

UN Peacekeeping Operations in a Multipolar Era

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Abstract

How is multipolarity impacting on UN peacekeeping operations? This article sets out to answer this question by examining the ongoing decline in UN peacekeeping operations and the concurrent rise of regional and ad hoc coalitions in an era of increasing geopolitical competition. The article argues that coalitions have significantly less focus on human rights, international humanitarian law, and the protection of civilians. They thus represent a shift away from the liberal values that have marked UN peacekeeping operations, and are coherent with current geopolitical shifts where China is chipping away at human rights at the UN and African states are increasingly voicing a need for more robust operations. The article concludes that the likely outcome of these trends is a continued decline of UN multidimensional peacekeeping, but that coalitions may receive logistical and administrative support from the UN peace operations machinery.

Keywords

UN peacekeeping – multipolarity – counterinsurgency – counterterrorism – ad hoc coalitions – geopolitics – African Union – human rights

1 Introduction

What happens when the UN wages war? In 2015 I examined the move of UN peacekeeping toward peace enforcement in Central African Republic (CAR), the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA); Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO); and Mali, the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization

Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). I looked at the security and legitimacy implications of the expanded will of the UN to use force in peacekeeping operations and argued that this would negatively impact on UN peacekeeping operations and the UN's role as an impartial arbiter in postconflict countries.¹

Not envisaged in the UN Charter, UN peacekeeping has evolved organically since its inception in 1948. While a comprehensive set of principles, rules, and guidelines have been developed over the ensuing years, the UN and Member States have also been able to adapt UN peacekeeping to changing circumstances. In the liberal era that began following the end of the Cold War, UN peacekeeping emerged as a tool to help states emerging from internal conflict. The failures in Bosnia and Rwanda led to a brief lull in the deployment of UN peacekeepers, but from 1999 onward a new wave of larger multidimensional missions was mandated. Seeking to address the failures of their precedents, these missions were centered on a mandate to protect civilians, but also sought to contribute to longer-term peacebuilding and state building. However, during the 2000s Western coalitions intervened in Afghanistan and Iraq and the arguably overambitious protection and peacebuilding agenda was gradually replaced with a more instrumental stabilization agenda. This trend migrated to the UN in parallel with the *longue durée* of the 2008–2009 financial crisis, leading to a renewed wave of conflicts on the African continent and the deployment of a final set of multidimensional UN peace operations to Mali and Central African Republic (MINUSMA, 2013; MINUSCA, 2014), this time equipped with stabilization mandates bordering on peace enforcement.² At its pinnacle in April 2015, 126,247 military, police, and civilian peacekeepers were deployed.³

Eight years later, much has changed. No new UN peacekeeping operations have been fielded, and the UN has closed four large peacekeeping operations in Côte d'Ivoire, Darfur, Haiti, and Liberia. Furthermore, the UN is in the process of downsizing and transitioning the remaining four large missions: MINUSCA, MONUSCO, MINUSMA, and the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). The number of UN peacekeepers in the field had shrunk to 87,217 in October 2022,⁴ divided among twelve ongoing peace operations. The four large remaining operations accounted for 70,284 of these.⁵ UN peacekeeping is in the process of

1 Karlsrud 2015.

2 Karlsrud 2019, 2020.

3 UN 2015.

4 UN 2022a.

5 UN 2022a.

becoming a more marginal actor, with regional and ad hoc coalitions being the *mode de jour*.⁶

Over the past decade, it has become increasingly clear that the liberal moment has passed. The world is marked by increasing geopolitical and ideological competition, where the liberal world order today is a less appealing alternative for many states than the authoritarian alternative that China is presenting. The war in Ukraine and an escalating trade war have accelerated tensions between key powers, leading to increasing transaction costs for the United States and its allies in multilateral organizations.

These trends are also impacting on UN peacekeeping operations. In this article, I look at some of the current and future trajectories that can be discerned. First, I examine the decline of peacekeeping over the past decade and identify some of the key reasons for this decline. Second, I note the parallel trend of an increase in regional and ad hoc coalitions and calls for the UN peace machinery to support these coalitions. Third, I look closer at geopolitical considerations and how these impact on peacekeeping operations. In conclusion, I argue that for now, multidimensional peacekeeping operations may soon be a thing of the past, and that we are entering a period where there will be a demand for counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations that can be set up on short notice, are temporary, avoid path dependency spending in international organizations, have less focus on human rights and related liberal values, are endorsed by the UN Security Council or a regional organization, and align more closely with national self-interests.

