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

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STIMSON

On November 23, 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 UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). 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 political strategy. This was the third 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 German Federal Foreign Office.

Introduction

The UN Security Council is expected to renew the mandate of the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) in December 2021. Discussions on MONUSCO's mandate come at a crucial moment for both the country and the mission. Recent political developments have given new momentum to efforts by the Congolese government to implement its comprehensive reform agenda, but continued political competition and persistent insecurity in the country's eastern region present serious risks. The UN presence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is also undergoing a significant reconfiguration, driven by MONUSCO's phased and progressive transition.

In this context, the International Peace Institute (IPI), the Stimson Center, and Security Council Report co-hosted a virtual roundtable discussion on November 23, 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 DRC 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 MONUSCO's mandate and the mission's strategic orientation and actions on the ground.

Several participants acknowledged that MONUSCO's mandate remains relevant to the DRC's current context and reflects the necessary support the UN can provide to the country.¹ Considering MONUSCO's ongoing withdrawal from the country, discussions focused on ways to reinforce the mission's efforts and encourage other partners to provide support while ensuring that the mission's mandate remains effective, realistic, and achievable. To attain these goals, the mission will likely need to focus on the following priorities during the next mandate cycle:

On the general mandate:

- Maintain protection of civilians as a core priority and support the stabilization and strengthening of state institutions through reforms;
- Welcome the government's program of action (2021–2023) and the mission's transition plan, referencing Resolution 2594 on peace operations transitions as appropriate;

¹ UN Security Council Resolution 2556 (December 18, 2020), UN Doc. S/RES/2556.

- Reinforce expectations for an inclusive framework for political dialogue; and
- Balance support for election preparations with support for governance reforms.

On the transition process:

- Maintain the mission’s budget, resources, and capabilities through 2022 given the many protection needs and emerging challenges;
- Continue including civil society in the joint working group on MONUSCO’s transition and engage in regular consultation with diverse civil society actors in conflict-affected areas, and with women, youth, and marginalized groups; and
- Encourage increased financing of the UN country team to facilitate the gradual transition of tasks.

On the protection of civilians:

- Continue strengthening the mission’s early-warning and rapid-response systems;
- Increase joint operations with the Congolese armed forces in the eastern conflict-affected provinces in accordance with the UN’s Human Rights Due Diligence Policy;
- Continue investing in the Force Intervention Brigade’s capacity to mitigate asymmetric security threats;
- Maintain the capacity to deploy flexibly in response to protection threats in areas where the mission does not maintain a physical protection presence; and
- Continue coordinating with the UN country team on dialogue and engagement activities and on the creation of a protective environment.

On stabilization and security sector reforms:

- Focus resources and activities on supporting implementation of the Congolese government’s program of action (2021–2023) and meeting the benchmarks set out in the mission’s transition plan and establish the key priorities for 2022.

Conflict Analysis

The DRC’s political landscape shifted throughout 2021. The April 2021 confirmation of a new parliamentary majority known as the “sacred union of the nation” (*Union sacrée de la nation*) ended the power-sharing agreement between current President Félix Tshisekedi and his predecessor Joseph Kabila. Backed by a unified government, Tshisekedi spearheaded a reform agenda focused on strengthening the country’s security and justice institutions while simultaneously declaring martial law in North Kivu and Ituri provinces to counter deteriorating security conditions. Protection challenges persist in much of eastern DRC, partially as the result of increased attacks by armed militias like the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) and the Cooperative for Development of the Congo (CODECO). These dynamics amplify the country’s already significant humanitarian needs.

Political Dynamics

Much of Tshisekedi’s initial term in office was spent navigating a difficult political coalition with former President Kabila and the Common Front for Congo (*Front commun pour le Congo*, or FCC). Tshisekedi announced the end of this coalition in December 2020 and worked over subsequent months to nominate and secure parliamentary approval for a new government composed of a fifty-seven-member cabinet. Following its affirmation in April 2021, Tshisekedi announced a new program of action from 2021 to 2023. The program is built around the establishment of security in the eastern provinces through the protection of civilians; neutralization of armed groups; establishment of a new disarmament, demobilization, community reintegration, and stabilization program (P-DDRCS); adoption of security sector, justice, and rule of law reforms; creation of new development programs; and preparations for the 2023 election cycle.²

Participants discussed opportunities and challenges emerging from this political landscape. Some speakers pointed to the government’s creation of the P-DDRCS, the establishment of a

² UN Security Council, *United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2021/587, June 21, 2021, para. 4.

national truth and reconciliation commission, and heightened strategic engagement with regional partners as clear examples of progress. Others observed that the new government has committed to improving its relationships with both MONUSCO and the international community more broadly, noting that its program of action is closely aligned with internationally identified priorities for the country's stabilization and development. These developments present opportunities for the UN and other international partners to help maintain political momentum and provide meaningful support to the government's reform agenda.

