nature of complex and intertwined conflicts, the number and type of violent actors and levels of hostility towards blue helmets partly explain why peace operations are struggling to deliver.

²¹ Stathis N. Kalyvas, “*Jihadi Rebels in Civil War*”, *Daedalus* 47, no. 1 (2018): 36-47; Walter, “*The New New Civil Wars*”.

²² Williams, “*Continuity and Change in War and Conflict in Africa*”, 42.

²³ Carlos Alberto dos Santos Cruz, *Improving Security of United Nations Peacekeepers*, 2017, 5.

²⁴ In the 2018-2022 period, an average of 31 peacekeepers were killed every year by malicious acts. In the decade before 2011, the average number of fatalities was 15/year (2000-2010); calculated based on: https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/stats_by_year_incident_type_5_83_january_2023.pdf

Challenges from Above: Strategic Competition and Global Power Shifts

In addition to the stress stemming from the changing nature of conflict, UN peacekeeping is also under pressure by global powers and increasing tensions between them. This is even the case regardless of the evolving position of the US administration, which has pushed for substantial expenditure cuts in UN peacekeeping between 2015 and 2021.²⁵ Competition between global powers provides an increasing challenge for peace operations. Beginning with the civil wars in Syria and Libya in 2011 as well as Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014, tensions between the five permanent members of the Security Council (P5) have steadily increased, as evidenced by the growing number of Chinese and Russian voting abstentions since 2012 and vetoes by the P5.²⁶ Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has further exacerbated tensions and may affect previously uncontroversial issues among Council members, such as peacekeeping, especially in Africa.

Mali is an ominous example. In 2022, the Council failed for the first time since 2013 to cast a unanimous vote on the extension of MINUSMA's mandate, with China and Russia abstaining. This was partly due to the fact that Mali itself has become a theatre of confrontation between global powers. But MINUSMA also became a victim of broader international tensions, including over contested issues that divide international powers. China's and Russia's abstentions, for example, aligned behind the concerns of the Malian government about state sovereignty, non-interference and human rights – controversies that are bound to continue in an increasing number of cases, in the realm of peacekeeping and beyond. The more global power will shift towards illiberal states, the more UN peacekeeping will be stripped of its post-1989 liberal identity to reflect a variety of different ideologies and values.²⁷ The resulting adjustments for peace operation will mean “a focus on political accompaniment, third-party impartial mediation, stability, and technical assistance” that are less intrusive and therefore less divisive.²⁸ China, for its part, has both the intention and the means to leave its mark on UN peacekeeping. Not only is it by far the largest troop contributor among the P5, it is currently also the fifth largest troop contributor to UN peace operations (2,258 troops as of 31 March 2023).²⁹ As mentioned above, it has become more outspoken on substantive issues (e.g. human rights in mandates). It is also wants a greater say in appointments for leadership positions in UN missions, two of which it has recently secured.³⁰ As part of its growing influence in the UN, it has also the ambition to head the UN Department

²⁵ Daniel Forti, *The 2022 UN Peacekeeping Budget: Signs of Progress or a Fleeting Moment of Consensus?*, IPI Global Observatory, 20 July 2020.

²⁶ Crisis Group, *Ten Challenges for the UN in 2022-2023*, Special Briefing no. 8, 2022, footnote 7; Malte Brosig and Markus Lecki, “The African Three (A3) at the UN Security Council: Translating Agency into Influence?”, *Politikon* 49, no. 3 (2022): 261.

²⁷ Cedric de Coning, “The Future of UN Peace Operations: Principled Adaptation through Phases of Contraction, Moderation, and Renewal”, *Contemporary Security Policy* 42, no. 2 (2021): 218.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ UN, *Uniformed Personnel Contributing Countries by Ranking*, 31 March 2023.

³⁰ Jeffrey Feltman, *China's Expanding Influence at the United Nations — and How the United States Should React*, The Brookings Institution, Washington DC, 2020, 4.

of Peace Operations, with possible consequences for peacekeeping's main tenets (see below).³¹

For an existing mission such as MINUSMA, a divided Security Council means a substantial loss of authority and legitimacy vis-à-vis autocratic, sovereignty-minded host governments. Peace operations rely on the Security Council's full support to gain traction in the pursuit of their political tasks.

