

Case Study 1

THE POLITICAL STRATEGY OF UN PEACEKEEPING

in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

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This case study was developed to inform *The Political Practice of Peacekeeping* by Adam Day, Aditi Gorur, Victoria K. Holt and Charles T. Hunt - a policy paper exploring how the UN develops and implements political strategies to address some of the most complex and dangerous conflicts in the world. The other case studies examine the political strategies of the UN peacekeeping missions in the the Central African Republic, Darfur, South Sudan and Mali.

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Initially deployed in the midst of the Second Congolese War in 1999, the UN peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is one of the longest serving missions in the UN today. Over the course of its deployment, the mission has undergone dramatic changes, beginning as a small ceasefire observer mission and eventually swelling into a large multi-dimensional presence with an ambitious electoral support, State-building, stabilization, protection, human rights and national reform mandate. The growth and ambition of the mission corresponded with seismic shifts in the Congolese political and security landscape, from the post-war consolidation of peace, through three elections cycles, several major security crises and tectonic shifts in the positions of DRC's influential neighbours. Today, the Security Council has indicated that UN peacekeeping in the DRC – at least in its current form – is coming to a close, with an anticipated three-years until the mission draws down and exits.

Drawing on an extensive literature review and interviews with dozens of UN officials, this study examines the political role of UN peacekeeping in the DRC, focusing on three key moments in the mission's lifespan: (1) the mission's support to the 2006 elections and its immediate aftermath; (2) the shift towards more robust use of force following the March 23 (M23) rebellion in 2013-14; and (3) the 2016 constitutional crisis, leading to the 2018 decision to put in place a gradual exit of the mission from the DRC. The study will pay particular attention to the ways

in which the Security Council's mandates during these watershed moments were translated into political strategies and/or approaches by the UN Secretariat and mission leadership. This report contributes to a joint United Nations University/Stimson Center research project on the political role of UN peacekeeping, in support of the Action for Peacekeeping initiative by the UN's Department of Peace Operations (DPO).

The study is divided into four sections. First, it provides a brief overview of the evolution of the mandates of United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC, its French acronym) and the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), noting the key shifts in the size, responsibilities and focus of the mission.¹ Based on this contextual overview, the second section narrows in on the three key moments mentioned above, describing the process by which new or substantially changed mandates were translated into political strategies and approaches on the ground. Here, issues of substance and of process matter: *What was the content of the approach adopted by the mission, and what steps were taken to arrive at a particular strategy?* The third section captures some of the overarching trends and findings about MONUC/MONUSCO's political role in the DRC over its lifespan. The final section draws lessons and policy findings from the DRC context that could be applicable to a broader audience in peace operations.



The Evolution of the UN's Mandate in the Congo

The UN's mandate in the DRC evolved and expanded dramatically from the moment when MONUC was first deployed as a 500-strong military observer mission in 1999.² At the time, the principal task of the mission was support to the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement that attempted to end the Second Congolese War, via monitoring and reporting on compliance by the signatories to the agreement. However, after only one year and facing enormous security threats as the Lusaka Agreement began to disintegrate, MONUC was given a Chapter VII (Action with Respect to the Peace, Breaches of the Peace and Acts of Aggression) mandate, a higher troop ceiling of roughly 5,500 troops, and a broader set of tasks related to the voluntary disarmament, demobilization, repatriation, resettlement or reintegration of foreign armed groups (DDRRR).³

The mission was also provided the mandate to use deadly force to protect those in imminent danger, one of the first protection mandates in peacekeeping.

MONUC played an important political role – alongside UN special envoys and other international heavyweights – in guiding negotiations that resulted in the Global and Inclusive Agreement signed by all major parties in December 2002, formally ending the civil war. This agreement elevated MONUC to a guarantor of the transitional Government and a coordinator of the donor support to Kinshasa, which attempted to demobilize 130,000 combatants and build democratically elected national institutions.⁴ This role was reflected in MONUC's 2003 mandate, in which it was tasked to chair the International

Committee in Support of the Transition (CIAT) overseeing implementation of the peace agreement.⁵ The mandate in 2003 also included a role for MONUC in facilitating the DDRRR process and protecting civilians.⁶ In recognition of the critical role of the region—and the fact that both Rwanda and Uganda had national forces on Congolese soil—MONUC was also tasked to support regional confidence-building measures amongst Congo, Uganda and Rwanda.

Over the next two years—from 2003 through 2004—MONUC’s security focus and troop strength steadily increased, first in response to the escalating crisis in Ituri,⁷ and then again following the 2004 seizure of Bukavu by the Congrès national pour la défense du peuple (CNDP) led by Laurent Nkunda.⁸ By 2005, MONUC’s troop strength had grown to 15,600, with a mandate to support the Congolese army in operations to disarm militias across the Kivu and work with the newly appointed Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for the Great Lakes Region to find “lasting solutions” to the security problems there.⁹

Likely the highpoint of MONUC’s political role was its support to the 2006 national elections, which was part of a broadened mandate that included technical/logistical support to elections, support to the adoption of legislation, and security sector reform (SSR).¹⁰ The mission was unable to move forward with its legislative and SSR mandate, however, because soon after winning the presidency, Joseph Kabila began to sideline MONUC and within two years began pushing for its draw down in the DRC. Security concerns during this period also took centre stage: a dispute between losing presidential candidate Jean-Pierre Bemba and President Kabila spilled over into violence in Kinshasa and elsewhere, while Laurent Nkunda’s CNDP escalated its attacks in North Kivu. Large-scale fighting between 2006 and 2008 led to the displacement of an additional million people and contributed to the proliferation of armed groups across eastern Congo.

First mapped out in 2007 as a path towards an orderly exit from the DRC, MONUC increasingly began to focus on stabilization. By 2009, this work had grown to include operations to extend State

authority, support to key reforms in the military and the police and securing mining areas from attacks by armed groups.¹¹ In 2010, this was formalized by the Security Council, which added the term “stabilization” to the newly named MONUSCO, authorized a troop ceiling of nearly 20,000 soldiers and put in place a two-prong set of priorities for the mission: protection of civilians (PoC) and stabilization.¹² Over the next three years, this meant MONUSCO was increasingly focused on the security situation in eastern Congo, working to clear areas of armed group activity, build State capacities and coordinate donor support to national institutions. The mission also provided technical and logistical support to the 2011 national elections, in which Kabila won the presidency for a second time.

