



THE SEARCH FOR LOST CONSENSUS

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Between the second half of July and the beginning of August over thirty people died (among them two Moroccan soldiers and two Indian policemen) during very violent riots that opposed civilians from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the “blue helmets” of MONUSCO (Mission des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation au Congo). Local civilians asked UN troops to leave the country and attacked several installations of the mission. The violence and the extent of the incidents, however, led to the suspicion that it was much more than spontaneous and uncoordinated initiatives. These incidents highlight the profound crises of consensus and legitimacy of these operations.

MONUSCO has the weak consensus of the government to operate, but has failed to build legitimacy and consensus among ordinary people, those most affected by an internal and international conflict that began with the end of the Marshal/President Joseph-Désiré Mobutu's regime in 1997 and has not yet been resolved.

The government of Kinshasa asked the UN to withdraw the mission back in 2010; and the UN has started to reduce it slowly, beginning in 2020, with a plan that should proceed with caution, given the unstable situation in the east of the immense country, the high number of military personnel involved, and the enormous logistical-operational installations and burden.

The protesters, meanwhile, claimed (and still affirm) that they wanted the UN to leave because it failed to protect civilians and ensure peace. As evidence of a situation that became very tense after the incidents, a UN military unit, confronted by a peaceful protest demonstration by civilians, opened fire on them, killing two and injuring over a dozen. This rather serious fact has embarrassed New York and has brought further pressure to bear on the request of the government of Kinshasa to speed up the end of the mission.

In reality, MONUSCO, heir to MONUC (deployed since 1999), is an entity in continuous evolution, having changed, often drastically, its mandate over the years, but always with the same objective—that of cooperating with the local government, contributing to the protection of the civilian population, protecting refugees from the violence of armed groups from the east, disarming the latter (through a special entity of the mission, the Force Intervention Brigade, established in 2017, albeit after much hesitation), and improving internal political dialogue. Many promises, and very few results.

President Felix Tshisekedi, elected in 2019, has an ambiguous attitude towards MONUSCO. His armed

and security forces are unable to face external and internal threats in the east, so he needs the "blue helmets" but wants to reduce their presence to the minimum necessary. And he has major problems of legitimacy inside the country, which makes dialogue with the UN even more difficult, which is not willing to appear even indirectly supporting ambiguous internal (and electoral) policies.

At the beginning of August, the Security Council met for consultations after the incidents and the Undersecretary General for Peace Operations, the French diplomat Jean-Pierre Lacroix, informed the Council about his visit to Kinshasa on 28-29 July, where he met with senior Congolese officials and UN personnel in the country. The meeting, sought by India, was held amidst heightened tensions between the DRC, Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda, accused by Kinshasa of hostile activities in the eastern region of Kivu through both the infiltration of regular military forces and the support for local armed groups, obscure entities such as M23 and ADF (Allied Democratic Forces) involved in the exploitation of rare earths, diamonds and more, in which the eastern region is very rich.

But the relationship between the UN and the host states is also flawed elsewhere. In Mali, the government's consensus for MINUSMA (Integrated Multidimensional Stabilization Mission) is equally weak. The government of Bamako delayed authorization for the rotation of troops of the mission for a whole month and only authorized it in the middle of August, with the widely expected result of accelerating the return of the other contingents of "blue helmets," such as now the Germans. Bamako also expelled the mission's deputy spokesperson (the government of Kinshasa did the same, immediately after the incidents in the DRC).

From 2020 on, the mission (which was activated in 2013), following a coup d'état, has been sailing in dire waters and is increasingly badly tolerated by the military junta (which is growing closer to Moscow). It has thus managed to speed up the departure of the French troops of the "Berkhane" operation, those of the European multinational mission "Takuba," and those of the EU training mission, EUTM-Mali. The recent debate at the UN Security Council on the MINUSMA renewal mandate initially stalled on freedom of movement in the country and on how to manage the reported increase in alleged human rights violations by the Malian armed forces and the presence of contractors, such as Russians from Wagner.

The "blue helmets" in Mali today operate in a political context for which their mandate is not suitable, with a diminishing benefit for the civilian population and with great risk for themselves: for eight consecutive years, MINUSMA was the most lethal in the world among UN operations in terms of those

fallen in its military ranks.

Protests in the DRC underline how the consensus of the populations, and not just the state, is central to the effective work of UN peacekeeping operations, while the turmoil over the terms of MINUSMA's deployment highlights how political issues, the inappropriate and the contextualized exercise of force, remain at the center of the debate on how to conceive and conduct peace operations.

If the member states (which ones? And on this question, a serious debate should take place) of the United Nations want multidimensional peacekeeping operations to survive, they should authorize peace operations that create consensus and support for peace and for their presence and objectives at multiple levels—including the state and its populations—along with the drafting of mandates that are anchored in meaningful and context-sensitive political processes which target diplomatic and humanitarian goals. United Nations peace operations are the most important contemporary tool for multilateral conflict management around the world and have historically distinguished themselves from other types of military interventions by adhering to three fundamental principles: the consensus of the parties; impartiality and the limited (and appropriate) use of force.

