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Options for Reconfiguring the UN Presence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

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STIMSON

On June 16, 2023, the International Peace Institute (IPI), the Stimson Center, and Security Council Report organized a workshop to discuss the ongoing transition and reconfiguration of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). This discussion was part of a series of workshops that aims to support the sustained engagement of UN member states on how to make the mandates of UN peace operations more realistic, effective, and achievable. This is the fifth year in which the series examined the prioritization and sequencing of MONUSCO's mandated activities. The 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 and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

Introduction

As part of MONUSCO's mandate renewal in December 2022, the UN Security Council called for the secretary-general to outline pathways for the mission's transition and withdrawal from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), along with possible options for the future reconfiguration of the UN's presence in the country, by July 2023.¹ This forthcoming report is also expected to consider the UN's role in light of the deployment of the East African Community Regional Force (EAC-RF) and other international and bilateral initiatives. This past year, the rise of the M23 and other non-state armed groups in eastern DRC has led to the deployment of regional and bilateral forces, while rising anti-MONUSCO sentiment has further restricted the UN's operating space. Following widespread and lethal civilian demonstrations against the mission's perceived ineffectiveness throughout 2022, the government of the DRC notified the UN Security Council of its intention to reassess the agreed timetable for the mission's departure, citing the deep displeasure of the Congolese people.

In this context, the International Peace Institute (IPI), Security Council Report, and the Stimson Center cohosted a roundtable on June 16, 2023, to discuss the UN's presence in the DRC in the short and longer term. Convened under the Chatham House rule of non-attribution, this workshop brought together member states, UN officials, independent experts, and civil society stakeholders. The discussion sought to inform the UN Secretariat's planning and discussions among UN member states on the prioritization and sequencing of MONUSCO's transition and prompt creative thinking on the UN's civilian, police, and military reconfiguration in the country, taking into account the deployment of regional and bilateral forces.

Participants agreed that the protection of civilians (POC) should remain the dominant priority guiding MONUSCO's drawdown across the three eastern provinces of Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu. Furthermore, there is a strong need for the mission to continue supporting the civilian-led delivery of humanitarian aid; disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) processes; and preparations for national elections in late 2023. Looking toward the UN's longer-term reconfiguration in the DRC, participants affirmed that sustainable peace is most likely to be achieved through a multitiered, tailored approach that addresses both immediate security concerns and underlying conflict drivers and leverages the comparative

¹ UN Security Council Resolution 2666 (December 20, 2022), UN Doc. S/RES/2666.

advantages of international and regional stakeholders.

Participants raised several key considerations for MONUSCO's transition and the UN's reconfiguration:

- Prioritize a gradual, responsible, and conditions-based transition that addresses benchmarks 1–4 and 15 in the joint DRC-UN transition plan, emphasizing the protection of civilians as a priority task;
- Develop tailored transition strategies for each of the eastern provinces in collaboration with the UN country team (UNCT), the host government, and local civil society that reflect the unique conflict drivers and dynamics in each region;
- Call upon member states in the region to uphold their political commitment to the Luanda and Nairobi peace processes, ensuring the DRC's and the region's long-term stability;
- Urge member states to provide innovative, robust funding that enables the transfer of programmatic work from the mission to the UNCT where appropriate;
- Continue to support the delivery of humanitarian aid and DDR processes where possible;
- Provide technical expertise in the lead-up to national elections slated for December 2023; and
- Adopt a “right fit,” tailored approach for the UN's longer-term reconfiguration that embraces creative thinking, goes beyond a military approach, and addresses the drivers of conflict.

Rising Instability

The security environment in eastern DRC continues to be undermined by escalating violence, perpetuated by the activities of various local and foreign armed groups operating in the region, including the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), the *Coopérative pour le développement du Congo*

(CODECO), and the M23.² Without a credible source of security, civilians remain in an extremely vulnerable position, with about 26.4 million people (30 percent of the population) in need of protection and humanitarian assistance. In addition, approximately 4.5 million people have been internally displaced due to armed conflict in North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri provinces.³ In eastern DRC, thousands of civilians—particularly women and children—continue to be terrorized by sexual violence perpetrated by armed groups.