In late 2012, a newly formed group calling themselves the March 23 Movement (M23)¹³ attacked and temporarily took control of the eastern capital Goma. Faced with an immediate threat to the stability of eastern Congo, the Security Council authorized the deployment of the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB), a brigade of roughly 2,000 troops drawn from Malawi, Tanzania and South Africa that deployed in April 2013 and played an important role in the defeat of M23 the following October. For the first time in UN peacekeeping, a mission was explicitly authorized to use offensive force, rather than adhering to the well-known principle of defensive use of force.¹⁴ This so-called “neutralization” mandate came to dominate much of MONUSCO’s tenure from 2014 onward, creating heightened expectations of the mission’s ability to impact the operational strength of the major armed groups and protect civilians under imminent threat.

The M23 rebellion also opened a political door for MONUSCO, allowing the mission to play an important role in the regional talks in 2013 that resulted in the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework (PSCF). For the first time since 2006, the mission was mandated to support something akin to a peace agreement, a broad regional commitment to address the institutional weaknesses that gave rise to insecurity in eastern Congo, and to address the chronic problem of regional interference on Congolese territory. The presence of the FIB – composed of some of the most important players in the region – was also

an opportunity for the mission to play a more central role in the political landscape of the DRC.

However, a number of factors intervened to inhibit this political role for MONUSCO. First, the PSCF itself quickly became bogged down in bureaucratic processes, unable to move beyond general statements of intent into implementable reforms and investments. This was in part because Kinshasa continued to resist any outside role in its own institutional reform, including by the UN, and also due to a gradual worsening of relations between Kabila and the powerbrokers in the region.¹⁵ Recurrent disputes between MONUSCO and the Congolese Government about the appropriate targets for the FIB led to a deterioration in relations between the mission and Kinshasa and a lack of progress against the armed groups. At one point in 2014, a dispute between the mission and the Government over joint operations against armed groups in eastern Congo led to a near total severing of relations for a period. Taken together, these dynamics meant the PSCF was less of a political conduit than had been envisaged initially, and the political role for MONUSCO remained extremely limited.

By 2016, the DRC had reached another crisis point as presidential elections had been delayed well beyond the constitutional period and Kabila appeared unwilling to step down. Continued proliferation of armed groups in eastern Congo, along with steadily worsening human rights conditions around political space, placed MONUSCO in a difficult position. On the

one hand, the Security Council had emphasized the mission's PoC mandate, placing it above the stabilization and political priorities. This reflected the reality that the mission was not a heavyweight in the political processes in Kinshasa, and the expectation from the Council that the UN's assets were best oriented to the security situation in the East.

At the same time, momentum behind the mission's exit from the DRC began to grow. In 2016, the Council requested that the mission again enter into a strategic dialogue with the Government over the conditions for the mission's withdrawal from the country. Though no agreement was ever fully reached, the strongly contested 2018 elections provided the key impetus to move more quickly towards the mission's exit. Following Felix Tshisekedi's ascent to the presidency in early 2019, the Council mandated an independent strategic review of the mission, aimed at charting a course for the draw down of the mission. This review described an ambitious national reform agenda that would need to succeed if the DRC was to move into a phase of greater stability and laid out a sequence of steps for the mission to withdraw over a three-year period.¹⁶

As of the writing of this report, the mission had developed an exit strategy for leaving the country over the coming years, hoping to reconfigure the UN presence in country to help address the challenges that are sure to persist well beyond the lifespan of peacekeeping in the DRC.¹⁷



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Three Turning Points in MONUC/MONUSCO's Lifespan in the DRC

As the above overview of MONUC/MONUSCO's lifespan in the DRC demonstrates, the mission has evolved significantly since its initial deployment in 1999. Rather than attempt to capture every new mandate established by the Security Council, this section examines three critical junctures, exploring in each how the mandate was translated into a political strategy by the Secretariat and the mission. The first moment covers the 2006-7 period, during which MONUC provided invaluable support to the elections process, continued to play a key role as chair of the committee overseeing the post-war transition, but then experienced a significant

drop in political relevance in the immediate aftermath of Kabila's election to the presidency. The second subsection focuses on the M23 takeover of Goma in 2013 and the Council's decision to increase MONUSCO's military capabilities. Here, the involvement of key regional players in the FIB may have provided the mission temporarily with greater political leverage in the DRC and the region, though this soon dissolved. The final moment explores the constitutional crisis from 2016-18, during which the Security Council appeared to re-emphasize the mission's security roles in country, recognizing that the African Union (AU) was playing a far more direct (if not particularly effective) role in the political

trajectory of the country. It concludes with the Council's call for a strategic review that would frame the mission's exit from the country.

2006-7

A Brief High Water Mark for MONUC

The lead up to the 2006 elections demonstrated a moment of clarity for MONUC's political role in the DRC. From 2003, the mission had been mandated to convene the International Committee for Support to the Transition (CIAT), a body with broad oversight of the electoral process and the other key elements of the transition. "MONUC had a formal role in convening the CIAT, a huge amount of political autonomy to urge the main political players in Kinshasa, and directly intervened to resolve disputes between the parties," a former MONUC official stated.¹⁸ This central role was reflected in reports of the Secretary-General at the time, which stated that the key role of MONUC was a political one, focused on building confidence in the transition and bolstering the nascent Government.¹⁹

Those involved in MONUC's political work in the pre-electoral period flagged three factors that contributed to the mission's relevance and leverage. First, the clarity of the role articulated for MONUC within the transitional agreement, along with the critical need to have the elections take place in a credible and timely manner: "We were at the centre of the process, in the room the whole time, the donors and the Government responded to our calls because they knew the elections would not happen without us," a UN official noted.²⁰ Another former MONUC official added that electoral support was "the kind of back to basics work that peacekeeping is able to do," noting that the expansion of the mission's mandate into areas like security sector reform and stabilization "placed the UN in a position of not knowing what it could deliver, and not knowing what political actors were needed to get the job done."²¹ This point was echoed in reports by the Secretary-General to the Security Council at the time, which spoke of a "wide gap" between expectations and reality in terms of PoC in particular.²² In contrast, the task of elections

support was "something the mission leadership and the Secretariat easily understood, a concrete and achievable deliverable that was clearly at the top of the Council's priority list."²³

The second factor that appeared to bolster MONUC's political leverage was effective use of the full resources of the broader UN family in-country. Ross Mountain, the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) and head of the UN Country Team (UNCT) in the DRC, was viewed as a dynamic and entrepreneurial UN official, able to pull together the UNCT around a common approach to the elections. According to one UN official involved in electoral support at the time, "[Deputy SRSG] Mountain put together a game plan to support the elections process with every asset in the country team, with the UN Development Programme and MONUC at the centre. This meant that the political actors in Kinshasa had to rely on the UN for support and had to listen to us when we gave advice or sent messages."²⁴

