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The Perils of Peacekeeping in Unstabilized Environments

MINUSMA operations in Mali confirm that peacekeeping missions are increasingly being conducted in complex and asymmetric environments. For Sofia Sebastian, how the UN addresses the dilemmas posed by such missions will have a big impact on which tools it has available to resolve future global security problems.

By Sofia Sebastian for ISN

In January, Head of UN Peacekeeping Operations Hervé Ladsous told the UN Security Council that the situation in northern Mali remains “extremely volatile” in light of the presence of terrorist groups and almost daily attacks on peacekeepers, including the latest rocket [assault](#) on a UN base on March 8. Since the initial deployment of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), a peacekeeper has been [killed](#) or wounded, on average, every four days, making northern Mali one of the deadliest settings for peacekeepers in recent history. The situation in Mali is illustrative of the complex and asymmetric environments in which peacekeeping missions have been deployed in recent years. How the UN addresses the dilemmas facing today’s peacekeeping missions will be critical in determining the future of peace operations and the tools available for the resolution of today’s most pressing global security challenges.

Mali and MINUSMA

The conflict in northern Mali is the result of several dynamics. These include political and territorial disputes (between rebels in the north, who demand autonomy, and a central government unwilling and unprepared to meet those demands), inter- and intra-communal tensions, deep-rooted corruption, fragile institutions, jihadi extremism, drug trafficking, and regional spill-over from neighboring countries. Libya’s unstable southern border, for example, has become a safe haven for terrorists – including possible ISIS training camps in the Libyan desert – and has contributed to increasing terrorist activities in the region.

The complexity of the crisis lies in the intersection of these security challenges, particularly the nexus between local conflict dynamics, organized crime and jihadi extremism. In 2012, for example, northern Mali came under the control of several terrorist organizations with links to organized crime. The occupation caused significant population displacements and a number of [human rights abuses](#), including public executions, forced marriages and prostitution, and the recruitment of child soldiers.

A French intervention, launched in early 2013, succeeded in repelling the terrorists temporarily; but

these organizations simply regrouped in Southern Libya or moved their activities to neighboring Niger. Terrorist activities resumed as soon as the French started to reduce their troop presence. While the north stayed outside the direct control of terrorists, vast parts of Kidal, one of the most unstable northern regions, remained under no single authority.

MINUSMA was authorized in April 2013 to take over from a UN-sanctioned, African-led mission that faced significant financial and operational challenges to effectively implement its mandate. The UN mission was mandated to stabilize and reestablish state control throughout Malian territory, to protect civilians, and to support a peace process that is currently focused on the resolution of the north-south divide. While not directly authorized to confront terrorist organizations militarily (which was and still remains the primary goal of French forces), the UN Security Council authorized MINUSMA to deter threats and take active steps to prevent the return of armed elements as part of its stabilization activities. This specific task blurred the lines between more traditional peacekeeping and peace enforcement. The former involves the tactical use of force at the local level to defend the mandate while the latter entails a broader spectrum of coercive measures, including the use of force strategically, without the consent of the parties. The Security Council has rarely authorized peace enforcement mandates.

As with numerous other UN missions, MINUSMA failed to meet its resource requirements from the start due to delays in the provision of troops, and struggled to operate in the midst of a terrorist-fighting environment with inadequate training, equipment, logistics, and intelligence. As of December 2014, only 76 percent of the authorized military personnel had been deployed and two of seven battalions complied with UN equipment and capacity standards. Shortfalls have been particularly dramatic in the face of ongoing asymmetric threats (many peacekeeper casualties could have been avoided with anti-IED vehicles). Safety and security restrictions have also kept all but a few civilian personnel from deploying north.

