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

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STIMSON

On October 20, 2021, 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 Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA). This discussion was part of a series of workshops that examine how the activities included in peace operations' mandates can be better prioritized, sequenced, and grounded in a political strategy. This was the fifth consecutive year in which these partners convened discussions in support of the mandate negotiations on MINUSCA. 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 German Federal Foreign Office.

Introduction

The UN Security Council is expected to renew the mandate of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) in November 2021. MINUSCA now confronts a more challenging environment compared with the period leading up to last year's mandate renewal, particularly in the aftermath of the January 2021 armed rebellion that swept toward the capital, Bangui, following presidential elections in December 2020.

In this context, the International Peace Institute (IPI), the Stimson Center, and Security Council Report co-hosted a virtual roundtable discussion on October 20, 2021. This roundtable offered a platform for member states, UN stakeholders, civil society representatives, and independent experts to share their assessments of the situation in the Central African Republic (CAR) in a frank and collaborative environment. The discussion was intended to help the Security Council make more informed decisions with respect to the prioritization and sequencing of MINUSCA's mandate and the mission's strategic orientation and actions on the ground.¹

Participants largely agreed that MINUSCA's strategic priorities are still relevant to the context in CAR and that the current mandate offers the mission valuable flexibility, despite some concerns that it may be too long. They stressed that MINUSCA will need to continue to "prioritize its priorities" over the coming months as various political and security issues emerge. The mission will likely need to balance the following:

- Helping rebuild momentum for the 2019 Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation;
- Facilitating inclusive processes for political dialogue and the extension of state authority;
- Supporting nascent cease-fire monitoring arrangements;
- Refining support to national security institutions;
- Strengthening its protection capabilities across the country; and
- Providing technical and logistical support to local elections scheduled for September 2022.

Participants emphasized that these points should all feature prominently in the upcoming mandate and should be reinforced with unified political

¹ UN Security Council Resolution 2552 (November 12, 2020), UN Doc. S/RES/2552.

support from the Security Council. Participants also stressed the value of closer cooperation between the mission and humanitarian partners to help mitigate the conditions facing internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees. They highlighted the value of more effective regional coordination between CAR and neighboring countries as well as strengthened coordination between the mission and other international organizations working in the country.

Conflict Analysis

CAR's political and security landscape deteriorated at the end of 2020. Coordinated armed attacks by the Coalition of Patriots for Change (*Coalition des patriotes pour le changement*, or CPC) following the December 2020 elections led the Central African government to respond with a military offensive that carried through much of 2021. Recent regional initiatives to revive the momentum of the country's peace agreement, underpinned by President Faustin-Archange Touadéra's declaration of a unilateral cease-fire in October 2021, have created new (albeit limited) space for political progress. This opportunity comes in the wake of legislative elections in March, as well as the announcement of an upcoming national "republican dialogue" initiative. However, these fledgling political initiatives are at risk, as insecurity and widespread human rights abuses committed by both signatory armed groups and national security forces and their bilateral partners directly challenge their durability.

Political Process and Implementation of the Peace Agreement

Progress in implementing the 2019 political agreement remained stalled for much of the year, exacerbated by limited support for broader political and governance initiatives. Six signatory armed groups (including the members of the CPC) renounced their support for the agreement and its various implementation mechanisms following the armed offensives in early 2021.² Four of these six

groups later indicated their willingness to rejoin the agreement in exchange for additional concessions from the Central African government, although divisions within these coalitions persist.³

Following the conclusion of legislative elections and the establishment of a new government and legislature, other political initiatives emerged. The government announced the formation of a republican dialogue involving Central African stakeholders and constituencies including political parties, religious groups, and civil society representatives. However, contention remains over whether to include armed groups in the dialogue. Some participants stressed that the dialogue needs to be more inclusive—including of women, youth, and people from diverse geographic and religious backgrounds—in order to be a people-centered process that will improve decentralization efforts and strengthen both formal and informal political processes.