The third factor was the high-profile and central role that SRSG William Swing personally carved out for MONUC in the lead up to elections. A seasoned American official with a deep history in the DRC, Swing came into the role with what one expert called "unprecedented gravitas" and an impressive set of contacts amongst Congo's elite.²⁵ "Swing was able to convene [the CIAT] and draw the highest level officials from the Government and the major embassies," a former UN official described. "He was known to the parties, and there was a sense that he could carry the big players like the US and France."²⁶ SRSG Swing bolstered MONUC's leverage ahead of the elections by facilitating the establishment of the International Committee of Eminent Persons, chaired by former President of Mozambique, Joachim Chissano, and composed of highly-respected senior officials.²⁷ When tensions broke out between President Kabila and Vice-President Bemba over the elections results, SRSG Swing was able to arrange for direct contact between the two, while helping to coordinate messages by the Eminent Persons Committee to urge restraint and offer Bemba safe passage out of the country.²⁸

Internally, MONUC did not have an overarching political strategy guiding its work in the run-up



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to the election. The mission's Political Affairs Department (PAD) did develop a series of papers that helped to bring the mission together around a common approach to the elections and, in this respect, PAD "helped keep the mission focused on its political role."²⁹ However, as described by one former MONUC official, "[SRSG] Swing carried the strategy around in his head. He knew Congo better than most of us, and he had the network of connections that allowed him to manoeuvre the terrain there. We [PAD] were there to support him, but we never charted out a course on paper for the whole mission's political role."³⁰

While the mission may not have had a formal document entitled "political strategy," PAD did play a far more central role in MONUC than in later years of the mission. "PAD was the heartbeat of the mission then," one former MONUC staff member noted. "Political [Affairs] set the direction for the mission, and it was easy because we were all centred around implementing a political agreement."³¹ This meant that the mission was also largely in charge of developing its own approach, without much direction from the Secretariat. "Under [SRSG] Swing, the Secretariat

was very much in the back seat, in support of the mission, but we didn't issue guidance when it came to strategic decisions," a former UN Secretariat staff member noted.

The high water mark of the UN's political leverage did not last much beyond the 2006 elections and, in fact, may have begun to erode on some fronts prior to the polls. According to several experts, the elections were also the overriding goal of the Security Council: "Once we had overseen a successful election, the Council and Kabila were ready to declare victory and wind down the mission," one former MONUC official said.³² Soon after Kabila took office, the Secretary-General appointed Alan Doss as SRSG, a seasoned British official with a very successful track record in planning the wind down of the peacekeeping operation Sierra Leone and in establishing the exit benchmarks for the mission in Liberia. "But things didn't go to plan," Mr Doss noted. "The elections solved one political problem, but they had created another one in the marginalized Tutsi community that soon became [Laurent] Nkunda's CNDP uprising."³³ The combination of a deeply contested electoral outcome and a rapid rise of

insecurity in eastern Congo meant that MONUC had to quickly pivot towards its protection mandate, moving troops and attention away from Kinshasa to confront armed group threats in the east. And it meant that instead of focusing on a narrowly drawn path towards draw down and exit, MONUC became even more deeply drawn into multidimensional peacekeeping in the DRC.

If the pre-electoral period was characterized by a fairly clear (if extraordinarily difficult) mandate to support elections as part of a transition, the post-electoral moment was far murkier in terms of MONUC's mandate and priorities. Faced with growing insecurity across the country, a nascent Government lacking viable State institutions beyond major urban areas, and a highly fluid regional context, the Security Council began to add dozens of tasks to MONUC's mandate.³⁴ "The mandate ballooned," Doss noted. "The Council pushed for more focus on protection and humanitarian issues, Kabila thought the UN should only be there to defeat the CNDP, and we kept getting sucked into one crisis after the next."³⁵ Rather than come on board to oversee the exit of MONUC, SRS G Doss was tasked by the Council to engineer one of its most rapid expansions as a raft of new tasks were thrust upon the mission.

According to several former MONUC officials, there was little scope to develop an overarching political strategy in this context, given the multiple demands placed on the mission by the Council, the need to address the immediate security risks in eastern Congo, and the lack of interest on the part of Kinshasa. "There was a blurring of the idea of mandate and strategy," SRS G Doss said, "we were so focused on moving troops out, protecting key sites, and handling the regional players that we never developed an integrated political strategy for eastern Congo. MONUC focused on the mechanics rather than the politics of protection."³⁶ This was reflected in the Council mandates at the time, which stressed that the mission's highest priority should be addressing the protection threats in the Kivus, with only tertiary mention of a political track to address the conflicts.³⁷

The absence of an overarching written political strategy did not inhibit MONUC from engaging in important and constructive ways before

and during SRS G Doss' tenure. Good access to President Kabila allowed MONUC to help broker the Nairobi Communiqué between Kinshasa and Kigali, committing both parties to rein in their respective proxy forces in the region. Between 2007 and 2008, the mission played important roles in a peace agreement between the CNDP and the Government,³⁸ and supported a track-two initiative between the Government and the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FLDR).³⁹ In early 2008, this work resulted in the signature of the Goma Accords, an explicitly political attempt to resolve the CNDP crisis. While the accords did not hold, this was not for lack of effort on the mission's part. And it should be noted, given the later fall of Goma, that the Goma Accords likely prevented a serious offensive on the city at the time.

According to several former MONUC and Secretariat staff, this political work was enabled by a positive and relatively hands-off approach by the Secretariat. "During [SRS G] Doss' tenure, the Secretariat saw itself as an enabler of whatever the mission wanted to do, we didn't try to issue any top-down guidance to him," a former member of the Great Lakes Team noted. "Headquarters saw itself as supporting the mission, not guiding it."⁴⁰ Several UN officials highlighted the importance of this light touch by the Secretariat, noting that the mission's leadership was broadly trusted with the strategic direction of the mission, even as the number of tasks ballooned upward.