MONUSCO and MINUSMA, as well as MINUSCA, the United Nations mission in the Central African Republic (CAR), are large-scale peace operations, with stabilization mandates. These three missions involve the bulk of the “blue helmets” deployed around the world, but are also at the center of growing internal and external pressures that make their end, or in the best of cases, their resettlement, uncertain. Unlike the old missions that focused on maintaining peace agreements between warring parties, MONUSCO, MINUSMA and MINUSCA are all tasked with helping the state government deal with violent internal challenges and assert their leadership, reflecting the dramatic change in the nature of the conflicts that have emerged since the end of the Cold War, where the predominant conflicts are intra-state ones to the detriment, up to now, of inter-state ones.

In these missions, the UN is explicitly intervening on the side of the state, and the peacekeepers have been accused of using force in defense of state authority, which sometime lacks legitimacy. But peace operations that undertake offensive military action (applying Chapter VII of the UN Charter) defy the principles of impartiality and the limited use of force, leaving only consensus to distinguish UN operations from other types of military interventions. Consequently, consent matters a great deal.

Traditionally, consensus is based on the approval of the host government, even when the state itself

that is rescued by UN action is a notorious violator of the human (but also economic and social) rights of its population.

While MONUSCO today still operates with the consent of the Kinshasa government, it is clear that the civilian population is not very favorable to the presence of "blue helmets;" and this especially in the seething eastern region, where enormous natural wealth and interests of neighboring countries make the area explosive. The mission failed to address the security problems of civilian populations in the east; and for decades, thousands of soldiers have been rotated from half the world—but nothing has changed on the ground.

Furthermore, the behavior of international soldiers towards the civilian population that they should protect from violence is so deplorable that they open deep wounds due to serious and prolonged abuses, which can be easily exploited by those who want to target an exasperated population against the UN.

As a general aspiration, UN interventions are undertaken in the service of people, not just states. In one interpretation, a whole body of international obligations stems from the UN Charter's initial declaration that peoples, not states, make a pact to save subsequent generations from the scourge of war. In this interpretation, the UN mandate is not simply about defending state sovereignty and the preferences of member states, but about the security, dignity and protection of people—ideas that are reflected in the mandate to protect civilians, that each multidimensional mission has authorized since 1999, and received by the Security Council.

Local activists and scholars have argued that peace takes root only when international actors invest in local communities and when political solutions that center the concerns of the local population have a way to develop. Missions focused on state security rather than people's will and security explicitly make peacekeepers another potential source of instability in areas already fraught with threats to ordinary people. This more securitized and coercive version of peace operations runs counter to the United Nations' vision of peacekeeping and peacebuilding that emphasizes the "primacy of politics."

The Missions in Mali, DRC and CAR, on the other hand, act with the explicit consent of the host state in order to support and extend the power of the nation, often working alongside state forces, to counter the groups that it has identified as rebels.

In Mali, MINUSMA's sustainability was in question long before the military coups—as the UN Secretary-General's 2018 report noted, an independent analysis from that year concluded that the mission “was faced with a dilemma between the need to reform and reconstitute the Malian defense and security forces and at the same time support the existing forces in dealing with the current situation of stability,” and that only a “clear regional political framework” would make the mission's objectives achievable. And now, the cannot move freely; cannot investigate alleged violations of human rights; can rotate troops only after a month of suspension. Finally, while there is an underlying political process on paper, in practice it is empty.

Furthermore, the instability of regional security arrangements raises further questions about the mission's ability to implement its mandate. MINUSMA depended heavily on French, European, and African counter-terrorism operations in the Sahel, which had formed a unique architecture of external forces with over 21,000 troops deployed across the region. This architecture is in flux, having proved ineffective and largely unpopular (it must be admitted that the narrative of some media on the welcome given by local populations to international forces, wherever they are deployed, is a legend fueled by the needs of internal politics of many states that participate in those operations to make them acceptable to their public opinions, especially in case of a politically controversial operation and in case of sustained human losses).

Furthermore, the same states that formally invite the UN to deploy, very often have no other choice in order to avoid internal collapse; and many governments do not look favorably on foreign military circulating freely in their own territory.

Mali is not the first host state to be so openly hostile to the peacekeepers. Perhaps the best-known example is the United Nations operation in Sudan in the early 2000s, carried out without the consent of Khartoum's government, which did everything to sabotage its work and freedom of movement. But MINUSMA's mandate to stabilize Mali makes the situation unusual: the “blue helmets” are in the field to help the Malian government fight jihadists and terrorists, while they are accepted with increasing difficulty by the same government they are supposed to be helping (and this ill-will towards the “blue helmets” is present both in DRC and CAR, at government level and in local public opinion). The political context has changed to such a radical extent that MINUSMA may no longer be in a position to operate in its current form and mandate.