This is particularly important in the broader context of a lack of inclusivity in political processes and shrinking democratic space. Most opposition leaders now reside outside of CAR. Some participants shared their perspective that the government's implementation of the peace agreement has not been as inclusive as intended, demonstrated by limited engagement with community-level organizations outside of Bangui that regularly interact with the signatory armed groups. One participant shared their experience that many of these organizations do not feel ownership over decision-making processes (particularly in the government) and lack the civic space to influence national authorities. In addition, any dialogue with armed groups continues to exclude CPC-affiliated armed groups.

Participants affirmed that meaningful political progress rather than military operations is the only sustainable solution to the country's crisis. Two recent developments emerged as possible opportunities to revive support for the 2019 political agreement and foster political dialogue throughout the country.

First, the Heads of State and Government of the

² UN Security Council, *Central African Republic—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2021/146, February 16, 2021, para. 4.

³ UN Security Council, *Central African Republic—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2021/867, October 12, 2021, para. 10.

International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) adopted a roadmap for CAR in September 2021 to revitalize high-level support for the country's peace process.⁴ Two significant features of the roadmap include a request for the government to declare a cease-fire and for the ICGLR to continue consulting with leaders of the armed groups to encourage them to renounce violence. Stronger involvement on CAR by this regional mechanism and some of its member states (e.g., Angola and Rwanda) comes at a time when the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the regional community that worked alongside the Central African government for many years, has been less prominent.⁵

The government took a meaningful step in advancing the roadmap when President Touadéra declared a unilateral cease-fire on October 15, 2021. A few days later, during his briefing to the UN Security Council, Touadéra urged the council to provide unified political backing to the cease-fire, the political process, and MINUSCA's mandate renewal. The G5+ grouping of partner states and international institutions welcomed the cease-fire, framing it as a necessary precursor to ending all armed action and facilitating inclusive political dialogue between the government and the signatory armed groups.⁶

The upcoming local elections (currently scheduled for September 2022) provide a second opportunity. These elections will likely be another political landmark for the country, especially in enabling decentralization and extending the government's presence farther beyond the capital. One participant noted that these elections would be the first opportunity for Central Africans to elect local government officials in over three decades, the last elections having taken place in 1988. MINUSCA's successful technical, operational, and logistical support for the presidential and legislative elections in 2020 became a point of reference for ways in which the UN could continue providing this support in the future.

Armed Conflict Dynamics and the Protection of Civilians

Although overall levels of armed violence have decreased since early 2021, persistent clashes between armed groups and national defense forces assisted by bilateral partners and other security forces amplify threats to civilians. The Central African government continues to pursue large-scale military offensives while also promoting political dialogue. Security violations of the 2019 political agreement rose 12 percent in June–September compared with the previous four-month period (from 495 to 559 incidents), and civilians were the targets in more than two-thirds of incidents. MINUSCA also reported that signatory armed groups and national security forces and their partners were responsible for significantly more incidents of human rights violations and abuse compared with earlier in the year, with the worst violations consisting of extrajudicial killings by bilateral partners and other security personnel. Investigations by the mission reveal that most civilian deaths are attributable to “excessive use of force” by national security forces and their partners.⁷

Participants affirmed that the protection of civilians must remain at the heart of MINUSCA's mandate, particularly during this period of heightened tensions. MINUSCA is continuing to reinforce its military and police components at the levels set out in Security Council Resolution 2566 (2021) so that it can more effectively protect civilians, facilitate humanitarian access, and prevent further deterioration of security conditions.⁸ However, participants acknowledged that capacity gaps hinder MINUSCA's ability to address these goals effectively. Some participants highlighted the continued need for early-warning mechanisms and for a redoubling of prevention efforts under the mission's protection strategy.

Discussions during the workshop gravitated toward three emerging factors that impede

4 International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, “Final Communiqué: Mini-Summit of ICGLR on the Political and Security Situation in the Central African Republic,” September 16, 2021, available at https://icglr.org/images/PressReleases/ENG_Final_Communique_3rd_Mini-Summit_ICGLR_-_16SET2021.pdf.

