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Prioritization and Sequencing of Security Council Mandates: The Case of MONUSCO

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On November 12, 2020, the International Peace Institute (IPI), the Stimson Center, and Security Council Report organized a virtual workshop to discuss the mandate and political strategy of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). These discussions are part of a series of workshops that examines how the activities included in peace operations' mandates can be better prioritized, sequenced, and grounded in political strategy. This was the second consecutive year in which these partners convened discussions in support of the mandate negotiations on MONUSCO. This meeting note was drafted collaboratively by IPI, the Stimson Center, and Security Council Report. It summarizes the main points raised in the discussion under the Chatham House rule of non-attribution and does not necessarily represent the views of all participants. The project is funded with the support of the government of Germany.

Introduction

The UN Security Council is expected to renew the mandate of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) on December 18, 2020. In anticipation of this process, the International Peace Institute (IPI), the Stimson Center, and Security Council Report co-hosted a virtual discussion on November 12, 2020. The workshop offered a platform for member states, UN stakeholders, humanitarian actors, and independent experts to share their views on what is needed to ensure lasting peace in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and to prepare for the anticipated gradual withdrawal of MONUSCO.

The discussion took place at an important moment in the UN's engagement in the DRC. The election of President Félix Tshisekedi and the formation of a new governing coalition in early 2019 set the conditions for the UN to begin considering the mission's eventual withdrawal. In late 2019, the independent strategic review of MONUSCO proposed a "phased, progressive and comprehensive exit strategy" for the mission.¹ Nearly one year later, on October 26, 2020, MONUSCO and the government of the DRC submitted a "Joint Strategy on the Progressive and Phased Drawdown of MONUSCO" to the Security Council.² The Joint Strategy served as the framework for discussions during the workshop, with participants focusing on the upcoming mandate negotiations and the mission's future.

Participants agreed that the mission's mandate accurately reflects the UN's strategic priorities and MONUSCO's ongoing role in the country. There was strong agreement that the mission's existing strategic priorities—the protection of civilians and support to stabilization and the strengthening of state institutions—should continue to provide an overarching framework for the UN's engagement across the country.³ In addition, participants expressed the importance of focused engagement with local actors, including local government officials and civil society representatives.

Recognizing that the upcoming Security Council mandate for MONUSCO will likely be a "transition mandate," participants discussed the initial

¹ UN Security Council, *Transitioning from Stabilization to Peace: An Independent Strategic Review of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, UN Doc. S/2019/842, October 25, 2019.

² UN Security Council, *Joint Strategy on the Progressive and Phased Drawdown of MONUSCO*, October 2020, UN Doc. S/2020/1041, October 27, 2020.

³ UN Security Resolution 2502 (December 19, 2019), UN Doc. S/RES/2502, paras. 24(a) and (b).

planning for the mission's exit strategy. They encouraged the UN to develop a transition plan that lays out a political vision for the future of the UN's engagement in the country that is shared by the Congolese government, the Congolese people, and the UN system. They discussed the transition in terms of defining an "end state" rather than an "end date," with a gradual drawdown that is based on realistic and measurable benchmarks, fosters national ownership, and ensures an integrated UN approach.

Context Analysis and MONUSCO's Strategic Orientation

Despite improvements overall, the political and security dynamics in the DRC remain volatile. The next presidential elections and the activities of non-state armed groups in the eastern provinces each present their own set of challenges for the country. As the UN system and the Congolese government prepare for the withdrawal of MONUSCO, participants agreed that the mission should continue to prioritize its mandates to protect civilians and support state institutions. It should also strengthen its role in providing good offices and engaging with local governments and communities while aligning with the UN's regional strategy.

Political Dynamics

Nearly two years after the peaceful transfer of power to a new ruling coalition, the rift between the DRC's two main opposing political parties persists. With continued tensions over electoral and economic reforms, Congolese political actors have already begun to position themselves in advance of the anticipated 2023 presidential elections. In this context, one participant warned of the risk that the armed forces could become politicized.

