

Can Force be Useful in the Absence of a Political Strategy?

Lessons from the UN missions to the DR Congo



Congo Research Group

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Jason K. Stearns



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CAN FORCE BE USEFUL IN THE ABSENCE OF A POLITICAL STRATEGY?

LESSONS FROM THE UN MISSIONS TO THE DR CONGO

This analysis was initially written for the Center on International Cooperation and the International Peace Institute as part of a series of internal papers for the High Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations.

The UN peacekeeping mission in the DR Congo has been critical in the testing and development of peacekeeping doctrine. Its fifteen-year lifespan--the longest in the UN's history if we except deployments that are strictly confined to observation--has seen the mission take on a variety of mandates and roles: It has observed ceasefires (1999-2003), played a key part in a political process (1999-2006), been the guarantor of a transitional government (2003-2006), and managed a stabilization program (2010-present). Most recently, it has also seen the use of more aggressive, robust peacekeeping, both in Ituri (2005-2007) and in the Kivus under the auspices of the Force Intervention Brigade (2013-present).

This laboratory of peacekeeping has provided some useful lessons for peacekeeping in general. While MONUC and MONUSCO are best known for the military failures and successes, it is their largely unsung successes in the political arena that deserve greater attention. The mission played a critical role in unifying the country, shepherding the peace process through repeated crises, and helping set up a variety of democratic institutions. Where it succeeded in deploying military force, it was usually due to a propitious political environment--as in the case of the Ituri conflict and the M23 insurgency. Where its military mandate of protecting civilians foundered, it was due to an excessively apolitical and reactive approach to dealing with conflict.

Sadly, since the 2006 election, the mission has been marginalized from what it does best, namely implementing a political process, and confined to military arenas in which it has not performed well: the protection of civilians and dismantling armed groups. This should be a cautionary tale both for stabilization missions, as well as for deployments employing robust peacekeeping.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE RECENT UN MISSIONS IN THE DR CONGO

The conflict in the Congo can broadly be described as an interplay of three levels of conflict--at the national, regional, and local levels. At the national level, the legacy of Belgian colonialism, coupled with 32 years of misrule by Mobutu Sese Seko, had resulted in a dysfunctional, predatory state. This provided fertile opportunities for rebellions from several neighboring countries, which by 1996 had all established rear bases in the Congo (then Zaïre). It was this regional conflict that provided the trigger for the 1996 war, with Rwanda invading the eastern Congo to break up the refugee camps that hosted the forces that had perpetrated the 1994 genocide, with support from Uganda, Angola, and various other African countries. Finally, at the local level in the eastern Congo, the absence of a strong state and meddling neighbors fueled local conflicts over land, power, and identity that would escalate dramatically once the war began.

The First Congo war was a short affair--the foreign armies propelled a coalition of Congolese rebellions to power in Kinshasa within nine months, facing little resistance from Mobutu's faltering forces. The government they installed in power under the leadership of Laurent Kabila, however, ended up being extremely shaky. Within a year of taking office, Kabila fell out with his Rwandan allies, prompting the Second Congo War, which began in August 1998 and split the country and subcontinent. Kabila was backed by Angolan, Namibian, and Zimbabwean troops, the main two rebellions in the eastern and northern Congo received support from Rwanda and Uganda, respectively.

The UN Mission to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) was initially deployed in 1999 as a small observation mission to observe the ceasefire agreed upon in the Lusaka Agreement of July 10, 1999. That agreement--which was signed by the Congolese government and five countries in the region, and later by the main rebel groups--provided the blueprint for the peace process that would, after many delays, produce a viable settlement. All parties were bound to a ceasefire, committed to the demobilization of foreign rebels based in the Congo, and the Congolese belligerents pledged to begin a national dialogue to end the conflict.

In February 2000, the mission was enlarged to 5,537 military personnel, who were given the mandate--on top of supporting the peace process and monitoring the ceasefire--to use deadly force to protect civilians in imminent danger, one of the first UN missions to receive such a mandate. Over the next three years, MONUC would also expand its staff and troops in order to strengthen its demobilization and repatriation program for foreign armed groups, as well as human rights, political affairs, child protection, and humanitarian affairs divisions. This was in line with the prevailing thinking at UN headquarters about multidimensional, complex crises.