5 UN Doc. S/2021/867, para. 29.

6 The G5+ partners include the African Union, ECCAS, the European Union, France, the UN, the United States, and the World Bank. See: US Embassy in Central African Republic, “G5+ Joint Press Release,” October 16, 2021.

7 UN Doc. S/2021/867, paras. 21, 51–54.

8 UN Security Council Resolution 2566 (March 12, 2021), UN Doc. S/RES/2566, para. 2.

MINUSCA's ability to respond to security threats in a holistic manner. First, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) left by armed groups along main routes have decreased the mission's mobility and continue to pose threats to the civilian population, peacekeepers, mission personnel, and humanitarian actors. One participant emphasized that this is a recent tactical evolution and that many of the uniformed contingents serving in MINUSCA do not have the necessary capabilities or expertise to quickly neutralize these IEDs. To adequately tackle this challenge going forward, the mission will require more financial and operational resources. Participants also encouraged the inclusion of stronger language in the mandate to address the use of IEDs.

Second, the mission's mobility is further hampered by more frequent violations of the status-of-forces agreement between the UN and the Central African government, which is becoming an area of mounting political concern for the mission.

Third, the growing presence of armed mercenaries (i.e., security partners deployed under bilateral arrangements outside of international legal frameworks) make the overall environment less conducive to the protection of civilians.⁹ These concerns centered on the Wagner Group, a Russia-based private security company that is actively supporting the Central African national security forces. Multiple participants shared the concern that the Wagner Group could pose a threat to the civilian population and to the mission's work, with one suggesting that UN stakeholders should name the group specifically in future reporting and statements.

Human Rights Situation and the Humanitarian Environment

Human rights conditions in CAR remain deeply concerning, with a notable increase in human rights violations reported by the mission since early 2021. Some speakers called attention to the joint report published by MINUSCA and the Office of

the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in August 2021 on human rights violations linked to the country's presidential and legislative elections. They emphasized that the reporting process and the mission's human rights mandate are valuable political tools, highlighting that the government's positive reception of the findings would support the UN in affirming human rights as a priority in all its work.

These human rights issues also intersected with discussions about accountability. One participant raised the issue of the UN's Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP) in the context of MINUSCA's security-sector support to CAR and encouraged the mission to reinforce this tool. Participants also highlighted the mission's ongoing efforts to prevent and address incidents of sexual exploitation and abuse. A prominent example is the UN Secretariat's repatriation of a Gabonese military contingent in September following serious allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse and the subsequent lack of action by the Gabonese government.

Multiple participants raised concerns about deteriorating humanitarian conditions across many of the country's provinces. MINUSCA recently reported that 63 percent of the population needs humanitarian assistance and protection, with 2.2 million individuals in dire need. Refugee and IDP populations are most vulnerable to the negative effects of fighting between government forces and signatory armed groups.¹⁰ One participant emphasized the need to reinforce the mission's capacity to create access for humanitarian aid, particularly to remote or isolated communities. In addition to ongoing insecurity, poor road conditions (especially following heavy rainfall), limited infrastructure, and insufficient access to basic services such as electricity and clean water exacerbate humanitarian needs and impede the ability of MINUSCA and the UN country team to reach these communities. These issues will become even more relevant to the mission's work if the government's cease-fire holds and individuals

⁹ See: UN Security Council, 8882nd Meeting, UN Doc. S/PV.8882, October 18, 2021, statements by France, Norway, and the United Kingdom; and UN Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic Extended Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2536 (2020)*, UN Doc. S/2021/569, June 25, 2021.

¹⁰ As of September 30, 2021, there were more than 722,000 IDPs in CAR and more than 710,000 Central African refugees in neighboring countries. UNHCR, "Operational Data Portal: Central African Republic," available at <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/caf>.

beginning returning to their communities of origin.

