The Endogeneity of United Nations Peace Operations in Conflict Systems

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Introduction

United Nations peace operations are deployed to vastly differing contexts to undertake a wide range of activities, supporting peace processes, protecting civilians and facilitating the delivery of life-saving humanitarian assistance. In all of these settings, the acts of commission as well as omission by peacekeepers and other UN entities can have important effects on the conflict dynamics. While missions generally seek to direct these towards non-violent forms of contestation and negotiated resolution of conflict, the resources at their disposal and the perceived legitimacy they can endow can 'put a finger on the scales' in favour of some parties to conflict over others. In doing UN peace operations can inadvertently alter the balance of power amongst parties and facilitate path dependencies that prejudice the shape and substance of the post-conflict peace. This working paper examines this issue of the UN's endogeneity in conflict-affected societies. It draws on examples from the *United Nations Stabilisation Mission in Mali* (MINUSMA) and the *United Nations Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo* (MONUSCO) to illustrate where and how UN peace operations have influenced conflict dynamics and identifies some of the main implications. The basic argument of the paper is that the UN system – the peace and security architecture, in particular – must better acknowledge its endogeneity and the ways in which this can influence conflict dynamics when it authorizes, plans and implements its peace operations around the world.

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[1] Parts of this working paper draw on an article co-authored with Adam Day (Centre for Policy Research, United Nations University)

UN Endogeneity in Mali Conflict System

Rather than consider MINUSMA as external to the conflict dynamics of Mali, a relational approach demands that the UN too is part of the relational approach. In this, MINUSMA's state-centric mandate is crucial, given that the mission's core priorities are assisting the state displace armed groups, build its institutional capacity and extend its presence to the peripheries of Mali. In this, MINUSMA and the Malian state have a clear relationship of *mutualism*: the UN provides logistical support to the army and stabilization funding to the government, and in return is able to effectuate its mandate.[2]

However, in addition to this strong and direct relationship with the Malian state, MINUSMA also has *mutualistic* relationships with other key actors. For instance, it is engaged in coordination and information-sharing with the regional and French counter-terrorism forces.[3] Association to such parallel forces can negatively impact public perceptions of the UN and its impartiality,[4] but these relationships also offer advantages. These include the emergency reinforcement offered by the French forces[5] or the strengthening of its own partnership with the Malian government due to triangular cooperation with the anti-terrorist actions of the G5-Sahel. Furthermore, MINUSMA's involvement in the eventual demobilization and reintegration of combatants sees the UN indirectly supporting both pro and anti-government

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[2] Arthur Boutellis, "Can the UN Stabilize Mali? Towards a UN Stabilization Doctrine?" *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 4, no. 1 (2015): Art 33.

[3] Author interviews with MINUSMA officials – Bamako/Mopti/Gao, April 2017.

[4] Lisa Sharland and Alexandra Novosoloff, *Parallel forces and UN Peace Operations* (New York: International Peace Institute, forthcoming). Author interviews with MINUSMA officials – Bamako/Mopti/Gao, April 2017.

[5] French Barkhane forces are authorized under same resolutions as MINUSMA to offer security assurances in the shape of back-up support as required and requested by the SG.

elements. MINUSMA also engage directly with traditional authorities through local conflict resolution and reconciliation initiatives as well as some targeted stabilization programming.[6]

Lastly, MINUSMA is ultimately seen by groups like JNIM as the epitome of *haram*. In their worldview, the UN is the product of an unjust global order they do not recognise as legitimate. Furthermore, they see the UN's stabilization missions as window dressing for the counter-terrorist agenda and neo-colonial interests of Western governments.[7] MINUSMA is therefore pitched into a *predatory-amensal* relation with violent extremists. The mission has been sent to help the Malian state overcome them and the UN has become part of the *raison d'etre* for groups like JNIM who outright reject the credibility of the UN. At the same time, continued Western presence in Mali provides fodder for extremists wishing to build on anti-Western sentiment and recruit further into their ranks.