MINUSMA has taken innovative steps to adapt to this hostile environment. Thanks to contributions by the Dutch, Swedes and Norwegians, the mission is now supported by the All Source Information Fusion Unit (ASIFU), a unique military intelligence unit designed to collect, analyze and provide timely and actionable intelligence. This unit should help peacekeepers react more rapidly to crises. MINUSMA is also using a trust fund to obtain IED-resistant equipment (including armored and mine-protected vehicles) and additional training for troops to help them operate more safely in this asymmetric environment. Weapon identification squads and operational mentoring and liaison teams - intended to support peacekeeping battalions with no experience in terrorist-fighting environments - have been recently engaged as well. The deployment of European troops, particularly a Dutch contingent of 350 troops (including 96 from Special Operations forces), along with three attack and four transport helicopters and the use of unarmed drones have also enhanced the mission's intelligence gathering, operational capabilities and overall mobility.

While all of these innovations and reinforcements have improved MINUSMA's ability to conduct reconnaissance, intelligence and escort duties, there remain significant gaps in coverage in the north. The capacity of MINUSMA to act as an effective deterrence force in fulfillment of its mandate is thus in question. The security situation became so precarious at the end of 2014 that Mali's Foreign Minister Abdoulaye Diop requested a more robust mandate for MINUSMA and urged the UN Security Council to send a rapid intervention force to effectively combat terrorism. An informal Security Council session on MINUSMA in November 2014, however, determined the mission's mandate would not be altered. Council members remained divided between those in favor of granting enforcement capabilities and those who regard peacekeeping as primarily a political instrument in support of a peace process.

Options for peacekeeping

As the High Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations – recently appointed by the UN Secretary-General to complete a thorough review of UN peace operations – progresses, MINUSMA's challenges offer an opportunity to reflect on (and address) the dilemmas facing peacekeeping missions today, especially those operating in asymmetric and complex environments. There are three potential options.

The first option entails a return to the foundational principles of peacekeeping (namely parties' consent to a UN operation, impartiality, and non-use of force, except tactically in self-defense and in defense of the mandate). This option is popular in certain UN and policy circles that believe the abandonment of the principles of peacekeeping – especially the ability to act as an impartial mediator – brings serious consequences for the acceptance of peacekeeping missions and increase the risks to peacekeepers. This option, however, is impractical and unrealistic given today's conflict operating environments (which may require peacekeepers to undertake offensive activities) and the Security Council's increasing reliance on the UN in asymmetric environments where there is little peace to keep.

The second option involves developing doctrine on UN peace enforcement operations as a separate category from peacekeeping. This option, however, would require a major doctrinal shift within the UN with significant normative, organizational, ethical and security implications, along with problems of legitimacy and preparedness. It would also be unlikely to succeed given the political dynamics within the UN. Russia and China, for example, have expressed reservations about recent peace enforcement mandates. Russia, in particular, warned against the growing emphasis on the military aspects of UN peacekeeping when MINUSMA's mandate was authorized, and suggested this shift in approach might have “unpredictable and unclear consequences for the security of United Nations personnel and their international legal status.” Other UN members, especially from the Global South, see enforcement as a new form of colonialism.

The third option reflects a compromise approach by providing peacekeeping operations with required resources and the policy, operational and political support needed to bridge the gap between needs and capabilities and between policy and practice. The UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations and Department of Field Support have recently launched various initiatives intended to better supply current peacekeeping operations. Member states need to ensure these initiatives move forward and donor countries need to provide and rapidly deploy these capacities.

Further work on the policy and doctrinal side would still be needed. More specifically, this middle-ground approach entails the development of doctrinal principles on the use of offensive capabilities for peacekeeping missions that operate in asymmetric and war-fighting environments. Policy and operational guidelines on how to use versatile force to match diverse threats and levels of violence and implement force protection measures will also be essential. The UN should also consider the inclusion of regional and border responsibilities in peacekeeping mandates, especially in situations that require responses that go beyond the “nation-centric” peacekeeping model such as in the fight against transnational crime and terrorism. Last but not least, further guidance and support will be needed in the use of certain capabilities, including new technology, intelligence gathering, standby and quick-reaction capabilities, and force enablers.

All of this will require critical consensus within the UN. The members of the High Level Panel should bear this in mind and work with the Security Council and the member states that provide troops and police forces for peacekeeping operations. Only when the UN addresses these gaps will peacekeeping operations such as MINUSMA be able to operate more safely in asymmetric environments and effectively manage conflicts that may in part, or periodically, require use of force beyond the tactical.

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