Prioritizing and Sequencing MINUSCA's Mandate

Participants agreed that MINUSCA's mandate is broad enough to still be relevant to the current context and that its priority tasks cover the breadth of issues in CAR. Most of the discussion gravitated toward identifying ways that MINUSCA can better “prioritize its priorities” amid rising needs across the country, the population's high expectations of the UN, and the mission's limited resources. Prioritization also impacts how MINUSCA pursues its short-term priorities on crisis response and its long-term responsibilities to help Central Africans foster a more sustainable peace. The discussion also centered on ways in which the upcoming mandate can position MINUSCA—backed by a unified Security Council—to effectively capitalize on nascent political opportunities emerging from the ICGLR roadmap and the government's unilateral cease-fire.

Participants offered some suggestions to both reinforce the mandate's language and help refine the mission's strategies and operations. They recommended that the mandate more explicitly focus on the mission's good offices role, the facilitation of inclusive dialogue at both the political and community levels, and capacity-building support to civil society, including women's and youth organizations. They also stressed the importance of amplifying the mission's protection efforts and refining its support to CAR's security sector. Other suggestions touched on how the UN can improve humanitarian access outside of Bangui and the necessity of strengthening MINUSCA's strategic communications efforts.

Support to the Political Process

Helping Central African authorities sustain political momentum and revive support for the 2019 political agreement should be a central focus for MINUSCA over the coming months. Participants acknowledged that the upcoming

mandate would need to reflect recent political developments and the ICGLR roadmap. Providing MINUSCA with an explicit mandate to assist the government in implementing the roadmap's provisions and reengaging signatory armed groups will likely be an important area of focus moving forward. However, some participants reflected that MINUSCA's political impact will be limited if the Security Council cannot both provide unified political support to the mission and exert coordinated pressure on the parties to the conflict.

Another line of discussion focused on potential ways in which the mission can provide direct support to the cease-fire process considering its existing disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) and security sector reform (SSR) initiatives. MINUSCA will likely be asked to play a prominent role in observing and supporting cease-fire arrangements, and multiple participants stressed that MINUSCA will need to have an explicit mandate to set up appropriate mechanisms and secure additional resources for this purpose. Such a mandate would also help MINUSCA coordinate with armed actors across the country, which some participants emphasized was greatly needed to ensure the safety and security of both civilians and peacekeepers deployed on the ground. Based on President Touadéra's request for stronger support to DDR and SSR initiatives during his October 2021 briefing to the Security Council, another participant suggested that MINUSCA could play a more active role in coordinating cross-border security cooperation with neighboring countries.¹¹

Likewise, participants stressed that the mandate should more systematically emphasize the mission's role in facilitating regional coordination to secure border areas. The head of mission regularly engages with other UN entities in the region as well as officials from neighboring countries, bilateral partners, and regional organizations like the African Union, ECCAS, the ICGLR, and the European Union. Considering recent developments and the growing influence of bilateral and regional partners on CAR's conflict dynamics, the mission cannot sustain its own political efforts in isolation from the actions of

¹¹ UN Doc. S/PV.8882, pp. 2–5.

these partners.

The Security Council can also strengthen the mandate's language on political inclusivity by encouraging the Central African government to diversify the participants in its dialogue efforts, including by ensuring women and youth are represented in the upcoming republican dialogue. Finally, some participants stressed that the Security Council should retain MINUSCA's mandate to assist Central African authorities in organizing elections. The new mandate should include specific language on supporting the organization of the local elections set for September 2022, as current provisions in the mandate are no longer relevant following the completion of presidential and legislative elections earlier this year.

Protecting Civilians

Protecting civilians is the priority task in the mission's current mandate, and participants agreed that this responsibility continues to be among the UN's most relevant contributions. Protecting the civilian population is first and foremost the Central African government's responsibility, and MINUSCA is mandated to complement a "comprehensive and integrated approach" to protecting civilians from violence by all armed groups and local militias. A few participants commented that all armed actors must be encouraged to protect civilians, regardless of affiliation and that the government has a central role to play in this. Most acknowledged that significant gaps in the protection of civilians persist despite the mission's refocused posture and the ongoing arrival of troop reinforcements.