The most progress, however, continued to be made when MONUC's mandate was able to impact the political dimensions of the conflict. Through its field-based reporting and monitoring, as well as the diplomacy of the various SRSGs and UN special envoys, the mission played a critical role in guiding negotiations to the Global and Inclusive Agreement, signed by all major Congolese belligerents in Pretoria on 16 December, 2002. This agreement also elevated MONUC to become the guarantor of a transitional government that emerged out of this deal, as well as the coordinator of a donor support mechanism in Kinshasa. The results were impressive: the country was reunited, 130,000 combatants were demobilized--including 30,000 children--, and democratically elected institutions were created at the national and provincial level.

This strong political mandate, built on top of a process that had broad buy-in from the main Congolese players and foreign donors, enabled MONUC to play a powerful role during the 2003-2006 transition. It stepped in to resolve disputes between signatories to the agreement, provided nuanced reporting on critical events, and to coordinate donor leverage at key moments. In August 2004, when the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD)--one of the main belligerents--threatened to pull out of the transition, MONUC rallied diplomatic pressure on the RCD and its Rwandan allies to keep them in the peace process. When the historically most important opposition party, the UDPS, boycotted the electoral process over delays in 2005, MONUC was able to vouch for the electoral commission and lend legitimacy to the polls. The eventual success of the 2006 vote, despite fierce fighting in downtown Kinshasa between units loyal to Joseph Kabila and those belonging to runner-up Jean-Pierre Bemba, was in no small part due to MONUC.

This heyday of UN involvement, however, came to an end with the elections of 2006. The government of Joseph Kabila, empowered by its popular mandate, no longer felt that MONUC should play a political role. The UN mission was unable to carve out a role in security sector reform--despite its mandate to do so--and was consistently sidelined from peace talks with remaining armed groups in the eastern Congo.

Nonetheless, while the peace process had officially come to an end, violence escalated again. In large part, this Third Congo War, as some call it, was the result of dynamics created by the peace process itself. One of the main belligerents, the Rwandan-backed RCD, was extremely unpopular and would eventually go from controlling a third of the country to four percent representation in national institutions. In anticipation of its electoral defeat, hardliners led by General Laurent Nkunda and backed by Rwanda launched a new rebellion, the National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP), in an effort to protect their interests. At the same time, the flawed integration of armed groups into a national army and an increasingly neo-patrimonial political elite fed a new, perverse logic of armed violence, in which politicians and army officers often partnered with armed groups in order to secure access to local resources and to bolster their powerbase.

While violence escalated--the number of displaced people increased by a million between 2006 and 2008--the UN mission paradoxically transitioned into a post-conflict approach. Since the government had stripped the mission of its ability to play an effective role in peace talks between armed groups, MONUC began to focus on extending state authority, reforming the security sector, and securing mining areas. This approach became formalized when the mission changed its name to become a stabilization mission in 2010, the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). It was now supposed to focus on supporting national institutions, including the army, and coordinating international support to the country's stabilization plan. In 2014, the mission moved most of its peacekeepers and substantive staff to the eastern Congo from Kinshasa, accentuating its departure from the Congolese political scene.

Without a willing partner in the Congolese government, however, the mission made little headway on institutional reform. The stabilization program built roads, administrative offices, and police stations, but without local ownership these reforms were short-lived. The roads were not maintained, the police only paid irregularly, and administrative offices deprived of meaningful budgets, with the UN was effectively locked out of security sector reform.¹ For the Congolese government, the UN had little business in getting involved in the internal functioning of state institutions. At the same time, the stabilization mandate, which implied military support to the Congolese army, undermined the neutrality of the mission and compromised their ability to interact with armed groups. And yet, the mission--deprived of a formal role in mediating, and mandated to partner with an army that was itself party to the conflict--had been told to make protection of civilians its highest priority.²

In 2012, the newly-formed M23 rebellion--a new version of the CNDP--occupied the regional hub of Goma in eastern Congo. This crisis, along with the failures of stabilization, prompted a rethinking of peacekeeping and foreign engagement in the Congo. Donors, the United Nations, and regional bodies brokered the Peace, Security, and Cooperation Framework (PSCF) in February 2013. The deal, which was signed by eleven countries in the region, created, for the first time since 2006, a semblance of a peace process. It identified the two drivers

of the Congolese conflict as institutional weakness and foreign intervention, and created domestic and regional mechanisms to address these challenges.

At the same time, a proposed regional observation force was transformed into a new part of MONUSCO: the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB).³ This new brigade, composed of 3,069 peacekeepers from Malawi, Tanzania, and South Africa, was deployed in April 2013 and played a critical role in the battle against the M23 that culminated in the rebels' defeat in October 2013.