Participants emphasized that MONUSCO should continue to support national stakeholders as they lead governance reforms and political dialogue. By advising and supporting Congolese actors, the

mission aims at "furthering reconciliation, democratization and inclusion."⁴ One speaker proposed that the new mandate further strengthen the mission's role in providing good offices, which are also integral to MONUSCO's efforts to protect civilians and support stabilization efforts. The speaker also raised the importance of capitalizing on the relationship between the current special representative of the secretary-general (SRSG) and the national government. Some participants speculated that the mission's political leverage could decline if its leadership changes after the announcement of the transition or as the mission gradually withdraws. One participant cautioned against using the mission's withdrawal as leverage to encourage the government to take specific actions, which could damage their relationship.

Participants also emphasized the importance of the mission recommitting to interacting with local actors, particularly local governance structures, civil society, and community-based organizations. In addition, they underscored that the government is not monolithic and that processes that lead to the over-centralization of power may exacerbate local conflicts. As such, there is a need to ensure that political engagement is inclusive at all levels of governance.

At the regional level, President Tshisekedi has been active in strengthening political, economic, and security relations with neighboring countries, including Angola and the Republic of the Congo. To support these efforts, participants recommended that MONUSCO focus on the implementation of the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework and increase coordination with the Office of the UN Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region. They also called on the mission to shape its approach to regional engagement based on the forthcoming United Nations Strategy for Peace Consolidation and Conflict Resolution and Prevention in the Great Lakes Region. Participants emphasized the need for the rest of the UN system to continue complementing MONUSCO's support to the government's regional outreach.

⁴ Ibid., para. 29.

Conflict Dynamics

Participants reflected on how the conflict situation has improved in many parts of the DRC over the last few years, with two-thirds of the country now considered stable. However, the provinces of North and South Kivu and Ituri continue to experience armed conflict of varying intensity, which manifests itself through clashes among armed groups and between armed groups and Congolese security forces. Insecurity in these eastern provinces is on the rise, with an increase in human rights violations and abuses over the past year, including sexual violence, as documented by the recent report of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.⁵

At the community level, participants reported that cycles of violence perpetuated by non-state armed groups are fueled by limited socioeconomic opportunities, particularly in terms of education and employment, and the absence of basic service delivery. The illegal exploitation of natural resources and “conflict minerals” also continues to drive the cycle of conflict and perpetuates human rights abuses, including child labor and exploitation.⁶ A few speakers reiterated the importance of applying and enforcing sanctions against individuals supporting the illicit trade of natural resources in the DRC.⁷

The persistent weakness of the state at the local and provincial levels allegedly benefits non-state armed groups. These armed groups have fought each other over territory, often along intercommunal lines, and many of them have economic and political ties to local communities or neighboring countries.⁸ Speakers emphasized the importance of a consensual, nonpartisan approach to engaging armed groups in eastern DRC.

Participants acknowledged that ending the decade-long conflict in the DRC requires national action, with support from the UN, to spur reconciliation,

heal collective trauma, and deliver justice. At the same time, many acts of violence and human rights abuses continue to be attributed to state authorities. Participants therefore called on MONUSCO and the UN country team to adhere to the UN Human Rights Due Diligence Policy.

MONUSCO’s Footprint and the Protection of Civilians

As the mission plans its exit strategy, it should prioritize its mandate to protect civilians, particularly in areas where armed violence continues. MONUSCO’s protection of civilians mandate is explicitly prioritized in the Joint Strategy recently submitted to the Security Council. To that end, contingency planning is focused on aligning MONUSCO’s capabilities and resources with an approach that continues to address threats to civilians across the country. Participants reiterated the importance of focusing the mission’s efforts and deploying peacekeepers to the areas facing the most threats, even if this requires changing existing plans.

Participants encouraged the mission to continue to use holistic approaches to protection and to strengthen the contributions of uniformed police and civilians to community engagement, including by creating additional channels of communication and supporting local protection networks. In areas where the number of troops is expected to decrease, they acknowledged the need for the UN to increase the number of police and civilian staff to ensure local capacity is sufficient and to enable a smooth transition. In addition, it will be critical to ensure that “the mobility and flexibility of the remaining forces are enhanced to ensure effective coverage” of conflict hotspots.⁹ Participants also suggested improving the mission’s threat analysis and early-warning and early-response mechanisms.