Even a very brief examination of the ways the UN participates in Mali's power networks underscores a crucial point that is often overlooked by UN peace operations: change does not take place in a linear fashion as ungoverned space gradually falls under the control of state institutions. Instead, UN operations participate in and influence a broad range of relations amongst different powerbrokers, often falling into the same kinds of symbiotic dynamics we see amongst conflict actors.

The UN as a Node in the Power Network of Eastern Congo

At times the UN is an influential player in eastern Congo. In fact, MONUSCO is deeply implicated in symbiotic relationships with myriad actors, particularly through its stabilisation-related activities.

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[6] Author interview with MINUSMA stabilisation/recovery and CAS officials – Bamako/Mopti/Gao, April 2017.

[7] Christopher S. Chivvis, *The French War on Al Qa'ida in Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Regarding the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) armed group, MONUSCO plays various roles that intersect with the underlying power dynamics in Beni area of North Kivu. On its face, MONUSCO is mandated to directly support the state in neutralizing the ADF and establishing basic security in the Beni area, entering into a form of mutual symbiosis with the state (including through its $40 million of stabilization funding). In these contexts, the UN is an extension and amplification of the state, increasing its monopolizing potential in the security realm, helping it to eradicate enemies, and boosting state capacity to deliver basic services to the population.

This parastatal role for MONUSCO is often the dominant one in the eyes of the population. Indeed, in recent surveys more than 60% of the Congolese population thought negatively of the Mission's partnership with the Congolese army.[8] But the overt partnership between MONUSCO and the state tends to obscure the more complex roles and relationships amongst the Mission and key actors in the Beni area. For example, the Mission is an employer of large numbers of Congolese citizens, thus entering into a form of mutual symbiosis with the local community. Likewise MONUSCO engages in a wide range of inter-communal reconciliation efforts, sometimes empowering traditional leaders to resolve conflicts within their own authority and/or bringing political and civil society actors together to address underlying tensions. While formally mandated to support the state, some of these relationships posit the UN in opposition to the state, particularly in upholding human rights in the face of abusive state behaviour.

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[8] Congo Research Group, "Impasse in the Congo: What Do the People Think? Results from a National Public Opinion Poll Investigative Report No 2" (New York University, New York, 2016).

A final set of relationships concerns the large amounts of money and resources that flow under the stabilisation rubric from MONUSCO to a multitude of Congolese actors. The mission has more than $40 million in stabilisation funds, which are disbursed under a nationally-owned plan. The mission's success – and consequent ability to raise additional funds to maintain stabilisation programming and staff – is measured in large part by its ability to spend these funds on programming. This creates a mutually symbiotic relationship between the institutions (and indeed at times individuals) receiving the funding and the UN, one where progress in the establishment of state institutions is a benchmark of success.

Conclusion

This short working paper has begun to identify where and how the UN's peace operations can become embedded in the conflict systems they are sent to transform. The foregoing has illustrated how, in both Mali and the DRC, acts of commission but also omission by the UN's peacekeepers can impact on the trajectory and intractability of conflict. The resources that flow and legitimacy that can accrue when a peace operation collaborates with particular actors creates winners and losers, altering fragile balances of power in the local context. Rather than ameliorate tensions and remove drivers of conflict, this can incentivize malfeasance, perpetuate violence, and even be generative of new conflict dynamics.

Contrary to the notion of "outside" influence and independent third party intervention, this scenario requires a way of treating all actors – including the UN – in terms of their relationships within a given marketplace. If UN peace operations are to contribute to sustainable peace and formulate viable exit strategies these potentialities must be better acknowledged and internalized in the UN's peace and security architecture. The political masters in the Security Council, the secretariat bureaucrats in the peace operations

bureaucracy, mission architects in the planning offices and the senior mission leadership in the field must all work with a heightened awareness of the UN's endogeneity in the conflict-affected societies they seek to assist if they are to first do no harm and second play a constructive role in war to peace transitions.