Nonetheless, this new peacekeeping approach--at once more political and more ready to apply military force--showed its limitations. The defeat of the M23 can be chalked up as much to bilateral diplomatic pressure as to the FIB. For the first time since Rwanda's official withdrawal from the Congo in 2002, western donors openly identified Rwanda as a spoiler and applied substantial financial leverage. In addition, the prospect of engaging in proxy warfare with South Africa and Tanzania, two regional rivals, raised the stakes substantially for the government in Kigali. When the FIB and the Congolese army launched their final offensive, the Rwandan army pulled the plug on the M23, forcing them to flee with relatively little fighting.

Some of the same factors that made the FIB an asset also hampered the UN mission. The second offensive the FIB was supposed to launch was against the Rwandan FDLR rebels. The Tanzanian and South African governments were less enthusiastic about engaging their troops against Rwanda's archenemies, with the Tanzanian government going so far as calling the rebels "freedom fighters" and saying Rwanda had to negotiate with them. In the end, a deterioration of relations between the mission and the Kinshasa government stalled the offensive.

Meanwhile, the new PSCF did not produce a real peace process and quickly became bogged down in bureaucracy. The Kinshasa government continued to resist any outside interference in institutional reform, while most of the progress against the M23 came through bilateral pressure--especially by the United States--outside of the PSCF. MONUSCO continued to be locked out of negotiations with armed groups and had little say in security sector reform.

ANALYSIS

The UN mission in the Congo is perhaps best known for its military successes and failures. Scandals over inaction in the face of mass violence, and sexual abuse by uniformed personnel have made international headlines. On the other hand, robust peacekeeping operations have claimed successes and influenced UN-wide debates on the use of force.

The argument outlined here tries to reframe the question about the use of force. Instead of "What can the UN do to protect civilians?"--which tends to orient the answer toward questions of resources, tactics, and the willingness of troop contributing countries to fight--I ask under what conditions the UN can play a role in addressing the conflict dynamics. This shifts the focus from the military toward the political and toward questions of the mandate, the interests of the main actors, and international diplomacy.

THE MILITARY FAILURES AND SUCCESSES

The list of the failings of MONUC and MONUSCO is long. In May 2002, Rwandan-backed rebels massacred over 160 civilians close to a UN base in Kisangani. In 2003, blue helmets did little but defend themselves in their bunkers as armed groups fought for control of Bunia, the capital of Ituri district, killing hundreds of civilians. In May 2004, renegade RCD officers, who then went on to sack the town, raping and killing dozens, overran UN forces in and around town of Bukavu. In October 2008, over a hundred civilians were killed in the town of Kiwanja, within earshot of a large UN base.

These are only some of the incidents in which UN blue helmets could have done more to prevent large-scale atrocities in the Congo. There are various reasons for these failings. During the transition, the UN felt conflicted between its commitment to keep all belligerents at the negotiation table, and its obligation to protect civilians against some of the same forces. At other times, troop contributing countries were extremely reluctant to place their soldiers in harm's way, at times even refusing orders given to them by UN commanders. Given that the UN is extremely dependent on a few countries for troops, there was little leverage to be used against this sort of foot-dragging.

Finally, the nature of the conflict and the country rendered the UN mandate extremely difficult to fulfill. When interpreted reactively, "protecting civilians in imminent danger," meant that peacekeepers always arrived too late to the scene of violence. By the time news of violence was relayed to the UN and they were able to deploy troops to the field--the area of which armed groups are scattered is the size of Portugal--it was often already too late.

Nonetheless, the UN mission has, paradoxically, become a sort of standard-bearer for robust peacekeeping. This is largely thanks to two episodes: the 2005-2007 period of robust peacekeeping in Ituri, and the FIB offensive against the M23 in 2013. In both cases, the mission leadership decided to interpret its mandate in a proactive fashion, declaring demobilized zones and carrying out offensives against armed groups who refused to disarm, in collaboration with the Congolese army. In the Ituri case, this resulted in the demobilization of over 18,000 combatants, while the M23 was defeated by the Congolese army and the FIB.

In addition, the mission has helped pioneer new approaches to the protection of civilians. Its Joint Protection Teams (JPTs) and Community Liaison Officers (CLOs) helped render the mission more sensitive to the needs and demands of the communities they are supposed to serve.

These military successes, however, were enabled by the political context. The armed groups in Ituri were politically marginal and had lost their Rwandan and Ugandan backing by the time the UN offensive began. The UN mission there had been preceded by the brief deployment of a European Union force and the arrest of many of the major armed group commanders. In the case of the M23, I have outlined above the importance of donor pressure on Rwanda preceding the offensive.