Table 2: Security Council Voting Behaviour on Peacekeeping-Related Resolutions

Source: Compilation based on [UN Digital Library Voting Data](#).

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of Resolutions</i>	<i>Where China and/or Russia abstained</i>	<i>Where China and Russia abstained</i>	<i>Where African Council Members abstained</i>
2022	33	9	6	6
2021	37	6	3	2
2020	39	8	4	2
2019	39	6	2	4
2018	40	7	6	4

Mali may not remain the exception. In 2022, 33 draft resolutions relating to peacekeeping were put to a Security Council vote. China and/or Russia abstained in nine cases (or both, in six cases), up from six in 2021.³² While it would be imprudent to read too much into the 2022 uptick, it could be linked to tensions over Ukraine. At the same time, the figures suggest that tensions reflect a continuation of a long-term trend that began around 2011, as explained above. In other words, political conflict in the Council will remain salient, regardless of the future trajectory of the Ukraine war. Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that UN peacekeeping will continue to be adversely affected by heightened political conflict between the leading UN member states. The likelihood for this to happen is high considering that major powers continue to develop stakes in regions previously marginal to their interests, such as Africa, in order to preserve or expand their influence and interests vis-à-vis competitors.³³ In the past, the P5 could relatively easily agree on peacekeeping operations as “a cost-effective and politically expedient means of providing stability in situations where few vital national interests are at stake.”³⁴ This is less and less the case as places like Mali and the CAR, not so long ago widely considered as strategic backwaters, have become theatres of strategic competition.

Finally, UN peacekeeping is also affected by the increasing agency and assertiveness of countries from the “Global South.” No longer content to simply contribute troops, rising and emerging powers are demanding their say in UN peacekeeping, challenging entrenched asymmetries, norms, practices and divisions of labour. As both the main recipients of peace operations and their main troop contributors, African countries – through the three elected

³¹ “Beijing’s Secret Campaign For the Post of UN Peacekeeping Head, A Job Long Held By France”, Africa Intelligence, 31 August 2021.

³² For comparison, Russia abstained only twice (and China once) in all of 2012. See Crisis Group, [Ten Challenges for the UN in 2022-2023](#), Special Briefing no. 8, 2022, footnote 7.

³³ Fonteh Akum and Denis M. Tull, [Strategic Competition and Cooperation in Africa](#), Megatrends Policy Brief no. 12, 2023.

³⁴ Sebastian von Einsiedel et al., [The UN Security Council in an Age of Great Power Rivalry](#), United Nations University Working Paper Series, no. 4, 2015, 9.

members of the Security Council (A3) – have a particular interest in shaping the debate.³⁵ Contested issues include the respective responsibilities of the UN and Africa’s regional organizations in keeping the peace on the continent, UN finance for African-led peace operations, reform of the outdated pen-holding system, leadership appointments and strategies and doctrines of peacekeeping.³⁶

The assertiveness of countries from the “Global South” and from Africa in particular will inevitably lead to tensions. The impetus for change is about power relations. While this may result in long-winded bargaining, it will also be an opportunity to put UN peacekeeping on a stronger, more legitimate footing. At the same time, African agency will follow broader changes in global politics. Historically, African members of the Security Council have tended to align with the P3 (US, France, UK). From 2000 to 2021, the A3 voted with UK and France on average 99 per cent and 94 per cent of the time, respectively.³⁷ African voting coherence with China (71%) and especially Russia (51%) were far lower.³⁸ Hence it is striking that in 2022 African members of the Council frequently joined Chinese or Russian abstentions. Of the nine cases, when China and/or Russia abstained from voting on peacekeeping-related resolutions, African countries joined them six times. Gabon abstained five times, followed by Kenya (four times) and Ghana (three times).³⁹

³⁵ Priyal Singh and Gustavo De Carvalho, *Walking with the Bear? Russia and the A3 in the UN Security Council*, Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria, 2021, 7.