Nonetheless, others expressed more caution. Though the *Union sacrée* has inspired optimism due to its relative novelty, participants stressed that its progress could only be evaluated after it has had more time to deliver the proposed reforms. According to one participant, its ability to do so will depend on the subsiding of factional fighting within the ruling coalition.

Participants also pointed out the rise in political competition in the run-up to the 2023 national and local elections. Over the past few months, MONUSCO has used its good offices role to engage with the national electoral commission, government officials, political parties, and civil society organizations on the upcoming election cycle, resulting in stakeholders widely acknowledging the importance of respecting the electoral timeline. However, tumultuous political discussions over the DRC's election laws, controversy over appointments to the electoral commission, and growing political competition suggest that the 2023 elections could be a significant source of political and societal tension in 2022.³ Some participants also expressed concern that the growing public focus on the elections could divert domestic and international attention and resources away from the government's program of action.

The need to strengthen justice systems, the rule of

law, and state institutions were also highlighted during the workshop. Some participants welcomed the new government's relatively strong focus on justice and acknowledged the establishment of a joint commission between the government and the UN as a first step toward establishing the national commission on transitional justice and reconciliation.⁴ Other participants underlined the P-DDRCS as a key deliverable of the government's program of action that should increase the focus on community-led reconciliation and reintegration efforts rather than the integration of ex-combatants into government security institutions.

Armed Conflict Dynamics and the Protection of Civilians

Security conditions in Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu provinces have deteriorated in recent months due to intercommunal violence and increased attacks by armed groups—some of which may be in response to the government's imposition of martial law in May. Frequent attacks by the ADF, CODECO, and other armed militias have led to civilian deaths, human rights violations, abductions, and internal displacement. MONUSCO reported that nearly 96 percent of human rights violations committed between June and July 2021 occurred in these conflict-affected provinces.⁵ The mission also estimated that armed militias were responsible for approximately 49 percent of all documented human rights violations, while state security forces were responsible for roughly 32 percent.⁶ Conflict-related sexual violence perpetrated by both armed groups and state forces remains a persistent problem, with South Kivu and North Kivu provinces witnessing the most incidents between June and July (36 percent and 21 percent, respectively).⁷ And while the security situation reportedly improved in Tanganyika province (the region MONUSCO anticipates withdrawing from in mid-2022), the mission continued to observe isolated criminal incidents and ambushes. Nonetheless, overall

3 David Zounmenou, "Will the DRC's 'Sacred Union' Deliver Electoral Reform?" Institute for Security Studies, August 2021; UN Doc. S/2021/857, p. 4.

4 UN Human Rights Council Resolution 48/20 (October 13, 2021), UN Doc. A/HRC/RES/48/20, para. 21.

5 UN Security Council, *United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2021/807, September 17, 2021, para. 21.

6 UN Security Council, *United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2021/987, December 1, 2021, para. 20.

7 UN Doc. S/2021/807, para. 58.

progress on respect for human rights can be seen, with the UN Joint Human Rights Office in the DRC reporting a decrease in the national rate of human rights violations compared with previous reporting periods.⁸

According to one participant, protection of civilians (POC) efforts by military and nonmilitary components in the mission should focus on neutralizing armed groups. The mission continues to implement a multidimensional POC strategy based on regular political engagement and dialogue, military operations (including offensives against armed groups through the Force Intervention Brigade), responses to protection threats, support to the Congolese armed forces and police, and stabilization efforts focused on strengthening state capacity and the rule of law. The transition process has also led the mission to shift how it undertakes protection activities in areas where it is preparing to withdraw, focusing less on physical protection and more on working with state actors, civil society (including women- and youth-led organizations), and UN agencies, funds, and programs to strengthen the protective environment. Nonetheless, participants urged MONUSCO to remain flexible in its projection of force (including in areas where it no longer maintains a permanent presence) as security conditions continue to evolve.