Renegotiations of this year's mandate at the United Nations Security Council also proved very difficult.

The transitional government and Russian mercenaries were accused of being involved in atrocities against civilians and Russia initially opposed the draft resolution to address the violations of human rights and local restrictions on MINUSMA movements; and an attenuated solution was reached to avoid Moscow's veto, which would have meant the total end of the mission; and, thus, the lesser evil was chosen.

UNSC, now more and more internally polarized, tends to simply renew the mandates and repeat the language and terms of commitment, when possible, instead of having to completely renegotiate the terms of an intervention; and this approach favors solutions of downside compromise. In the case of Mali, DRC and CAR, this approach places peacekeepers in an increasingly hostile environment, with little noticeable benefit, while leaving the door open to their near demise or (costly) irrelevance.

For these three missions, two potential options are open: either to be re-authorized as a more effective mission and with clear mandates, enforceable and clearly negotiated with host nations; or to terminate them. A third option is to prioritize the protection of civilians and document human rights violations, tasks that would require the consent which governments are clearly reluctant to give.

In more general terms, the protests in the DRC raise questions about the current nature and prospects of peace operations. They cannot do their jobs when the local population does not want them there; and UN operations without the consent of the local people are mere exercises to defend state sovereignty, not attempts to build lasting peace (and which therefore leave as soon as possible). And operating in dangerous circumstances without the consent of the host state or the ability to protect people from state violence or a clear peace to be maintained, as they are doing in Mali, DRC and CAR, risks further damaging the position of the UN and its residual prestige.

Building consensus at multiple levels is the key to the lasting success of UN peacekeeping operations and is the cornerstone for finding lasting political solutions to conflicts. The UN has tools and techniques to promote local peacebuilding efforts; and focusing these tools and techniques to build consensus for UN presence in local communities should be a key part of any mission. And, where host state consent is not possible, humanitarian, and diplomatic goals—not security goals—should be the central axis of UN efforts in a conflict. Otherwise, UN peacekeeping operations risk being left in a quagmire between divergent and unattainable goals, such as protecting people and solving security problems.

But if the UN is in the process of losing consensus in Africa, the USA, one of the most important states with the organization (and one of several) is actively looking for it, although the results are not very convincing. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken was on tour in Africa, with the announcement of the Biden administration's policy towards the continent as a highlight of the visit. The new strategy was launched during the South African leg of the tour that also took Blinken to DRC and Rwanda, from August 7-12.

In Blinken's country-specific discussions in South Africa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda are not to be defined as irrelevant, but as part of the US global strategy to contain Russian and Chinese pressure, and consolidate the anti-Moscow and Beijing approach in every sphere, including that of the United Nations, considered by Washington as basic and legitimizing.

However, it is the announcement of this new policy for the entire continent which is the most significant development, with far-reaching ramifications in the immediate, medium, and long term. It is the tradition of most American administrations to set up political and economic projects and initiatives for Africa, whether they are well-structured and articulated or simply ad hoc and disordered. The importance of these policies is that they shape relationships through trade and investment, political and diplomatic engagements, assistance through various humanitarian agencies and initiatives, and military relations.

According to an improper narrative, Donald Trump's administration (2016-2020) would have made Africa disappear from its global political agenda. To be fair, the Trump administration hadn't completely neglected Africa. One of the highlights of the Trump administration's engagement with Africa was the 2018 launch of Prosper Africa, an inter-agency entity that provides a coordination mechanism for trade and investment programs. That Prosper Africa continues to exist during the Biden era, so ideologically polarized against the Trump one, shows that something good for Africa also came from the Trump administration.

However, the Trump administration did not engineer a global strategy, aside from casual statements by officials at the time—such as former National Councilor John Bolton—and often based on the United States' exclusive need to stand up to China and Russia on the continent. But essentially there is a lack of a constant approach, replaced by moments of interest and phases of stagnation.

The latest US global strategy towards Africa was formulated ten years ago by the Barrack Obama

administration. That policy prioritized strengthening democratic institutions; stimulating economic growth, trade, and investment; promoting peace and security; and, promoting opportunities and development through initiatives in the fields of health, food safety, climate change. While these issues remain relevant to Africa-US relations in 2022, political, economic, security and geopolitical circumstances have changed exponentially in the United States, Africa and around the world.

During the first months of Biden's presidency, there was optimism in Africa about better relations with the then new administration. Some of the optimisms have been bolstered by the appointment of personalities believed to be in tune with African causes and interests, starting with Linda Thomas-Greenfield, US Ambassador to the United Nations.

While analysts, scholars and strategists await formal politics, there are first indications on the key aspects, which recall what was proposed by Washington on the occasion of the Pan-American Summit in Los Angeles and Biden's trip to Korea and Japan: democracy, good governance and respect for human rights, security support (through AFRICOM). But on the economic front, the policy should include "economic prosperity," and to be inclusive; and it should consider not only the interests of American companies, which made offers to the Indo-Pacific and Latin America rather weak.

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