2013-14 ————— MONUSCO Goes on the Offensive

The second moment in MONUSCO's lifespan was triggered by the 2013 attack and takeover of Goma by the M23 Movement, a group of disaffected former CNDP members that felt betrayed by a failed peace process a few years before.⁴¹ Already before the fall of Goma, the mission had significantly reoriented away from Kinshasa, prioritizing PoC and extension of State authority in the volatile eastern provinces. But the attack—demonstrating that the State could not hold its eastern capital against a rebel group—constituted a shock to the region and

the Security Council. In response, in April 2013 the Council authorized the FIB that provided with the first explicit offensive use of force mandate in peacekeeping.⁴² “The Council was in emergency mode when it authorized the FIB,” a representative of a Council Member State noted. “It saw Goma as a domino that could fall and cause all of Congo to collapse, so its overriding concern was to get MONUSCO into top gear on the military front. Everything was focused on the force.”⁴³

The new mandate for MONUSCO slightly preceded the arrival of a new SRSG for the mission, Martin Kobler, a German diplomat who had led the UN mission in Iraq and served as Deputy SRSG in Afghanistan previously. His arrival, on the heels of the defeat of M23 and deployment of the FIB, led to a rapid change in the overall strategy of the mission. “SRSG Kobler was very much influenced by the provincial reconstruction process in Afghanistan,” a MONUSCO official who had served at the time noted. “He wanted to quickly extend State authority into so-called ungoverned spaces and deliver rapid dividends to the people.”⁴⁴ The Islands of Stability concept—which was quickly put into place by SRSG Kobler as the overall Mission Concept—indeed appeared strongly influenced by counter-insurgency operations in places like Afghanistan. Following the mantra “shape, clear, hold, build,” the Islands of Stability envisioned UN peacekeepers driving armed groups from key areas, holding territory against incursions, and helping to create the conditions for the establishment of viable State institutions.⁴⁵

In fact, the Islands of Stability concept was also largely the mission’s political strategy at the time.⁴⁶ “[SRSG] Kobler saw the Islands of Stability as the way to partner with the Government, to show that MONUSCO had a value added,” a MONUSCO official stated. “If the mission could help build State capacity in eastern Congo, then other national reforms – things like security sector reform, improved human rights, elections – would more easily follow.”⁴⁷ As laid out in the Mission Concept at the time, MONUSCO had three interrelated priorities: PoC, stabilization, and implementation of the regional PSCF.⁴⁸ Here, the political objectives—security sector reform, political dialogue and empowerment of civil society— were largely identified under

the PSCF. Importantly, the Mission Concept described this as a sequential set of activities in three steps: protection, then stabilization, then longer-term political reforms.⁴⁹ “The political stuff came last in Kobler’s book,” a former member of MONUSCO’s Political Affairs Division noted. “The approach he created for the mission was all about showing boots on the ground advancing against the enemy.”⁵⁰

The FIB was meant to play a crucial role in this approach, targeting priority armed groups together with the national army, reducing the threat posed to the State, and creating the space for the development of national institutions. Moreover, the FIB was to send a strong signal that the regional powerhouses were invested in DRC’s stability, and ready to take meaningful steps to implement the PSCF. “This included on the political front,” a UN official in New York noted. “Having regional players on the ground and more willing to use their weight in Kinshasa was meant to give greater leverage to the UN when it came to convincing Kabila to adhere to the constitution and implement the PSCF.”⁵¹

According to several former and current MONUSCO officials, Kobler’s approach to developing and implementing the Mission Concept was to “make decisions first and ask questions later.” In a short period of time, he had put in place the Islands of Stability strategy, introduced a large-scale shift of staff from the Kinshasa headquarters to a range of field offices in the east, and pushed hard with the Government for more robust action against the FDLR. “He was an SRSG who wanted to be seen to be making a difference from the outset,” a former UN official said, highlighting the strong public communication element to the Islands of Stability concept.⁵² Part of the political role of MONUSCO at the time was to be more visible, making frequent statements to the press, and raising the profile of the UN in-country. Within the mission, too, there were frequent internal communications on progress in the Islands of Stability work, weekly updates sent around to all staff and a slogan (*Peace It!*) meant to give a sense of enthusiasm and a forward-leaning posture.

According to several Congolese politicians, this high-profile role for MONUSCO was a double-edged sword. “It was good that the UN was

publicly focused on the armed groups in the east,” said a senior official in Government, “but there was too much in the press that was negative about the Government. We began to lose confidence in MONUSCO very quickly.”⁵³ This loss of confidence reached a crisis point in late 2014, when MONUSCO wished to ride the momentum of the M23 defeat and deploy the FIB against the FDLR (the top priority armed group identified by the Security Council at the time).⁵⁴ Neutralizing the FDLR was not only a military objective but a political one for MONUSCO: President Kagame had played a crucial role in the defeat of the M23 and would have been eager to see the FDLR weakened in response.⁵⁵ “One of the key political roles of the FIB was to keep positive regional momentum going too,” a former MONUSCO official said. “If the mission could put pressure on the FDLR, it would have opened up the possibility of broader regional deals, maybe the repatriation of the FDLR to Rwanda, and real progress towards our goal of stabilizing the east.”⁵⁶

However, the Kabila Government was opposed to any robust military action against the FDLR, in part in recognition of the group’s role in defeating the M23. “We never agreed to fight the FDLR at the time, and it was politically impossible for us to conduct joint operations with MONUSCO so quickly after M23,” a Congolese Government official said.⁵⁷ When, in late 2014, MONUSCO’s Force Commander publicly announced that operations against the FDLR would commence in the coming months, the Government reacted strongly against the decision.⁵⁸ Kabila quickly announced that Generals Fall Sikabwe and Bruno Mandevu had been tasked with key operational command roles in the joint FDLR operations. Both generals had been “red listed” by MONUSCO’s Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP) based on credible findings that they had perpetrated serious human rights abuses during earlier assignments.

According to MONUSCO’s human rights policy, the “red list” was considered an absolute barrier to military cooperation. Following announcements by both SRSK Kobler and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations that MONUSCO would not undertake joint operations while the two generals were involved, the relationship between the mission and the Government

soured rapidly.⁵⁹ “Kabila had painted us into a corner,” a former MONUSCO official noted. “We had gone public with the FDLR, so he went public with the red flagged generals.”⁶⁰ This incident seriously affected the relationship between the Government and MONUSCO, leading to a long lull in joint operations, but perhaps more importantly a lack of access and traction with key political figures in Kinshasa. A former MONUSCO official stated, “After the ‘red generals,’ MONUSCO was pretty burned with the Government. We couldn’t get a meeting with Kabila anymore, the senior officials were dismissive of us, and we had a much harder time pushing for the bigger political reform agenda.”⁶¹

An open question at the end of SRSK Kobler’s tenure was how to evaluate the FIB’s neutralization role in eastern Congo. On the one hand, it was seen as crucial to efforts to limit armed groups in eastern Congo, and increasingly central to the overall PoC approach by MONUSCO. The FIB was also meant to be a political tool for the mission, a clear statement that regional powers were invested in DRC’s stability and ready to use their weight to achieve progress on the PSCF and other commitments. According to several experts in MONUSCO and within the expert community, the FIB simply did not deliver that political weight to the mission. “It was like being in a chess game and you’re given an extra queen, so the expectations go up, but after a couple years of her not improving your position on the board, you start to wonder why you went through all that trouble.”