Notably, some participants shared that civilians, UN peacekeepers, and humanitarian actors operating in conflict-affected provinces are confronting more frequent asymmetric attacks compared to previous years. They specifically pointed to the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), a tactic increasingly favored by the ADF that features prominently in the secretary-general's most recent report on MONUSCO.⁹ While a few participants maintained that the mission has the necessary expertise and resources to confront the use of IEDs, this trend may require increased attention if it continues. These changes in the threat landscape—which the UN peacekeeping operations in the Central African Republic and

Mali have also recently confronted—will likely present new and unexpected challenges for MONUSCO over the coming months.

Participants also highlighted the importance of regional collaboration to address the transnational networks and dynamics fueling the activities of armed groups. Recognizing these dynamics, the Congolese government has sought to improve its relationships in the region. The DRC has actively participated in the Contact and Coordination Group, a coalition of intelligence and security service representatives from Burundi, the DRC, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda mandated to promote nonmilitary measures to end security threats in eastern DRC pursuant to the UN Strategy for Peace Consolidation, Conflict Prevention and Conflict Resolution in the Great Lakes Region.¹⁰

In July 2021, the Contact and Coordination Group adopted an action plan and created a Joint Operations Coordination Center to implement four priorities: (1) disarming and repatriating armed militias through community-driven approaches; (2) cutting off arms, recruitment, and financial supply networks; (3) strengthening disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs; and (4) supporting cross-border economic opportunities.¹¹ UN country teams in Angola, Burundi, the DRC, Rwanda, and Uganda have also drawn on support from the UN Peacebuilding Fund to develop cross-border projects. Some participants considered these efforts essential to making meaningful progress on reducing insecurity, noting that the Congolese government is unable to address the regional drivers of insecurity on its own.

MONUSCO's Transition Process

MONUSCO is currently undergoing a progressive and phased transition based on Security Council Resolution 2556. The transition process has been conceptualized on the basis of multiple inputs, including regular consultations with Congolese civil society organizations. It also builds upon the

⁸ UN Doc. A/HRC/RES/48/20, para. 19.

⁹ UN Doc. S/2021/807, paras. 34–36, 78.

¹⁰ UN Security Council, *United Nations Strategy for Peace Consolidation, Conflict Prevention and Conflict Resolution in the Great Lakes Region*, UN Doc. S/2020/1168, December 4, 2020.

¹¹ United Nations, African Union, and International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, “Fourth Meeting of Heads of Intelligence and Security Services of Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania—Final Communiqué,” July 6, 2021, para. 5.

foundations laid by the 2019 independent strategic review of MONUSCO (led by Youssef Mahmoud) and the 2020 Joint Strategy on the Progressive and Phased Drawdown of MONUSCO (developed jointly by the mission and the Congolese government). As the first major step in the transition process, MONUSCO withdrew its uniformed personnel from the Kasai provinces on June 30, 2021 (though it continues to support peacebuilding and stabilization efforts there).¹² Plans are now in place to withdraw UN troops from Tanganyika province by mid-2022, depending on security conditions.¹³

The secretary-general's most recent report on MONUSCO provides a comprehensive transition plan, the result of a joint working group formed by the Congolese government and the mission in July. The plan was developed through a process of systematic consultations between the mission and the UN country team, the government, and civil society organizations. Participants heralded this development as a demonstration of the government's commitment to restore state institutions and protect civilians across the country. It serves as an agreed road map between the mission and the state on how to move forward, articulating a vision for the mission's exit and providing timelines and indicative benchmarks to evaluate substantive progress.¹⁴ For the drawdown to proceed, it provides eighteen benchmark targets and supporting indicators for MONUSCO to meet between 2021 and 2024. The plan puts significant focus on the protection of civilians, disarmament and demobilization efforts, and activities to be conducted in collaboration with UN agencies, funds, and programs (e.g., community stabilization, restoration of state authority).¹⁵ Some participants urged the Security Council not to view the transition plan or its current timetable as inevitable but rather to ensure that the timing of MONUSCO's transition out of the country (or lack thereof) is dependent on fulfillment of the indicators.

Considering the transition's anticipated next steps, some participants reflected on how MONUSCO's withdrawal from the Kasai provinces could inform its preparations for drawing down in Tanganyika province. They highlighted the imperative of early transition planning and stressed that the UN's priorities should be guided by the needs and aspirations of the communities from which peacekeeping operations are withdrawing. Multiple speakers also emphasized the value of continuous input from civil society, particularly in monitoring the implementation and impact of the transition plan. Others focused on the importance of sustaining resources for the UN during the transition process. One participant discouraged the Security Council from reducing the mission's authorized levels of uniformed personnel, stressing that MONUSCO needs all available resources to implement the transition plan. Another encouraged international partners to invest more funding in peacebuilding and stabilization projects in areas where the mission has already withdrawn, including through increased support to the UN country team.