2 The Decline of UN Peacekeeping Operations

There are several reasons for the gradual marginalization of UN peacekeeping operations. Traditional Western peacekeeping troop-providing countries started scaling back their support already in the 1990s, with a limited presence in some missions (Lebanon, Cyprus) and a one-off return in Mali.⁷ UN multidimensional *peacekeeping* is going out of style. During the past two decades, UN peacekeeping operations have repeatedly been deployed to situations where there is no peace to keep, and also increasingly with a mandate making the operation a direct party to an ongoing conflict. MINUSMA has been the rock bottom of this development, as the mission has been deployed into an ongoing

6 Reykers et al. 2023.

7 For more on this, see, for example, Koops and Tercovich 2016.

counterterrorism operation and eventually mandated to support one of the key actors in this conflict, the Joint Force of the Group of Five Sahel.⁸

UN peacekeeping operations are not fit for the revised purpose policymakers have mandated, doctrinally or operationally. As outlined in the introduction of this special issue, UN peacekeeping operations are not designed to be deployed with peace enforcement and stabilization mandates, and particularly not into theaters with ongoing counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations. This has been made excruciatingly clear by the continued losses of life first and foremost experienced by MINUSMA, but also by other large remaining UN peacekeeping operations. Stabilization practices in these missions have impeded local forms of peacebuilding,⁹ further undermining the chances of success.

Policymakers have over time become disillusioned with the limited progress made by open-ended multidimensional peacekeeping operations, and now only four remain. Key UN Member States like the United States have pushed for downsizing MONUSCO and other missions.¹⁰ Current UN Secretary-General António Guterres has not been a big supporter of UN multidimensional peacekeeping operations.¹¹ This can partially be explained as a clash between the increasing robustness of UN peace operations over the past decade and the background of Guterres as a humanitarian, having led the UN High Commissioner for Refugees for a decade from 2005 to 2015. In 2021 Guterres published *Our Common Agenda*,¹² and in this report he initiated a process to develop a *New Agenda for Peace* report, harkening back to the seminal *An Agenda for Peace* produced under the leadership of Boutros Boutros-Ghali in 1992.¹³ *An Agenda for Peace* is perhaps most recognized for developing the concept of peacebuilding. In the *Common Agenda* report, Guterres sketched out six areas that need further scrutiny. While UN peacekeeping operations are conspicu-

8 The Group of Five Sahel was initially comprised of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauretania, and Niger. Mali pulled out of the group in June 2022.

9 Curran and Hunt 2020.

10 Day 2020; de Coning 2021.

11 António Guterres has, according to Gowan 2021, “frequently signalled doubts about the effectiveness” of multidimensional UN peacekeeping missions. As a former UN High Commissioner for Refugees from 2005 to 2015, Guterres has instead put more emphasis on other roles the UN can play such as conflict prevention and peacemaking, as well as elevating the role of regional organizations and ad hoc coalitions like the Group of Five Sahel Joint Force. Karlsrud 2023.

12 UN 2021.

13 Boutros-Ghali 1992.

ously absent from this agenda, it puts great emphasis on the urgent need to “secure predictable financing for peace support operations delivered under Chapter VIII of the Charter covering regional arrangements: these operations fill a critical gap in our global peace and security architecture and should not rely on ad hoc arrangements.”¹⁴

3 The Rise of Regional and Ad Hoc Coalitions

The reference to financing of regional peace support operations points to another and related trend over the past decade. Since 2011, there has been an uptick in regional and ad hoc coalitions deployed to counter insurgency and terrorist threats, particularly on the African continent. The Regional Cooperation Initiative for the elimination of the Lord’s Resistance Army (RCI-LRA) was formed in 2011 by Uganda and neighboring states, with support of the African Union (AU). The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) was formed in 2014 by Nigeria and neighboring countries to counter the Boko Haram and has since then managed to quell the terrorist group. The Group of Five Sahel Joint Force (G5S-JF) was established to fight terrorism in Mali and its neighboring countries, but mostly came to an end in 2022 after coups in Burkina Faso and Mali and increasing tensions between the partnering countries. In 2021, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) deployed the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) to the northern part of Mozambique to fight terrorism.¹⁵ In Democratic Republic of Congo, the East African Community in 2022 mandated the deployment of a Regional Force (EACRF) composed of troops from Burundi, Kenya, and South Sudan. Troops from Burundi and Kenya arrived in autumn of the same year, with troops from Uganda expected to follow suit.¹⁶ During the fall of 2022, there were also discussions on whether to deploy a new “international specialized armed force” to Haiti, explicitly not being a UN force due to the troubled history of UN peacekeeping in the country.¹⁷ Finally, in November 2022 Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo agreed to operationalize the Multinational Joint Task Force Accra Initiative (MNJTF-AI) to fight terrorism in their countries.¹⁸

14 UN 2021, 61.

15 SADC 2021.

16 Reuters 2022.

17 UN 2022b.

18 Accra Initiative 2022.

Ad hoc coalitions can be set up on short notice to deal with a specific task in a given time-frame.¹⁹ An endorsement from the UN Security Council or a regional organization like the AU's Peace and Security Council also opens the door for funding from the European Union (EU) and other actors. By not setting a precedence, they also enable states to avoid path dependency spending through international organizations, by not establishing precedence for future deployments. Finally, they align more closely with national self-interests, both in terms of deploying nations and those funding these operations.