Across the eastern provinces, the dynamics and drivers of conflict differ. In Ituri, competition over illegal mining sites remains a key instigator of conflict between armed groups, with civilians directly targeted by the ADF, CODECO, and Zaire militias.⁴ Participants pointed to the June 2023 attack by CODECO on the internally displaced persons camp in Lala, which led to the deaths of at least forty-five civilians, as a sign of the dire security situation.⁵ In North Kivu, the ADF regularly attacks civilians, while the M23 continues to clash with the Congolese armed forces as it seeks to expand the territory under its control. In South Kivu, both foreign and local armed groups are perpetuating insecurity, adding a regional dimension to the conflict environment.⁶ Beyond the instability caused by armed groups, the lack of jobs and economic opportunities fuels banditry and widespread hardship.

Regionally led peace processes remain vital to reduce the threat posed by armed groups to a level that is manageable for Congolese authorities and forces. Notably, the Luanda dialogue process, directed by the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), is imperative for improving relations between the DRC and Rwanda and ensuring regional stability. In turn, the Nairobi peace process, led by the East African Community, continues to provide the best avenue for reducing internal violence and disarming, demobilizing, and reintegrating foreign and local armed groups. Both peace processes are sources of hope for civilians.

² UN Security Council, *United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2023/208, March 20, 2023, para. 12.

³ *Ibid.*, paras. 31 and 101. *IPI Global Observatory*, March 30, 2023.

⁴ *Ibid.*, paras. 13–14.

⁵ UN Security Council, *Press Statement on Situation in Democratic Republic of Congo*, UN Doc. SC/15319, June 13, 2023.

⁶ UN Doc. S/2023/208, paras. 16–24.

However, to ensure their success, regional stakeholders must politically engage and exert pressure at the highest levels, as well as ensure accountability for those perpetrating attacks against civilians.

MONUSCO's Transition and Withdrawal

Participants noted that the government and the UN have reached a preliminary agreement on the “minimum security conditions for the Mission’s responsible, conditions-based exit.”⁷ Out of the original eighteen benchmarks provided in the joint transition plan and approved by UN Security Council Resolution 2612 (2021), benchmarks 1–4 and 15 will likely serve as the parameters for MONUSCO’s ongoing transition.⁸ Any withdrawal should be gradual, responsible, and conditions-based, as a premature exit could jeopardize hard-won progress to date.

Once the revised joint transition plan is agreed upon with the Congolese government, both the state and the mission will need to sensitize the civilian population to this new plan, making it clear that a “gradual” and “conditions-based” withdrawal does not equate to the mission trying to stay in the country longer. This will be particularly important because of popular pressure for the mission to move toward an exit following the December 2023 presidential and legislative elections. The Security Council will thus need to maintain a flexible approach, reviewing and adjusting the revised transition plan as needed after the first six months of implementation.

One participant provided the reminder that the development of an expedited transition plan is a direct response to the Congolese people’s rising

discontent with the UN’s inability to halt continued attacks against civilians in the eastern provinces. This has resulted in part from the population’s outsized expectations for the mission, which do not align with the resources and capabilities MONUSCO currently has at its disposal. Going forward, the mission and UNCT will need to manage expectations given the tremendous reputational damage the mission has already suffered. Ensuring local buy-in to the revised transition plan, including through a bottom-up approach, will be essential to ensure a positive legacy.

In this vein, the new transition plan should be localized, enabling the mission to adopt province-specific transition strategies that reflect the distinct conflict dynamics present in each area. Participants cited MONUSCO’s integrated transition teams as critical for establishing tailored mechanisms and platforms for addressing and preventing violence at the provincial and local levels, along with providing good offices and support to political dialogue and strategic communications at the national level.

Participants affirmed that the UNCT will play a pivotal role throughout the transition, noting that the coordination with the UNCT called for in Resolution 2612 (2021) has already begun. One participant urged UNCT leadership to be meaningfully engaged in the mission’s transition and withdrawal from Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu. This would help ensure the responsible handover of mission assets and programmatic activities to the UNCT, preventing members of the UNCT from duplicating efforts or assuming activities outside their mandates or capacities. Participants also called for member states to exert political pressure and provide innovative, robust financing for the mission and UNCT to enable a smooth transition.

7 UN Security Council, *United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2022/709, September 22, 2022, para. 68.