Humanitarian Conditions

MONUSCO's work in the DRC is made more challenging by the deteriorating humanitarian conditions. There are currently more than 5.2 million internally displaced persons in the country, an increase of 1.3 million since 2020 due to a combination of armed violence and natural disasters.¹⁶ And while the DRC also hosts 536,000 refugees from neighboring countries, the country's humanitarian response plan remains less than 40 percent funded, raising serious concerns over how the international community or the Congolese government will address poor living conditions and increased food insecurity.¹⁷ These challenges are exacerbated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the recent Ebola outbreak in North Kivu province, which are straining the country's already limited healthcare systems.¹⁸

12 UN Doc. S/2021/807, para. 62.

13 Security Council Report, "July 2021 Monthly Forecast—Democratic Republic of the Congo," June 30, 2021.

14 UN Doc. S/2021/807, Annex, paras. 14–16.

15 *Ibid.*, para. 19.

16 UN Refugee Agency, "Democratic Republic of the Congo," available at <https://reporting.unhcr.org/drc>; UN Doc. S/2021/807, para. 27.

17 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)," available at <https://www.unocha.org/drc>; UN Doc. S/2021/807, para. 27.

18 UN Doc. S/2021/807, para. 29.

Prioritization and Sequencing MONUSCO's Mandate

Ultimately, participants agreed that MONUSCO's mandate remains relevant to the DRC's current context and reflects the necessary support the UN can provide. Much of the discussion focused on how to reinforce MONUSCO's transition process and ensure that it would not reduce or impair the UN's ability to deliver support to the country.

Participants suggested updating the mission's mandate to account for recent progress on its transition and changes in the country's political and security dynamics. They recommended that the mandate welcome MONUSCO's transition plan and benchmarks and enable the mission to implement the plan in a flexible, integrated, and inclusive manner. They also stressed the importance of the mission's good offices mandate in encouraging political dialogue prior to the 2023 election cycle and in calling for domestic and international support to help the government implement its program of action. Others proposed that the mission focus its robust POC mandate on the conflict-affected eastern provinces while remaining responsive to protection threats in the areas where it is drawing down. Participants also called for stabilization programming that leverages and augments the capabilities of domestic actors (including women- and youth-led grassroots organizations), MONUSCO, and the UN country team.

Protection of Civilians

Participants were clear that the protection of civilians should remain at the core of MONUSCO's work as its overarching strategic priority. Discussions gravitated around ways the Security Council can support MONUSCO in balancing a robust POC mandate in the country's eastern provinces with the need for diverse protection strategies in areas where the mission has downsized or no longer maintains uniformed personnel. It was suggested that the mission continue to strengthen its early-warning and rapid-response

systems and to work closely with domestic civil society organizations to monitor human rights conditions.

Some participants encouraged MONUSCO to coordinate and cooperate closely with the UN country team to reinforce its work on POC during the transition.¹⁹ However, many felt that the level of physical protection MONUSCO can provide is fundamentally different from that of a UN presence without uniformed personnel. The success of MONUSCO's transition will thus be determined by the Security Council's ability to support both Congolese and UN stakeholders in adapting to this reality. Toward this end, it is essential that the mission work with the Congolese government to reassume full ownership of POC in the country. However, some participants reflected that the UN's recent experience in Sudan has shown the practical challenges of a peacekeeping mission departing when the government is unable to fully assume these responsibilities.

Others felt that MONUSCO could also increase joint operations with Congolese security forces, particularly to conduct robust operations in the eastern part of the country, in compliance with the UN's Human Rights Due Diligence Policy. Some stressed that MONUSCO should retain flexible deployment capabilities so that it can quickly respond to protection threats in parts of the country where it does not retain a full-time physical presence. One participant also suggested that MONUSCO could continue to support the Force Intervention Brigade in better preparing and responding to asymmetric security threats. Other participants urged the council not to reduce MONUSCO's authorized levels of troops, police, or civilians, arguing that these capacities remain important to help the mission deliver on its POC mandate while it reconfigures its presence.