A broader question remains regarding the extent to which the mission should use force to achieve its

⁵ Human Rights Council, *Human Rights Situation and the Activities of the United Nations Joint Human Rights Office in the DRC—Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, UN Doc. A/HRC/45/49, August 24, 2020.

⁶ United Nations, “Final Report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo,” June 2, 2020, pp. 13–23.

⁷ This will become even more relevant beginning in January 2021 when the European Union’s new regulations on conflict minerals come into force. For more information, see: European Commission, “Conflict Minerals: The Regulation Explained,” December 13, 2017, available at <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/in-focus/conflict-minerals-regulation/regulation-explained/>.

⁸ UN Doc. S/2019/842, paras 21–25.

⁹ UN Doc. S/2020/1041, p. 3.

desired end state in areas where armed violence persists. Participants voiced the need for national authorities and the UN to be united against non-state armed groups, but they also recognized that military operations against these groups are not sufficient. A security-based approach should go hand in hand with a strategic political approach. Ensuring long-term stabilization requires activities beyond the use of force, including support to socioeconomic development and local governance.

MONUSCO's Mandate and Preparing for a Transition

The discussion focused heavily on the strategic dimensions of MONUSCO's anticipated transition. Participants considered four main issues that the Security Council should consider during the mandating process.

Defining a Shared Political Vision for the Transition

Participants agreed that the upcoming mandate renewal provides an opportunity for the Security Council to articulate a clear, shared political vision for MONUSCO's transition and to envision a coherent end state for the mission's drawdown.

To frame the mission's transition strategy, some participants highlighted the importance of adopting a "strengths-based approach" that leverages and builds on existing capacities for peace in the DRC instead of solely identifying risks and gaps. Others emphasized the primacy of politics in guiding the transition process. One participant also urged Security Council members to treat the Joint Strategy as a framework and not to be overly prescriptive in the mandate itself, noting that the Joint Strategy is a precursor to a more detailed UN transition strategy.

Further, participants urged the Security Council to use the upcoming mandate to define the transition's end state rather than tying the mission's withdrawal to a specific end date. The Joint Strategy articulates the desired end state as "the threat posed by domestic and foreign armed groups

[has been] reduced to a level that can be managed by national authorities and the root causes of conflict [have been] addressed."¹⁰ Some argued that this is a realistic vision for an end state because the litmus test for a peacekeeping operation's continued presence should be whether the situation presents a threat to regional peace and security. Others argued that it is a vague and security-centric outcome, especially considering that Congolese stakeholders will likely not be able to address all the root causes of conflict before the mission faces a political imperative to withdraw completely.

Informing the Transition

Participants emphasized that the new mandate should establish clear benchmarks and indicators agreed upon by the Security Council and the Congolese government to inform a gradual, responsible, and flexible transition. Benchmarks not only encourage clear assessments of developments on the ground but also provide a framework for Security Council members to better cooperate when making decisions about drawdown.

Participants agreed that benchmarks should be measurable and realistic and should have the continuous buy-in of Congolese authorities and other stakeholders who will be responsible for meeting them. The government's agreement on protection-related benchmarks and indicators is especially critical, as it is the government that will reassume responsibility for providing security for all communities after MONUSCO's withdrawal. However, participants highlighted that protection thresholds are political and that different stakeholders—whether Congolese national authorities, local authorities, communities, humanitarian actors, or international actors—may be willing to tolerate different levels of potential risk, including armed violence, during the drawdown. Considering that the political nature of protection thresholds will likely make them hard to agree on, participants emphasized the need for other benchmarks, including on administrative reforms and state authority; justice and accountability; disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration; and the return of internally displaced persons.

¹⁰ Ibid., para. 10.

One participant emphasized that rising political tensions at the provincial and national levels in advance of the 2023 elections could fracture domestic political will for meeting the benchmarks set by MONUSCO's mandate. It was therefore suggested that the Security Council consider developing different types of benchmarks, such as core benchmarks and contextual benchmarks, to provide Security Council members with a more nuanced assessment of expectations and progress—an approach the Security Council has used for other peacekeeping operations.¹¹

Enabling Inclusive National Ownership

Empowering Congolese actors and affirming their role as enablers of peace is crucial for a sustainable, nationally owned transition. Participants underscored that national ownership needs to cut across substantive areas, particularly the protection of civilians, security sector reform, and state administration. MONUSCO and Congolese stakeholders also require a common understanding of how the mission's footprint and activities will change. To this end, several participants suggested the implementation of a robust public information strategy and campaign.