2016-2018 --- A Constitutional Crisis

In 2016, the DRC was facing a major constitutional crisis. President Kabila, who was serving his second term, was unwilling to step down and appeared more focused on placing obstacles in the way of national elections due at the end of the year. Relations with the international community were fraying fast, as major donors and regional partners became increasingly frustrated at the lack of progress towards a democratic transition, despite repeated assurances by the Government. Sensing potential weakness, opposition parties began to speak out more stridently, holding large-

scale protests and calling for regime change, against which the State security forces often responded with repressive tactics and use of force. Armed groups were becoming increasingly politicized, violence levels were on the rise in much of eastern Congo and a new uprising in the central Kasai region was straining the capacities of the Government and the UN to respond.⁶²

Facing likely delays in the presidential elections and a related risk to the broader stability of the DRC, the Security Council's renewal of MONUSCO's mandate was notable for elevating the political role of the mission above that of stabilization.⁶³ Whereas in 2015, support to elections was positioned below protection and stabilization in the mandate (and indeed compartmentalized as a separate section), in 2016 the Council reconfigured the mandate to include a more comprehensive "political situation" area, placing it above stabilization. The broad "political situation" mandate for MONUSCO included support to political dialogue amongst Congolese stakeholders, monitoring human rights in the context of elections, provision of technical assistance and logistical support to elections, working to bring to justice those responsible for egregious human rights violations, provision of Good Offices to the Government to promote human and civil rights, and work to end child recruitment.⁶⁴ "They [the Security Council] saw the Kabila Government backsliding on the elections and wanted to make a clear link between political space and the credibility of the electoral process," a former MONUSCO official noted.⁶⁵

By 2016, however, MONUSCO's mandate had become an over-adorned Christmas tree, with more than 25 operational paragraphs and, according to some counts, upward of 50 discrete tasks. Even within the PoC section (which received the highest priority by the Council), there were seven sub-priority areas, covering a wide range of activities from physical protection to Good Offices to DDR. "How was the mission meant to prioritize when the Council threw everything at us?" a former MONUSCO official said. "It was a recipe for confusion."⁶⁶ At the working level, some members of the Council agreed: "MONUSCO was a case of a mission where every year we had a discussion about what was really needed, and instead of paring away to get to that priority, we just added another set of tasks on. It was because

each Council member had tasks they needed to keep in, so we could never reduce."⁶⁷ This had in fact been recognized by mission leadership as early as 2010, when SRS G Doss had pushed for a strategic review to develop a prioritized mandate, but debates over protection and draw down took centre stage.⁶⁸

The addition of the "political situation" section in the mandate appeared to suffer from the same Christmas tree phenomenon. "The Council jotted down a long list of things MONUSCO should do, but there was no real sense of the actual role the mission should be playing through the constitutional crisis," a UN expert noted.⁶⁹ This was in part because MONUSCO did not formally have a clear role in the processes established in Kinshasa. The National Dialogue process set up to resolve the electoral impasse was chaired by President Kabila and facilitated by an AU-appointed envoy, whereas the UN (both MONUSCO and the Regional Envoy) played only a fairly vague supportive role.⁷⁰ A member of the Permanent Three on the Security Council summarized, "We [the Council] realized that MONUSCO was not in a good position to deliver the elections, or even get much traction pushing hard for them, so we used the mandate more as a sign of what we wanted out of the process itself: we wanted a credible, peaceful process, and MONUSCO was the eyes and ears of the international community."⁷¹

Soon after SRS G Maman Sidikou, a Nigerien diplomat with deep experience in the African Union, took the helm of MONUSCO, he instituted a mission leadership process to translate the 2016 Council mandate into a Mission Concept. This took the form of a two-day retreat of the senior leadership, a consultative process across the mission and some consultations with the UNCT. In terms of process, this was an almost entirely field-driven Mission Concept, with the Great Lakes team in the Secretariat only consulted after a near-final version had been completed, though the Secretariat formally approved the final draft.

The 2016 Mission Concept reflected a high degree of scepticism that the elections process would move forward within the envisaged timeframe, but placed the highest priority on the mission's support to a credible, peaceful process within the two-year horizon of the strategy.⁷² In the



section dedicated to support to the political process, the Concept largely restated the Security Council resolution, indicating that the mission would use its Good Offices to facilitate dialogue, promote and protect political space, engage with civil society and provide direct assistance to the electoral authorities.⁷³ But it also identified areas of joint action with the country team around elections – particularly the UN Development Programme – and contained an annex that provided specific guidance on how the more general aspects of the Concept should be taken forward.

The Mission Concept was also followed by a more in-depth process to develop implementation plans in every field office, led by the Senior Stabilization Advisor and overseen by the Deputy SRSG for Operations and Rule of Law. In each office plan, specific provisions were included concerning how the office would work to promote political space, support elections and take forward other key provisions in the Mission Concept. “We tried to turn the high-level mandate language of the resolutions and the [Mission] Concept into a workable day-to-day plan for each office,” a former MONUSCO staff member described.⁷⁴

Importantly, the Mission Concept also tied the electoral process to MONUSCO’s exit from the DRC. The Kabila Government had long been demanding that the mission withdraw and saw the end of peacekeeping as a key signal that the country had moved into a new phase. During SRSG Kobler’s tenure, a “Strategic Dialogue” process had been set up between the Government and MONUSCO, to negotiate the terms of an eventual withdrawal from the DRC, though no

formal agreement was reached. As such, the withdrawal of the mission constituted “one of the few points of leverage that MONUSCO ha[d] in Kinshasa.”⁷⁵ The Mission Concept articulated a three phase withdrawal vision for MONUSCO, the first phase of which ended with the holding of credible elections. The second phase, in which MONUSCO would begin significant reductions in its troop presence in eastern Congo, would only take place following credible, peaceful elections. “This idea of making MONUSCO’s exit contingent upon elections was a way to send a signal to the Government and all the parties, and it was a way to build human rights and political space into the mission’s eventual withdrawal plan,” a former MONUSCO official noted.⁷⁶

In this respect, MONUSCO’s Mission Concept appeared to go beyond the Council mandate, at least in terms of making political conditions clearly part of the mission’s eventual exit from the country. Resolution 2277, for example, focused more on the security targets to be achieved for the reduction of the force presence, leaving the more complex indicators around political space and elections to be decided between the mission and the Government. “The Mission Concept was a key preparation for our approach to the Strategic Dialogue with the Government,” a MONUSCO official described. “It showed that we would demand something broader than just improved security for the draw down of the mission.”⁷⁷

For the first time, and on the request of the Council, the Mission Concept also included “tailored strategies” for addressing the threat posed by armed groups in eastern Congo.⁷⁸ Focused primarily on the priority groups (FDLR as well as three others: LRA, ADF and FRPI), these



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strategies laid out how the mission’s military approach would complement a longer-term political solution for each group. Here, the goal was to embed the neutralization operations in a broader strategy that would work alongside stabilization and political interventions to address the root causes of conflict. Moreover, the strategies attempted to link what had been seen as peripheral security concerns in eastern Congo to the political elite in Kinshasa. “We all knew that armed groups in the east were part of a power network stretching from Kinshasa into the broader region,” a UN expert noted, “and we needed strategies that reflected the interlinked nature of these groups.”⁷⁹

Broadly, the Mission Concept process reflected three political realities for MONUSCO in 2016: (1) the relative lack of role the UN had within the electoral process; (2) the need to view insecurity through a more political lens; and (3) an attempt to gain leverage via the draw down and exit of the mission. Over the 2016-2018 period, MONUSCO’s path largely following this course: it was not a central player in the electoral process that resulted in the nomination of Felix Tshisekedi, though it did provide important logistical and technical support to the polling; it reported regularly on issues of political space, freedom of speech and human rights around the elections process; and it increasingly focused on how its exit from the DRC would take place.