Support to MONUSCO's Transition Process

The upcoming mandate renewal provides a valuable opportunity to consolidate the Security Council's support for MONUSCO's ongoing transition process. Some felt that, in addition to

¹⁹ For more information, see: Damian Lilly, "Considering the Protection of Civilians during UN Peacekeeping Transitions," International Peace Institute, January 2021.

endorsing the transition plan, the council could use the mandate to reinforce the plan's consultative foundation by contextualizing it within the findings of the 2019 independent strategic review and the 2020 joint transition strategy. One participant cautioned against cutting MONUSCO's budget, given the challenges that lie ahead during the transition process. Other participants commented on how the mission's second strategic priority of strengthening state institutions and advancing reforms can best be achieved through the implementation of the government's program of action and MONUSCO's transition plan.

Noting the consultative processes that contributed to the transition plan's creation, the council's upcoming resolution could also encourage MONUSCO to continue consulting regularly with a diverse constellation of NGOs across the DRC. Some participants highlighted that these organizations and community-led initiatives, especially those outside of Kinshasa, are best positioned to indicate the levels of risk in certain areas and can help monitor the implementation of the transition plan. There was general agreement among participants that civil society should continue to be included in the joint working group on the transition.

Other parts of the discussion focused on how the Security Council can use the upcoming mandate negotiations to raise sensitive issues regarding the transition process. While commending the formulation of comprehensive benchmarks, two participants reflected that the mission would not likely fully achieve all the benchmark indicators prior to its eventual departure. Instead, they stressed that the government, the Congolese people, the mission, and the council would likely need to develop more nuanced understandings of how to prioritize the benchmarks, account for gradual (but not complete) progress, and use these measures to adjust the transition in real time.

Some participants highlighted the importance of both the council and MONUSCO coordinating joint analysis, planning, and integration with other stakeholders in the country.²⁰ MONUSCO can foster closer cooperation and explore joint

peacebuilding programming with UN agencies, funds, and programs as well as government agencies and local civil society organizations to address the root causes and structural drivers of conflict, such as intercommunal tension. In this regard, there was discussion around the need to invest not only in the mission but also in UN agencies, funds, and programs to provide them with the resources necessary to facilitate the gradual transfer of tasks. One speaker underscored the impact of the UN Peacebuilding Fund over the past year and encouraged both the fund and UN member states to increase their earmarked contributions to the DRC.

Political Dialogue

As attention on the 2023 elections grows over the coming months, participants encouraged MONUSCO to continue its proactive political role. The mission's mandate will likely need to reflect the DRC's changing political environment and reinforce the opportunities the *Union sacrée* presents to achieve governance reforms. Participants also noted that the work of the mission, other UN agencies, and partners in this area should follow the priorities set by the government in its program of action and that the mission should encourage coordinated support for this reform agenda.

Some speakers felt that the mission's mandate will need to strike a delicate balance: on the one hand, it will likely need to task the mission with supporting preparations for the early stages of the election cycle; on the other, the mandate will need to avoid overemphasizing the election process at the expense of other necessary reforms in the security, economic, and political spheres. The Security Council should reinforce its expectation that the Congolese government create an inclusive framework for political dialogue and implement the reforms described in the 2021–2023 program of action.

Other participants emphasized that the mandate should encourage continued progress on regional relations. In particular, the upcoming resolution could emphasize the progress achieved by the

20 For more context, see: UN Security Council Resolution 2594 (September 9, 2021), UN Doc. S/RES/2594.

Contact and Coordination Group and ask the Congolese government to continue prioritizing nonmilitary, civilian-centered strategies to counteract insecurity in eastern DRC. Some speakers proposed that the Security Council mandate MONUSCO to coordinate support for the government's program of action among international partners and multilateral organizations.

Conclusion

Workshop participants felt that MONUSCO's mandate and existing activities position the mission to advance its strategic priorities while also managing its own transition. With a somewhat improved domestic political environment and the growing alignment between the Congolese government, its neighbors, and international partners, the UN has a valuable opportunity to consolidate and build on this progress. Based on this workshop,

suggestions for revisions to MONUSCO's mandate include:

- Integrating the mission's transition plan and benchmarks into the new mandate;
- Ensuring that the mission has the mandate and resources to undertake the transition in a flexible, integrated, and inclusive manner;
- Capitalizing on the mission's good offices to maintain dialogue between political coalitions prior to the 2023 election cycle;
- Encouraging international and regional support for the Congolese government's 2021–2023 program of action;
- Balancing robust protection responsibilities in eastern DRC with flexible and responsive approaches to protection in other parts of the country; and
- Prioritizing inclusive and locally led approaches to stabilization and transitional justice.

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