³⁶ UN Security Council Open Debate Maintenance of International Peace and Security: New Orientation for Reformed Multilateralism, *Statement by Ambassador Martin Kimani*, New York, 14 December 2022.

³⁷ Brosig and Lecki, “*The African Three (A3) at the UN Security Council*”, 262.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Aligning behind both China and Russia, the A3 abstained three times as a bloc (on the DRC and the CAR). They also abstained once (on Libya), with no other Council member abstaining.

The Security Council: Setting Up Missions for Failure

Besides changes in world politics and the operational environment, the current crisis of UN peacekeeping is also a product of dynamics that are internal to the peacekeeping enterprise itself. While a comprehensive assessment of peace operations is beyond the scope of this paper, the tendency to overstretch the concept of peacekeeping has contributed greatly to its discredit. As the political authority mandating and overseeing peacekeeping, the Security Council carries much of the responsibility for the gap between ambitions and the actual ability of peace operations to deliver. This to a large degree due to the Council's peacekeeping trilemma, which entails three contradictory goals: aiming for success leads the Council to issue wide-ranging, comprehensive mandates to address violent conflict, including its underlying causes; yet, the goal to minimize expenditure leads the Council to allocate insufficient resources.⁴⁰ Finally, the Council's goal to keep troop-contributing countries on board by prioritizing the safety of peacekeepers imposes another constraint on peace operations. This translates into consequences that hamper peacekeeping's ability to deliver: an ever-expanding number of tasks;⁴¹ the regular use of extraordinarily demanding tasks (notably Protection of Civilians, the extension of state authority and the reform of its institutions); incoherent mandates with tensions between various tasks; or contradictions between certain tasks and the principles of peacekeeping.

None of this is news. The challenges have been evident for the better part of the last decade. This fact brings the politically most damning aspect of failure to the fore, which is a blatant lack of learning and adaptation on the part of a Security Council. Indeed, the Council has stubbornly stayed the course despite the widening gap between over-ambitious goals in difficult and often hostile environments and peacekeeping outcomes. There is little evidence that the Council has learned from failure by altering or adjusting its political and strategic vision towards peacekeeping, maintaining a largely hypocritical posture. France is worth singling out as penholder for three of the four big missions, e.g. the DRC, Mali and the CAR.⁴²

In Mali, for example, the Security Council failed to make any substantive changes to the mission and its mandate, even though the escalating crisis in the country suggested that the strategic approach was set up for failure. Throughout the lifespan of MINUSMA, the Council made only one major and largely self-defeating adjustment. In Resolution 2480 (2019) it decided that the already overstretched mission's second strategic priority should be the stabilization of Mali's vast and violent central region, including the protection of civilians, without adding a single blue helmet to the mission.⁴³ Such decisions reinforce the widespread notion that missions are set up for failure, no matter how hard peacekeepers on the ground try to make the best out of an impossible mandate.

⁴⁰ Paul D. Williams, "The Security Council's Peacekeeping Trilemma", *International Affairs* 96, no. 2 (2020): 479-499.

⁴¹ One report about UNMISS notes: "There are 207 separate tasks in UNMISS' current resolution." Adam Day et al., *Assessing the of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan/UNMISS*, EPON Report, Oslo, 2019, 18.

⁴² Security Council Report, *2023 Chairs of Subsidiary Bodies and Penholders*, New York, 2023.

⁴³ Denis M. Tull, *UN Peacekeeping in Mali. Time to Adjust Minusma's Mandate*, SWP Comment no. 23, Berlin, 2019.

The silver lining emerging in this bleak diagnosis is that peacekeeping per se is not in crisis. It is only partly true that “MINUSMA is emblematic of larger peacekeeping problems.”⁴⁴ In reality, the problem concerns multidimensional operations as a sub-type and more specifically stabilization missions. In 2004 the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) was the first mission carrying the term in its name, followed by missions in the DRC (MONUSCO, 2010), Mali (MINUSMA, 2013) and the CAR (MINUSCA, 2014).⁴⁵ Since the 2017 drawdown of MINUSTAH, the UN peacekeeping crisis is therefore one of multidimensional missions in Africa, if we include UNMISS.⁴⁶