During 2016, President Kabila in fact reached out to the UN for mediation support to the constitutional crisis. However, based on an analysis that the opposition parties were not willing to engage in the type of mediation envisaged by Kabila, the UN demurred, prompting

a turn to the AU for mediation support.⁸⁰ In December 2016, the AU brokered the Saint Silvestre Agreement between the Government and the main opposition parties, setting the course for elections. Taking advantage of this moment, the UN Secretariat executed what it called a “political pivot,” pushing for the Council to prioritize the UN’s support to the agreement in subsequent mandates. This, according to experts involved, was designed to align the mandate with the Mission Concept, but also help to create a more visible political role for the UN in-country. Thus, while the UN had kept a distance from leading mediation efforts, it remained ready to help the parties implement the agreement when they were ready. This laid the groundwork for the eventual elections in 2018.

In 2019, with a new Government coming into place, the Security Council mandated an independent strategic review of the mission, aimed at charting a course for the mission out of the country.⁸¹ Led by a former senior UN official with a mandate to produce an independent assessment of the country, Youssef Mahmoud’s review described an opportunity for a positive trajectory for the DRC. Though facing enormous challenges, the country could achieve the conditions needed for the draw down of the mission if its political leadership was able to progress an ambitious national reform agenda, address the most crucial threats posed by armed groups, and undertaken concrete actions under the PSCF. This review was an important reference point for the Council’s 2019 mandate renewal for MONUSCO, in which it suggested that the review’s benchmarks for a (at minimum) three-year withdrawal of the mission should guide the future planning of the mission.⁸²



III

The Political Trajectory of the UN in the DRC

Based on the above three moments in the lifespan of MONUC/MONUSCO in the DRC, some conclusions about the longer political trajectory of the mission can be identified. Examining these trends, this section points to broader lessons that might be learned across peace operations.

DIMINISHING POLITICAL RETURNS

The 2006 presidential elections were the high water mark of the UN's political relevance in the DRC. MONUC had a clear and central role within the transition process, and a tangible value added to the parties in terms of organizing the elections. Almost immediately after President Kabila was elected, however, this political relevance declined precipitously. This was in part

because the Government had far less need for the UN; in fact, the presence of a peacekeeping mission was an irksome reminder to Kabila's Government that the DRC remained fragile and in need of international intervention. The transition to a stabilization mission in 2010 can largely be seen as an effort by the Security Council to assuage concerns in Kinshasa and establish a more relevant, acceptable presence in the DRC. In some ways this worked, allowing the mission to stay on in country, but it may have been at the cost of a clear political role. According to a wide range of interlocutors, MONUSCO never enjoyed the kind of political relevance that existed during the 2006 elections period and earlier. Instead, it became seen more as a service provider for the Government, conducting joint military operations against armed groups, helping to

build State capacity and only tangentially involved in the national political process. The decision not to define the UN's political role may well have been due to concerns about sovereignty given that Kabila had been elected in a process that met with international approval, but it left the mission somewhat rudderless at several points in its lifespan.

Internally to the mission, this dwindling political role manifested in the gradual marginalization of the PAD. MONUC staff from the 2006-2010 period of the mission spoke of PAD as the central advisory group to the SRS, actively involved in setting goals for the mission and advising on courses of action. Over time, however, this role appeared to wither, leading to the sidelining of PAD in the overall strategy-making of the mission. "PAD gradually became more or less a news reporting function within the mission," a former MONUSCO official described, "which reflected that MONUSCO's political role had become pretty irrelevant by 2011 onwards."⁸³

PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS TAKES OVER

Over time, MONUC/MONUSCO came to prioritize PoC over every other mission task. This was done gradually, as the mission grew in size and scope, and also tracked the growth of PoC doctrine within the broader UN. The result was the Security Council quickly mandated MONUSCO to prioritize PoC over all other mission tasks, including when it came to use of resources. According to some experts within the mission and in New York, this elevation of PoC meant that there was less attention paid to the political role of the UN in country. "We turned into a protection machine," one MONUSCO staff member said. "The Council is only interested in whether we have protected civilians, all the press is about our protection failures, and we spend all our time thinking about the operational side of getting troops to hotspots."⁸⁴

Other experts noted that the rise of PoC in MONUSCO contributed to a widening expectations gap between the mandate and what the mission could accomplish on the ground. Over time, as the mandate for MONUSCO grew to include a wide and more ambitious range of

protection tasks, there were more and more possibilities to fall short. "Every massacre that happened in Congo became our fault," a former MONUSCO official noted.⁸⁵ Several former and current MONUSCO staff suggested that the strong messaging about PoC by the Council meant that the mission was less able to focus on its political work. This is not to suggest that PoC and politics are necessarily separate issues – progress on PoC should have been bolstered by political engagement and should have been seen as part of a broader set of political goals in country. However, the potential complementarity of the two areas was not something clearly articulated in the strategies of the mission in its lifespan.

The PoC priority for MONUSCO also impacted its relationship with the host Government. As the political crisis around the presidential elections deepened in 2016, protection also took on an even more distinctly political overtone. State security services, long known for their predatory practices and abuses against civilians, were used to dispel public protests, often violently. As the Secretary-General regularly reported, State security services were more dangerous to civilians in terms of human rights violations than any armed group.⁸⁶ Within the mission, one of the most complex questions became whether MONUSCO would interpose itself between Government forces and civilians in the case of ongoing protection risks.