Government engagement with the UN is an important dimension of national ownership. The mission's collaboration with Congolese authorities on the Joint Strategy was considered an important landmark for the transition process, especially as the independent strategic review was unable to solicit the government's input. But while the national government was seen as an equal partner in preparing the Joint Strategy, participants indicated that MONUSCO and the national government did not give Congolese civil society and nongovernmental organizations the opportunity to voice their views. Participants encouraged a more inclusive approach for the upcoming transition, especially considering that many Congolese claim not to have a clear understanding of MONUSCO's mandate and objectives.

Participants highlighted that the mission should

promote local ownership and build local capacity to limit security risks following its departure. This was underscored by the recent closure of the mission's operating bases; some communities were either unaware of the impending closure or actively protested the resulting security gaps. One participant underscored that MONUSCO should work with different communities and actors, including humanitarian organizations, to plan for how existing local protection committees and early-warning systems will continue to operate post-transition. In addition, they encouraged the UN to identify how it can support human rights monitoring in areas where the mission has withdrawn.

Ensuring an Integrated UN Transition

Successful transitions require missions and UN country teams to integrate their planning efforts and strengthen joint delivery of programs. Participants discussed the importance of close collaboration between MONUSCO and the UN country team in the DRC over the coming months to consolidate in-country gains and further strengthen the capacity of local administrations. This will help ensure that decentralized governance institutions are better prepared to execute their mandates once the mission withdraws.

Participants affirmed that the UN country team will ultimately be responsible for helping Congolese stakeholders address long-term structural drivers of violence. This will require it to undertake activities in areas including natural resource management, land rights, gender rights, gender-based violence, human rights monitoring, justice and accountability, local governance, and local dispute resolution.

Some participants highlighted the importance of closer collaboration between the mission and the UN country team on joint programming, particularly on strengthening local administrations, so that decentralized governance institutions will be better prepared to execute their mandates once the mission withdraws. While some noted the Joint

¹¹ For more information, see: Adam Day, "UN Transitions: Improving Security Council Practice in Mission Settings," UN University Centre for Policy Research, January 2020.

Strategy's lack of details on the specifics of future collaboration between the mission and the UN country team, others noted that a separate UN transition plan will be prepared to elaborate on operational issues. Finally, UN officials should plan early on to mitigate possible financial shortfalls during the transition.

Conclusion

As the UN and the Congolese government continue to prepare for MONUSCO's phased withdrawal, the upcoming mandate renewal provides an opportunity for the Security Council to reaffirm MONUSCO's strategic priorities and prepare for the coming years. In the immediate future, MONUSCO should continue to leverage its political role and the presence of its uniformed personnel to protect civilians and strengthen state institutions.¹² To reinforce these efforts, the Security Council could bolster MONUSCO's mandate by reinforcing its use of good offices, stressing the importance of its political engagement with all levels of the government and with civil

society, fortifying its threat analysis and early-warning mechanisms for the protection of civilians, and highlighting the importance of national ownership and accountability.

Consolidating achievements in the DRC and planning for a sustainable reconfiguration of the UN's presence in the country requires careful coordination between the UN system, national stakeholders, and external partners. The mission's province-specific strategies are regarded as a positive step in this regard, as they allow for the distribution of resources and capacities based on the needs and priorities of each area, which should help mitigate protection gaps. However, beyond the mission's own capacity, participants urged more inclusivity in the design and implementation of the transition plan, including in the development of a common political vision and realistic and measurable benchmarks. This should be communicated through a robust public information strategy. Finally, an integrated and coherent system-wide approach, both in the country and in the region, will be critical to a successful transition.

¹² UN Security Resolution 2502 (December 19, 2019), UN Doc. S/RES/2502, para. 24(a) and (b).

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