8 Benchmarks 1 and 2 relate to the protection of civilians, 3 and 4 to DDR, and 15 to elections. Benchmark 1: “Significant reduction in armed threats thanks to a comprehensive approach that helps to put an end to the existence of armed groups in the provinces of Ituri, North Kivu and South Kivu to an extent that they can no longer cause widespread violence against the civilian population.” Benchmark 2: “Existence of a greater capacity to respond rapidly to protection threats and resolve intercommunity conflicts effectively, and greater cooperation between the security forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, MONUSCO, the actors concerned and other effective civil defence mechanisms, including civil society and humanitarian personnel.” Benchmark 3: “Adoption of a national framework outlining key strategic, political, institutional, legal, coordination, financial and operational strategies for disarmament and demobilization, including community reintegration that will serve as a means of transition towards community recovery and stabilization.” Benchmark 4: “Contribution of the P-DDRCS [Disarmament, Demobilization, Community Recovery and Stabilization Programme] to the sustainable reduction of the number of armed groups, in accordance with order No. 21/038 of 5 July 2021, following the transition timeline.” Benchmark 15: “Organization of credible, inclusive and peaceful elections held in accordance with constitutional timelines.” UN Security Council, “Annex: Transition Plan of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo” in *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. 20.

Achieving Key Benchmarks

Protection of civilians (POC) remains paramount in planning and assessing MONUSCO's transition and the UN's future reconfiguration. Host-state authorities hold the primary responsibility to protect civilians, which necessitates that the mission focus on transferring POC activities and strengthening the capacity of national authorities and forces, including the Congolese armed forces and national police, to protect civilians. Continued partnership on joint initiatives, such as building police and judicial capacity, will be key to this effort. Further discussion is necessary to ascertain how other partners may contribute, including the roles and standards that international, bilateral, and regional actors should adhere to when undertaking operations in the country or supporting political processes.

Some participants recalled lessons learned from the closure of other peacekeeping missions, as in Haiti and Sudan, where missions' exits were determined by timelines rather than the state's capacity to protect. Several highlighted that the UNCT does not have the mandate, resources, or personnel to assume protection activities, but it could support efforts by state authorities and civil society to protect civilians by providing technical assistance and contributing to a protective environment. There is also a continued need for MONUSCO to assist in the delivery of civilian-led humanitarian assistance and support implementation of the state's Demobilization, Disarmament, Community Recovery, and Stabilization Programme (P-DDRCS). Overall, participants affirmed that the mission's exit should depend on the state's willingness and ability to ensure the protection of civilians in the eastern provinces, which will require the successful establishment of the state's security and judicial presence.

Several participants also urged the Congolese government to clarify how it is managing and coordinating regional and bilateral forces in the east. There seems to be an assumption that regional and bilateral forces will support the protection of civilians, which their mandates do not stipulate. Questions also remain about how the Congolese

government will deconflict the currently deployed EAC-RF, the forthcoming Southern African Development Community (SADC) forces, and Angolan troops, as well as the private military companies present in the east. This deconfliction is especially pressing given growing popular discontent with the EAC-RF, whose mandate faces an uncertain future.⁹ Remarks by the country's leadership point to a desire for the EAC-RF to depart after its current mandate expires in September.¹⁰ Participants agreed that the government's coordination of these forces will be vital to guarantee the protection of civilians, the safety and security of UN peacekeepers, and the effectiveness of regional and bilateral forces.

Participants also mentioned that the government anticipates the mission's support in preparing for elections, noting that this creates questions about how the mission can provide electoral support while also preparing to leave the country. As political campaigns may present distorted views of how conflict is impacting civilians, there remains a strong need to separate the protection of civilians and delivery of humanitarian assistance to vulnerable populations from political discussions.

As electoral politics may impact both MONUSCO's transition and the timing of future mandate negotiations, a few participants stated that discussions about the UN's long-term reconfiguration would be better suited for after the elections. In consideration of the fluid and dynamic nature of politics, the options put forward by the secretary-general in the report coming out in July should be adaptable to diverse developments. To this end, MONUSCO's integrated operational team recently underwent a scenario-based planning exercise to analyze how election results could impact the political and security situation.

Envisioning the UN's Future Footprint

When considering the UN's long-term reconfiguration in the DRC, participants largely agreed that the UN needs to adopt a flexible approach that

⁹ Survey data from January 2023 shows that the vast majority of Congolese are dissatisfied with the EAC's approach in eastern DRC. "Majority of Congolese Reject East African Community Regional Force," Congo Research Group and Ebuteli, February 2023.