CHRISTMAS NEVER COMES

A recurrent complaint across the UN has been the length, complexity, and viability of MONUSCO's mandates. Over time, the Council appears to have missed opportunities to refine and focus the mission's mandate, instead appending an ever-increasing list of tasks that are not easily prioritized. With a Council resolution that now exceeds 15 pages of dozens of tasks with disparate time frames and potential for implementation, the mission's mandate has appeared fractured rather than coherent, pulled between myriad of priorities without an overarching vision of its role in country. "The Security Council has become far less disciplined and the language has gotten looser," a senior Secretariat official explained. "This is because each Council member is more

concerned with making sure its specific issue is in the mandate, not whether the mandate makes sense.”⁸⁷ Other experts also noted that internal pressures – by a variety of specialist UN agencies demanding their issue be reflected in the mission mandates – meant that mandates tended to balloon over time.

From a political standpoint, the result has been equally muddled in recent years, more of a list of political tasks than a clearly articulated role in country. The UN’s role in support of the elections initially scheduled for 2016 was a case in point: amongst the long list of issues in the “political situation” section of the mandate, the actual role of MONUSCO was difficult to discern. “In the earlier years, the Council had an easy job,” a MONUSCO official noted. “It could just say ‘support the peace agreement’ and the UN knew what to do because it was all in there. But once there was no peace agreement, once the Council started trying to deal with all of the other troubles in Congo, the political place for the UN stopped being clear.”⁸⁸

EAST MISSES WEST

The increasing security focus of MONUC/MONUSCO was accompanied by a gradual shift of resources and attention to eastern Congo, most visibly when the mission relocated senior positions to Goma in 2014-15 (though by then a bulk of staff were already in the east). On one hand, this shift was the logical result of wishing to be closer to the most heavily affected conflict areas, to place the strategic planning of the mission closer to its operations. Several MONUSCO officials, however, spoke of this shift as diluting the mission’s sense of its political role in Kinshasa, and of bifurcating the mission into two entities: a large force-driven neutralization/protection/stabilization mission in eastern Congo, and a small political mission in Kinshasa. This was of course not actually the case – MONUSCO’s leadership regularly met and took joint decisions for all of the DRC – but the tendency for the mission to describe itself in dual terms did appear to increase as a result of this shift.

A BLACK BOX VERSUS A HEADLINE

At different moments in the lifespan of MONUC/MONUSCO, the mission’s public persona has waxed and waned. During the 2006 elections period, the mission was on the front page of most newspapers, and even in the post-electoral period under SRSB Doss there was a robust public information campaign that kept the mission in the headlines. This public profile played an important role in staking out room for manoeuvre for the mission at key moments, but it also came at a cost: SRSB Kobler’s well-publicized decision to ‘red flag’ Congolese generals for joint neutralization operations was an embarrassment to the Government and meant MONUSCO was quickly isolated in Kinshasa. In contrast, SRSB Sidikou’s low-profile approach appeared to mollify many political actors and may have brought him closer to the decision-makers during the constitutional crisis, but possibly with little leverage to assert the UN’s position with the parties.

These differences in leadership styles are important. They point to the question of whether a political strategy should be a formal document disseminated widely, or whether it should reside largely in the head of the SRSB. Several former MONUC/MONUSCO staff suggested that the overall vision for the mission, including the political role and how the UN would interact with the parties, was not something that could be written down. “The SRSB is a black box,” one stated. “The political strategy is just what the SRSB has in his/her mind.”⁸⁹ Others, however, were critical of this and suggested that the most effective moments of the mission were where the broader vision was clearly disseminated across the mission and publicly. The differences also point to a deeper issue about how the profile and personality of SRSBs shape missions: some establish ambitious public personas for the mission, others adopt a quieter, less antagonistic line.



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IV

Key Findings

Many aspects of the MONUC/MONUSCO experience are not unique. Other large missions have been drawn into settings with little prospect of short transition to post-conflict peacebuilding; several other missions have seen peace processes disintegrate, leaving them with little peace to keep. And missions often face similar problems of eroding host State consent amidst growing internal conflicts. The following section therefore offers some broader lessons and recommendations for those involved in mandating or leading peace operations.

1 Link mandates to political frameworks

UN peacekeeping in the DRC saw its greatest relevance when it was clearly situated within a peace process, playing a well-defined role.

Following the 2006 elections – when the formal transitional period articulated in the peace agreement lapsed – the Security Council and the mission found it far more difficult to articulate a political role for the UN in country. While there were certainly moments when that role was evident (e.g. in the 2011 elections, and briefly following the establishment of the PSCF), the lack of a framework for a political process plagued the mission for much of its lifespan. If the Council sees no such framework, it should interrogate the ambition of its mandate, rather than continue to broaden it as the Council did in the case of MONUSCO.

2 Get back to basics

MONUSCO demonstrates perhaps the most obvious case of “mission creep” in UN

peacekeeping. Over time, the Council gradually amplified the mission's mandate, adding task upon task until the mission was overburdened, without a clear vision of what it had to achieve. Some of the tasks, especially those related to large-scale national reforms, are more likely to take place over a 40-year period than the far shorter horizon of peacekeeping. Looking back across the lifespan of the mission, the clearest examples of success are those related to implementing a peace agreement, such as the UN's support to the post-2003 transition, its early work on the PSCF, and some of its efforts to implement agreements between armed groups and the Government. Over the years, as the DRC made little progress on its national reform and stabilization agenda, these issues failed to give the UN leverage with the political leadership of the country. Rather than broadening a peacekeeping mission's set of tasks into areas it is unlikely to impact meaningfully in the short-term, the Council and the Secretariat would do well to examine the more achievable elements of MONUC/MONUSCO's tasks and refocus on those.

3 Design synergies, not competing priorities

One of the major challenges of MONUSCO's sprawling mandate has been the sense that different mission components were competing for priority. Great attention has been paid to the position of tasks within the mandate (on the assumption that higher placement in a resolution means higher priority), while the Council has occasionally issued guidance on priorities. Likewise, and particularly under the Islands of Stability approach, tasks have sometimes been considered sequentially, with the political objectives as a sort of final stage in a largely security-driven process. This mindset is not helpful, as it reinforces the mission as a grouping of separate pillars, rather than a single entity pursuing a common vision. Instead, missions should start with a single overarching political set of objectives and then articulate how the other tasks (PoC, stabilization, human rights, etc.) contribute to that goal together and in support of each other.

4 Understand and shape the relationship with the host government

Some of MONUC/MONUSCO's most important successes were done in direct partnership with the Government. However, at times the mission has been seen as too close to the Government, potentially undermining its ability to exercise its political role impartially. This has especially been the case in the context of joint military operations with the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC), which were perceived by some Congolese as an example of the UN being instrumentalized, but also in the context of the 2011 elections, during which the UN was perceived as supporting a process that had been unduly altered by Kabila. In developing an overarching strategy for the UN in country, mission leaders should pay special attention to the issue of host State consent, how partnership with the host government will be addressed, and areas where a certain amount of critical distance may be needed. This should be done as early as possible, including possibly ahead of the Council mandate for a new peace operation.⁹⁰

5 Beware a hostage situation

Some of the more ambitious elements of the UN's mandates in the Congo presented a familiar Catch-22: either the Government reforms or the UN will not leave, but given the UN has no power to implement those reforms, it remains. The UN mission then becomes somewhat hostage to Government intentions rather than an instrument of Council decision-making. This also means the UN is continually negotiating from a position of weakness, more eager to stay than the host government wishes. The Council and the Secretariat should take this dynamic into account when designing mandates, and also when planning for key shifts such as transitions.