Broadly speaking, stabilization means the deployment of peacekeepers into a context of ongoing violence. These are non-permissive environments where UN missions are tasked to undertake a conflict management role to provide the security environment for a peace process.⁴⁷ The text of stabilization mandates is characterized by language that takes missions into grey zones between the robust use of force and peace enforcement. Missions are urged to tackle armed groups by coercive means. The use of violence is no longer a working hypothesis in defence of the mandate, it is presumed to be necessary. Yet, the triad of established peacekeeping principles Security Council Resolution 2423 (2018) has gone the furthest in this regard, not only demanding a “proactive and robust posture”, but requesting MINUSMA “to continue anticipate and deter threats and to take robust and active steps to counter asymmetric attacks against civilians or United Nations personnel, to ensure prompt and effective responses to threats of violence against civilians and to prevent a return of armed elements to those areas, engaging in direct operations pursuant only to serious and credible threats.”⁴⁸

In effect, missions are expected to engage in activities bordering on counter-insurgency and even counter-terrorism. An extension of this is that stabilization missions are linked to state-building objectives. They are state-centric insofar as missions are mandated to assist national government with the extension of state authority. Proponents of stabilization have portrayed the shift as a necessary response to sustained violent conflict in hostile settings, where missions need to protect themselves and their mandate to create conditions for peace. In other words, stabilization is a response to the evolving nature of conflict described above.

The problematic consequences of peacekeeping as stabilization are by now well known. Associating the use of coercion with better outcomes is a flawed claim, nor is it supported by empirical evidence.⁴⁹ To begin with, UN missions are ill equipped to use violence in an organized and sustained way. Systematic coercion is therefore incongruent with the basic precept that peace operations should have clear, *achievable* mandates that are tied to a political strategy.⁵⁰ More important, a coercion-based conflict management role will deprive UN peacekeeping of its greatest asset, which is its role as a political actor supporting peaceful solutions. Similarly, state-centric stabilization departs from the principle of impartiality insofar as cooperation with often autocratic governments in the name of state-building

⁴⁴ Conversation with Western diplomat, Bamako, 16 November 2022.

⁴⁵ John Karlsrud, “From Liberal Peacebuilding to Stabilization and Counterterrorism”, *International Peacekeeping* 26, no. 1 (2019): 10.

⁴⁶ UNMISS is a multidimensional mission, though not explicitly a stabilization mission. Since 2014, it no longer has a state-building mandate. See Day et al., *Assessing the Effectiveness of the UN Mission in South Sudan/UNMISS*.

⁴⁷ *Report of the Independent High-Level Panel on Peace Operations*, New York, General Assembly/Security Council, S/2015/446, 2015, 43.

⁴⁸ Similar language can be found, for instance, in *Resolution 2098 (2013)* on MONUSCO.

⁴⁹ Jenna Russo, “Militarised Peacekeeping: Lessons from the Democratic Republic of the Congo”, *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 12 (2021): 3070-3086; John Karlsrud, “Towards UN Counter-Terrorism Operations?”, *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 6 (2017): 1215-1231; Denis M. Tull, “The Limits and Unintended Consequences of UN Peace Enforcement: The Force Intervention Brigade in the DR Congo”, *International Peacekeeping* 25, no. 2 (2018): 167-190.

⁵⁰ *Report of the Independent High-Level Panel on Peace Operations*, 44f.

undercuts the UN's credibility as an impartial actor. Not only does this create a great deal of normative ambiguity, but peace operations that use force may become a party to the conflict.⁵¹ Legal scholars increasingly argue that the mandates and behaviour of UN stabilization missions turn peace operations into a participant of hostilities.⁵² As a result, International Humanitarian Law (IHL) may be applicable to the missions. As they lose their quasi-civilian status, operations are no longer legally protected against attacks by belligerents. To put it bluntly, "peacekeepers will become lawful military targets and attacks on them can then no longer be considered war crimes."⁵³ Legal arguments aside, the perception that stabilization operations are a party to the conflict may be precisely the reason behind the surge of deadly attacks against peacekeepers in recent years. Contrary to the Cruz report, rather than being an appropriate response to insecurity, the militarization of peacekeeping may actually increase the danger for peacekeepers.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Arthur Boutellis, *Hostile Forces: Cruz Report Risks Distracting from Strategic Context*, IPI Global Observatory, 5 February 2018; Marion Laurence, "An 'Impartial' Force? Normative Ambiguity and Practice Change in UN Peace Operations", *International Peacekeeping* 26, no. 3 (2019): 256-280.