Others felt that MINUSCA's existing efforts to increase its troops' mobility, continuously adjust its footprint in hot-spot areas, and strengthen early-warning mechanisms and community-alert networks were effective channels for strengthening its response to threats to civilians. Participants also encouraged stronger language in the mandate to address the use of IEDs and requested that troop-contributing countries ensure their contingents are fully trained and resourced to neutralize the impact of such devices.

One line of discussion focused on whether the mission should take a more proactive posture to reduce the presence of armed groups in the country, which could be enabled by adapting the mission's rules of engagement. One participant emphasized that the mission has struggled to prevent attacks against civilians and is often forced to react to situations already underway. They highlighted that other UN peacekeeping operations have the mandates and capabilities to robustly neutralize armed groups and asked whether MINUSCA should be equipped with a rapid intervention force or provided updated rules of engagement.

Participants also encouraged the Security Council to have frank discussions about reinforcing the mandate's language on the HRDDP, particularly considering the growing number of violations and abuses attributed to the Central African security forces and their partners. Similarly, some participants urged the Security Council to have forthright discussions about mercenaries in the country and the risks they pose to both the civilian population and UN peacekeepers.

Strategic Communications

A few speakers highlighted that MINUSCA, backed by stronger language in its mandate, should develop a more comprehensive communications strategy. Strategic communications are critical to mandate implementation and the management of host-community expectations.¹² While MINUSCA's mandate already has language on strategic communications and the mission has implemented programs to sensitize the Central African population to its mandate and activities, some participants felt that these efforts were insufficient. A few participants remarked that the mandate of the mission is not well understood and its activities are not always visible enough to civil society, resulting in frustration that the mission is not doing more. Refocusing on sustainable engagement with communities could go a long way in generating more support for the mission among the population.

In addition, participants observed the increasing

¹² Jake Sherman and Albert Trithart, "Strategic Communications in UN Peace Operations: From an Afterthought to an Operational Necessity," International Peace Institute, August 2021.

prevalence of coordinated misinformation and disinformation campaigns against the mission. These not only shape negative perceptions of the mission's work but also foster distrust within the population and increase security risks to UN peacekeepers. With the UN expected to update its Strategic Communications and Public Information Policy for peacekeeping operations to account for misinformation and disinformation in the coming months, MINUSCA is well positioned to lead efforts in CAR against this emerging threat.

Humanitarian Access

Several speakers further urged MINUSCA, in partnership with the UN country team and other humanitarian partners, to seize the opportunity offered by the cease-fire to reach populations isolated by persistent clashes between government forces and signatory armed groups or by geographic barriers. One participant urged UN member states to provide more financial support, whether through the mission or other channels, to help the country rebuild basic infrastructure. Participants also noted that the UN had only raised 60 percent of the \$445 million required to provide life-saving assistance to civilians in need.¹³

Conclusion

Following a year of persistent crisis, MINUSCA confronts a fragile context. While recent developments suggest new (albeit fledgling) momentum in CAR's political processes, the country faces an

increasingly crowded and fragile security landscape, alarming human rights and humanitarian conditions, and structural socioeconomic challenges. To address these challenges, MINUSCA is tasked with implementing one of the broadest multidimensional mandates of any UN mission.

Workshop participants felt that MINUSCA's mandate and existing strategies afford the mission sufficient flexibility to navigate this difficult landscape. However, political unity within the Security Council and slight adaptations to the mission's mandated tasks could help the UN better prepare for a potentially volatile situation moving forward. Suggestions for revisions to the mandate's language included:

- Explicitly linking the mission's good offices role to the ICGLR roadmap and the government's republican dialogue initiative;
- Fostering more inclusive dialogue and governance processes at all levels of society, particularly with the substantive involvement of women and youth;
- Enabling the mission to support cease-fire arrangements while realigning the UN's engagement with national security institutions;
- Embracing a more prevention-oriented strategy for protecting civilians;
- Allocating the mission more resources to help both humanitarian actors and aid reach the parts of the country in greatest need; and
- Bolstering language on strategic communications.

¹³ UN Doc. S/2021/867, para. 32.

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