6 Understand who does what

The DRC presents one of the most crowded fields in international conflict resolution. Dozens of special envoys fly in and out of Kinshasa; major regional organizations like the AU and Southern

African Development Community maintain envoys in and around the country; hundreds of peace-oriented NGOs compete for donor money for their programmes; while the UN maintains an SRSG of MONUSCO, a Special Envoy for the Great Lakes, a Group of Experts and one of the largest UNCTs in the world. In the past, the bifurcation of the UN Department of Political Affairs and Department of Peacekeeping Operations meant these actors received different guidance and support from their respective hierarchies. Security Council mandates necessarily focus on the peacekeeping mission itself and are not useful tools in laying out clear responsibilities. This places even greater onus on the Secretariat and mission leadership to develop strategies where the respective roles are articulated.

7 Differentiate between a plan and a strategy

For much of MONUC/MONUSCO's lifespan, there has not been a formal document that would be considered a mission-wide strategy. In its later years, Mission Concepts were developed, but

these were often less of a strategy and more of a roadmap for implementing the Council's mandate. "We have tended to go straight into mission planning," a MONUSCO staff member noted, "which gets us straight into operations and the results-based budget without that higher-level sense of the strategic direction of the mission."

8 Headquarters as a mission backstop

The MONUC/MONUSCO experience points to the need to have strong mission leadership buy-in and control over strategy-making, including when it comes to influencing the content of Council mandates and the development of mission strategies. In this regard, the Secretariat appears to have been most effective when it acted as a backstopping partner, offering support and broad guidance, participating in an iterative and constructive exchange. A review of Mission Concept guidance with this preferred dynamic in mind would be helpful.⁹¹

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- 86 See, e.g. United Nations Security Council, "Report of the Secretary-General pursuant to paragraphs 10 and 14 of Security Council resolution 1649," United Nations, 22 May 2006, S/2006/310.
- 87 Interview, New York, May 2020.
- 88 Interview, New York, June 2020.
- 89 Interview, New York, May 2020.
- 90 Adam Day, "To Build Consent in Peace Operations, Turn Mandates Upside Down," United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, 19 January 2017, <https://cpr.unu.edu/to-build-consent-in-peace-operations-turn-mandates-upside-down.html>.
- 91 At the time of publication, a new set of draft guidance was being considered in DPO, which would move the principal responsibility for the Mission Concept to the Secretariat.

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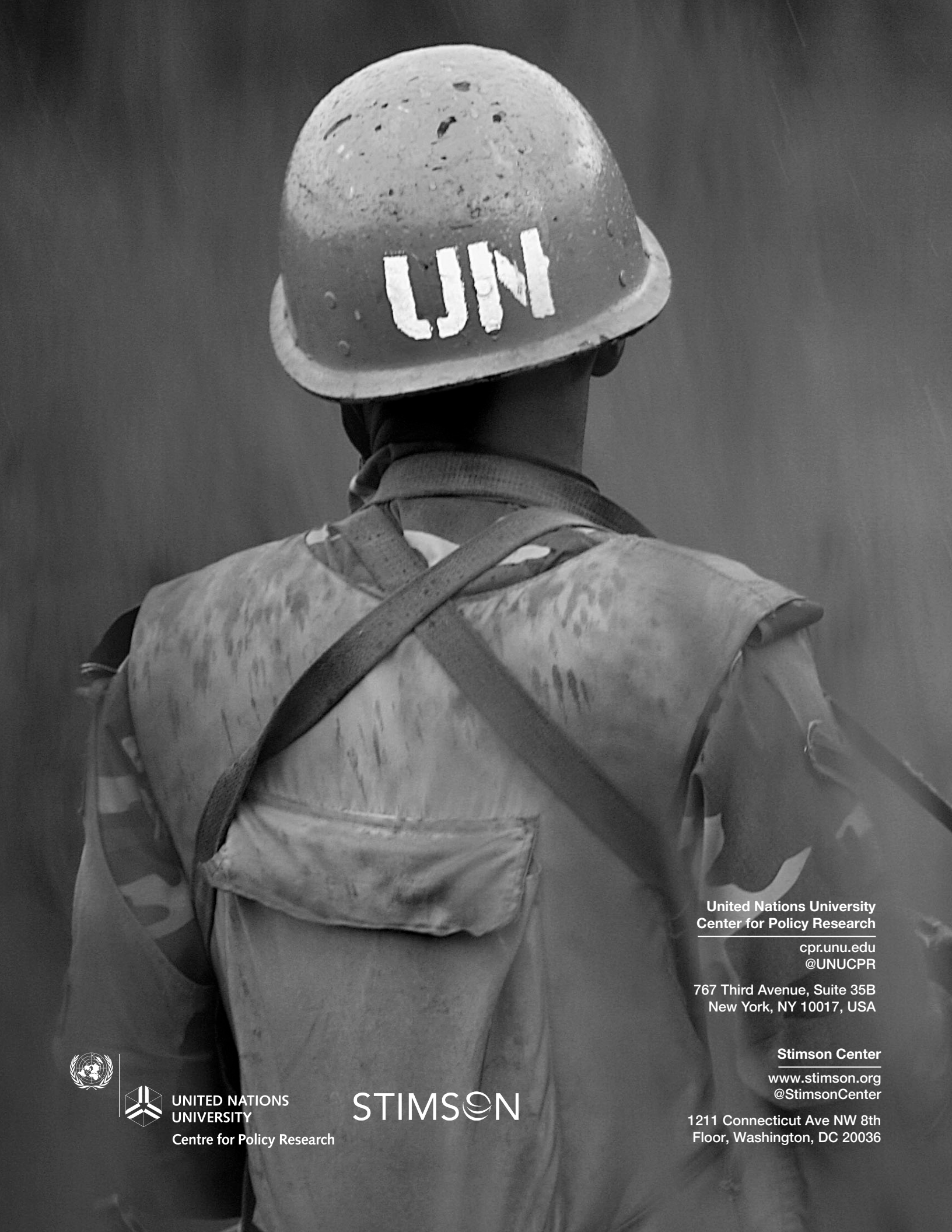
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