⁵² Bianca Maganza, "From Peacekeepers to Parties to the Conflict: An IHL's Appraisal of the Role of UN Peace Operations in NIACs", *Journal of Conflict & Security Law* 25, no. 2 (2020): 209-236.

⁵³ Noor Wahed, "Can and Should UN Peacekeepers be Party to a Conflict?", DLP Forum, 25 May 2022.

⁵⁴ Boutellis, "Hostile Forces".

The Way Ahead

UN peacekeeping is currently under significant pressure due to financial constraints, strategic competition and more generally the remaking of the international system. At the same time, it faces a challenge of legitimacy due to the ineffectiveness of its large and ongoing stabilization operations. What are the implications for peacekeeping? The near future will resemble the recent past. Heightened international tensions mean that UN peace operations will be used modestly, both with respect to the number of new missions and mandated tasks, with multidimensional missions likely to present an increasing minority. Introduced twenty years ago, stabilization missions in particular appear to be an improbable option for the future. More traditional types of missions with limited aims and narrow mandates such as monitoring ceasefires and interposition tasks could grow in importance, possibly co-deployed along non-UN forces.⁵⁵ Frequently, these formats will present the lowest common denominator on which Council members will agree upon. Special political missions may also remain popular on account of limited costs, risks and controversies.

A more prudent use of peace operations will also coincide with broader transformations of the international system. In a context that is both multipolar and high on tensions, UN peacekeeping will increasingly reflect the emergence or resurgence of illiberal powers.⁵⁶ This is already becoming perceptible in the way China and Russia, sometimes joined by states from the “Global South”, put emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference during Council debates on UN peacekeeping mandates, while pushing back on human rights.

Peacekeeping in Africa will reflect the broader trends described above. In some ways, they could be even more pronounced there if rivalries among major powers keep mounting on the continent. A decisive factor will be the extent to which African agency will unfold. The clamour for African solutions, manifested through the deployment of 27 AU peace operations over the past two decades, sits uneasily with a recent trend towards ad hoc alliances (G5 Sahel, Multinational Joint Task Force in the Lake Chad Basin) and bilateral interventions that have produced decidedly mixed results.⁵⁷ Arguably, ad hocism itself has been encouraged by signs that African leadership to address peace and security has been weak and ineffective in some of the region’s major crisis hotspots (the DRC, Ethiopia, Mali and the Sahel, Sudan). The self-absorption with domestic problems of some of Africa’s traditional regional powers (e.g. Côte d’Ivoire, Ethiopia, Nigeria, South Africa) has not helped either.

In the short run, the pressing question is how conflict should be addressed in non-permissive contexts in which UN missions provide partial options at best. Current stabilization missions have shown that, where the use of organized violence is necessary, blue helmets are not a suitable response. Africa’s regional organizations may be more willing and able to use and sustain levels of coercion. Often, they are also a rapid first responder. In comparison, UN missions have far greater capacities and experience with providing the civilian dimensions of stabilization and peacebuilding. This could be an argument for a division of labour in hostile and difficult contexts, either in the form of co-deployment of African-led

⁵⁵ Alexandra Novosseloff, *A Comparative Study of Older One-Dimensional UN Peace Operations*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Nicosia, 2022; Katharina P. Coleman and Paul D. Williams, “Peace Operations Are What States Make of Them: Why Future Evolution is More Likely than Extinction”, *Contemporary Security Policy* 42, no. 2 (2021): 251. See also Alexandra Novosseloff and Lisa Sharland, *Partners and Competitors: Forces Operating in Parallel to UN Peace Operations*, International Peace Institute, New York, 2019.

⁵⁶ De Coning, “The Future of UN Peace Operation”, 218.