Regional and ad hoc counterterrorism coalitions are also offering a much more permissive and enabling legal and political alternative to UN peace operations with significantly less emphasis on human rights, international humanitarian law, and protection of civilians, but more difficult relationships between troop-contributing countries, other actors and the local population.²⁰ Examples include the UN Support Office for the African Union Mission in Somalia (UNSOA),²¹ the EU support to the Multinational Joint Task Force fighting Boko Haram funneled through the AU Strategic Support Cell, and MINUSMA's logistical support for the G5S-JF.²² A key element of these support offices has been that financial and logistical support needs to be matched by strengthened oversight and accountability mechanisms. Human rights and due diligence monitoring frameworks have been developed as part of a quid pro quo to access EU and other Western countries' funding, as well as UN assessed contributions. However, considering the experience from cooperation between the UN and, for example, the AU in Darfur and Somalia, UN support to regional and ad hoc coalitions is not likely to be without wrinkles and accountability measures may be difficult to implement.²³

In Somalia, a Civilian Casualty Tracking Analysis and Response Cell in the African Union Mission was established, but has been facing major "operational, structural and political challenges."²⁴ In the Lake Chad area, the AU Strategic Support Cell is not able to provide sufficient training in human rights and international humanitarian law compliance to MNJTF troops.²⁵ And although the UN has put significant resources into an accountability and compliance framework for the G5S-JF,²⁶ the troops of countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, and

19 Reykers et al. 2023.

20 Albrecht and Cold-Ravnkilde 2020.

21 Replaced by the UN Support Office in Somalia (UNSOS) in 2015.

22 de Coning and Karlsrud 2021.

23 See also Hirschmann 2019.

24 Rupesinghe 2019: 3.

25 Onuoha, Tchie, and Zabala 2022.

26 United Nations Human Rights 2023.

Niger have repeatedly been accused of grave human rights and International humanitarian law violations: “Military forces deployed in the region are suspected of being responsible for 27 % of civilian deaths between April 2021 and March 2022.”²⁷

4 Geopolitical Considerations

The end of the liberal moment, the rise of China, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and an increase in authoritarianism in Africa are impacting on UN peacekeeping in diverse ways. However, so far all of these trends have mostly negative implications for UN peacekeeping.

China has chipped away at the liberal veneer of UN peacekeeping operations for some time, advocating for a cut in the budget for human rights officers in UN peacekeeping operations, and advocating against human rights language in UN Security Council mandates.²⁸ According to Lise M. Howard, “China’s rise poses challenges to contemporary notions of peacekeeping as a tool for furthering human rights and democratic norms.”²⁹

The Russian Wagner Group, a mercenary outfit with close ties to the Kremlin, is enjoying increasing popularity among African states, and is a key element of a resurgent Russia in Africa.³⁰ Increasingly assertive host regimes weary of UN liberal interventionism in, for example, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, and Mali have sought support from the Wagner Group.³¹ In Mali, the Wagner Group has allegedly been involved in various attacks resulting in more than 500 civilian casualties.³² Russia has long been critical of liberal interventionism. Discussing the G5S-JF at the UN Security Council in November 2022, Russia argued that “international assistance should be based on the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs and the principle of ‘African challenges, African solutions.’”³³

Among many African states, these are welcome developments. Democracies are on the decline on the African continent,³⁴ and electoral authoritarianism

27 The People’s Coalition for the Sahel 2022: 10; see also Human Rights Watch 2021, 2023.

28 Zürcher 2020; Charbonneau 2017; Harju 2019; Paddon Rhoads 2019; Katayanagi 2016.

29 Howard 2021, 212.

30 Ramani 2023.

31 See, for example, Doxsee 2022; ICG 2022.

32 Serwat et al. 2022.

33 UN 2022c.

34 Mo Ibrahim Foundation 2023.

is increasing in popularity.³⁵ According to Katharina P. Coleman and Brian L. Job, “African actors embrace robust protection, stabilization and counterterrorism activities, which China is willing to support within a ‘developmental peace’ framework, as long as state sovereignty is respected—priorities many African actors share.”³⁶ The implications of these trends are increasing pressure on UN peacekeeping in the “security marketplace” that weak states can turn to. Regional and ad hoc coalitions, as well as the Wagner Group present less liberal and more accommodating alternatives to UN peacekeeping.

5 Conclusions

The combined effects of endogenous and exogenous factors have led to a continuing decline of UN peacekeeping operations for most of the past decade. As we enter a period of increased geopolitical competition and UN multidimensional peacekeeping is going out of style, traditional observer missions deployed to relatively stable conflict situations may become more relevant as possible compromise solutions.³⁷ There is also space for the UN to continue its mediation work through the provision of its good offices and the deployment of special political missions.

Going forward, there is however a diminishing likelihood of deployment of UN multidimensional peacekeeping operations to engage in situations of active conflict. Instead, the trend of regional and ad hoc coalitions is likely to strengthen, focusing on counterterrorism and counterinsurgency. This will result in less intrusive missions in terms of human rights and international humanitarian law monitoring, with increased control and command of own forces, and increased commensurability between self-interest and the risk troops are exposed to. For the UN to remain relevant, these coalitions may receive logistical and administrative support by the UN peace operations machinery, dressed up with accountability fig leaves that are not able to cover up the human rights and international humanitarian law violations that these coalitions repeatedly will perpetrate.

35 See, for example, Morse 2018.

36 Coleman and Job 2021, 1468.

37 See, for example, Novosseloff 2022.

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