¹⁰ Patrick Ilunga, "Tshisekedi to East African Force: Act on Rebels or Leave DRC," *The East African*, May 10, 2023.

considers shifting conflict dynamics, increased presence of foreign forces in the country, and the evolution of national politics and regionally led political processes. Most participants agreed that the UN should avoid applying a template approach based on past peace operation models, modalities, or funding channels. Instead, it should think creatively about how to achieve a “right fit” approach that supports sustainable peace in the country. In terms of financing, participants affirmed that any UN reconfiguration can be accommodated within the organization’s existing financial regulations and rules, pending support from member states.

Participants debated how the UN should develop a strategy for its long-term presence in the country, including whether it would be most useful to start with the current reality on the ground or work backward from the desired end state of a peaceful DRC. Working backward could help ensure that significant progress is made in addressing the drivers of conflict in the east, such as the economic and political incentives for instability and the legacies of past and current harm. Further, it would limit the solutions considered to those that would directly contribute to the desired vision. A few participants noted that achieving such a vision is difficult in the face of pressing challenges and the host government’s desire for an expedited transition. Thus, member states must reach an agreement on what is realistic and achievable in the near term.

Looking toward the future, participants reiterated that POC must remain a top priority for the host government and national stakeholders. However, they also emphasized that the UN should temper public expectations of how it will be able to contribute to protection initiatives without a peacekeeping presence. Many stated that it is not appropriate to expect the UNCT to assume POC activities given the specific mandates and limited resources of its members. However, one participant advanced that further thinking could be done on how the UN could support unarmed POC initiatives where the environment allows, such as through the UNCT.

Security-focused ideas for the UN’s future footprint in the DRC include the deployment of a UN standby force to respond in emergency

situations; the deployment of armed police to reinforce the protection of civilians and safety of humanitarian workers; the placement of UN military observers in hotspot areas; the provision of logistical support to regional and bilateral forces invited by the host government, in accordance with the Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP); support from the UN Office on Counter-Terrorism; and the development of joint security strategies with the host government for each of the three provinces (including possible peace operations). Participants argued that the host government would most readily support a security-focused approach to the UN’s reconfigured presence, particularly the idea of a standby force.

In response to proposals for a residual UN police presence, participants flagged that the utility of such a presence would have to be measured against its capacity to protect civilians in a meaningful way. As it is, the eight formed police units currently deployed have a limited impact on protection due to the tremendous size of the country, the high level of civilian protection needs, and the increasing safety and security risks for UN personnel. Additional consideration would also need to be given to how to coordinate and divide policing responsibilities and tasks with the Congolese national police and how to ultimately transfer these tasks.

Outside of armed approaches, the discussion revolved around how existing regional special political missions, such as the Office of the UN Special Envoy for the Great Lakes or the UN Regional Office for Central Africa (UNOCA), could reinforce ongoing political processes. As another option, participants also advanced a modular approach, whereby key activities would be split between UN entities on the UNCT based on their comparative areas of expertise. A number of participants argued against creating a new special political mission for the DRC, citing a lack of support from the host government and a political mission as being insufficient for meeting the country’s substantial security needs. However, others advocated for the consideration of this option, as it is primarily a budget category (pulling from the UN’s regular budget) and could enable diverse and flexible mission configurations.

Conclusion

As the Security Council considers MONUSCO's transition plan and the UN's future engagement in the DRC, it should consider several tensions. First, the host state has firmly advocated for an expedited transition given public discontent with UN peacekeeping. However, the desire for a shortened transition will need to be balanced against the government's expectation that the mission assist with electoral preparations, DDR processes, and the delivery of humanitarian assistance throughout the transition period. Second, there is a need to deconflict the priorities of regional forces and UN

entities and ensure each is drawing on their comparative advantage. Third, the UN's future presence in the DRC will need to adapt to the political situation following the elections in December 2023. Immediate protection and humanitarian needs will also need to be assessed against action to mitigate the drivers of conflict. Overall, Congolese, regional, and international stakeholders will need to arrive at a common vision and strategy for stabilizing the country and region while avoiding band-aid military approaches or subscribing to wishful thinking as the UN considers its long-term presence in the DRC.

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