⁵⁷ Security Council Report, *The Financing of AU Peace Support Operations: Prospects for Progress in the Security Council?*, New York, 2023.

operations and UN missions or in the guise of joint, hybrid missions, as was the case with UNAMID in Darfur. If carefully planned and led, both organizations could invest their respective comparative strengths and advantages in either scenario, although these models raise a host of complex challenges.

Either way, the path towards a greater African share of cooperative or complementary UN-AU peacekeeping is still blocked by financial hurdles; that is, the AU's extraordinary high level of dependency on donor funding (over 75%) for its peace and security activities, but also the lack of essential operational and logistical capabilities.⁵⁸ The lobbying of the AU for access to UN assessed contributions to finance at least in part African-led, UN-authorized missions appears to slowly inch towards success. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has thrown his weight behind the idea by proposing two channels. One is the deployment of joint AU-UN missions, the other consists of UN provided logistical and operational support packages for African operations, funded through assessed contributions, as was the case for AU operations in Somalia.⁵⁹ Beyond financing, the Secretary-General's propositions are a testimony that UN stabilisation missions have reached a dead end. Pulling away UN missions from the stabilization paradigm is also a way to protect and preserve the institution of UN peacekeeping. Finally, Guterres' proposals reconfirm that Africa's regional agency is central in addressing peace and security in the region, both on political and operational grounds. Chances are that the P5 will endorse Guterres' ideas. Previously reticent, even the US government may have warmed to them, in no small part by its motivation to foster stronger relations with Africa in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.⁶⁰ That logic may also apply to the other P5 members, including Russia.

As a non-member of the Security Council, Germany is not a major voice in these debates. However, as a significant UN troop contributor over the past decade, an aspiring Council member and a country with an increasingly ambitious Africa policy, it should provide political and diplomatic support to Guterres' UN partnership policy with Africa, including in the financial sphere. Moreover, the "Zeitenwende" and its renewed focus on territorial defence should not be a reason to withdraw from UN peacekeeping. If Berlin's pledge to defend multilateral institutions is to be credible, it should stay engaged in peacekeeping, even in places where its own security may not be directly at stake. It can provide scarce and valuable capabilities for UN missions. Berlin can also support African-led peace operations through increased pre-deployment training for African troop-contributing countries to UN and AU-led missions. Providing equipment to African troop contributors should also be a priority in view of high-risk operations. In this respect, Germany should make sure that the European Peace Facility does not neglect the African demand side, despite the priority given to Ukraine and Eastern Europe.⁶¹ Finally, Berlin should continue to advocate for a thorough reform of the UN Security Council, where African states, both as important contributors to and recipients of peace operations, remain thoroughly underrepresented.


⁵⁸ In 2015, the AU vowed to self-finance 25 per cent of its and peace and security activities by 2020, a goal that was then deferred to 2024. See Security Council Report, [The Financing of AU Peace Support Operations](#), 5.

⁵⁹ [Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2320 \(2016\) and 2378 \(2017\) and considerations related to the financing of African Union peace support operations mandated by the Security Council, S/2023/303](#), 1 May 2023.

⁶⁰ Security Council Report, [The Financing of AU Peace Support Operations](#), 8.

⁶¹ Julian Bergmann and Niels Keijzer, "Do Not Neglect African Security", D+C (5/2022), 17.

Megatrends Afrika is a joint project of SWP, IDOS and IfW.
The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s).
All project publications are subject to an internal peer review process.

 This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

SWP Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik | German Institute for International and Security Affairs

IDOS German Institute of Development and Sustainability

IfW Kiel Institute for the World Economy

www.megatrends-afrika.de

megatrends-afrika@swp-berlin.org

ISSN 2747-4275

DOI 10.18449/2023MTA-WP07

 **SWP**
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for
International and Security Affairs

 **IDOS** | German Institute
of Development
and Sustainability

 **ifw** KIEL INSTITUTE FOR
THE WORLD ECONOMY

Funded by:

 Federal Foreign Office

 Federal Ministry
of Defence

 Federal Ministry
for Economic Cooperation
and Development