THE ENABLING POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

MONUC and MONUSCO have been most effective when they have been deployed to implement or facilitate a political process. The peak of this involvement was during the transitional government, which culminated in the 2006 elections. Without sustained UN involvement, the transition would probably have faltered on the deep mistrust and conflicting interests of the belligerents.

A particular political and economic environment allowed the UN mission to play this role. First, no belligerent was strong enough to win out militarily--by the time the peace process finally began in earnest in 2001, there had been over two years of stalemated, costly fighting, with little advance on any front. The belligerents had little choice but to make peace.

Secondly, the main belligerents were heavily dependent on outside forces: the Kabilas on Angolan and Zimbabwean troops, the rebels on the Ugandan, Rwandan, and Burundian militaries. Some of these countries--in particular the governments in Kigali, Kampala, and Kinshasa, which depended for over half of their budget on foreign aid--were susceptible to donor pressure. Criticism from those donors mounted on Kigali and Kampala, in particular, after their armies fought two deadly battles over power and resources in Kisangani, undermining their claims that they were only involved in the Congo out of self-defense. Three reports by UN panels of experts--which played a critical role at various points in the peace process--detailing the individuals and countries profiting from the Congolese conflict, also enhanced pressure on these outside military players.

Lastly, the Congolese conflict was relatively free of superpower politics. Despite its human cost, and the involvement of nine African armies, none of the permanent UN Security Council members perceived that its core national interests were at stake in the conflict. This made the passing of UN resolutions and multilateral diplomacy easier. While Rwanda and Angola, in particular, did have critical security and economic concerns regarding the conflict, they were not so vital as to be unshakable.

Once democratic elections, however, took place, the UN mission lost much of its leverage on the Congolese political scene. It was reduced to a bystander in most of the negotiations with armed groups, while the Congolese government refused to allow it to carry out its mandate in security sector reform, and it failed to play a significant role in the deeply flawed 2011 elections. Meanwhile, donors became more focused on their bilateral security and economic interests, which at times stood in tension with the goals of the UN mission.

CONCLUSION

The deployment of the FIB in 2013 elicited much commentary about the use of force in peacekeeping operations, suggesting that the UN missions' largest failings--but also successes--have been in the protection of civilians. This conclusion is misleading. The missions have been most valuable when they have been able to play a political role in the implementation of a peace process. And while robust peacekeeping has indeed saved lives and reshaped the security dynamics in the eastern Congo, this has been as much due to the political environment as to strong UN leadership.

I end with several broad recommendations. First, UN missions should never lose sight of their political context into which they are deployed. In some places, there will be no peace to keep, elsewhere that peace process may be flimsy and difficult for the UN to shape. The first duty of UN leadership is to understand these limitations and to work with their bilateral and multilateral partners to reshape these political confines. If these parameters cannot be changed, or the host party refuses to grant the mission a significant political role in shaping the peace process, the UN should think carefully about how it engages and, if needed, withdraw its forces altogether. In the Congolese case, the UN should have mobilized international attention on the negative role played by Rwanda at a much earlier stage, and should have engaged much more critically with its Congolese host during the 2011 elections. There is real reason to doubt whether, given the lack of local ownership and ongoing conflict, the UN mission should have transitioned into a stabilization mission.

Second, force can be a crucial component of peacekeeping missions, and in the Congolese case the UN mission should have been much more willing to interpret its military mandate more proactively throughout. It is rare, however, that force alone can ever solve violence. All armed groups are embedded in social structures and have ties to broader social and political dynamics. The UN will never kill all FDLR combatants, for example, and should think carefully about how it can combine political and military approaches. For example, after over a decade of refusing to negotiate with FDLR commanders, there is a growing consensus that the UN should try to facilitate the departure of leaders who have no criminal record to third countries of exile.

These considerations militate for modesty. We should highlight the valuable technical lessons that the Congolese experience has provided--the JPT and CLO concepts, the evolving doctrine of robust peacekeeping, and strong UN leadership. But we also need to recognize the limits of what can be done in the confines of the political environment into which blue helmets are deployed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jason K. Stearns is the director of the **Congo Research Group** at the **Center on International Cooperation**, New York University.

ENDNOTES

¹Oxfam, “For Me, But Without Me, Is Against Me: Why Efforts to Stabilize the Eastern Congo Are Not Working,” Policy Briefing, July 2012.

²UN Security Council Resolution 1925, Article 12.

³The brigade was initially proposed as part of an interposition force for the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICLGR), then adopted by the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), and eventually integrated into MONUSCO.

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Center on International Cooperation

726 Broadway, Suite 543

New York, NY 10003

cic.nyu.edu