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Prioritizing and Sequencing Security Council Mandates in 2023: The Case of MONUSCO

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STIMSON

On November 21, 2023, the International Peace Institute (IPI), the Stimson Center, and Security Council Report organized a workshop to discuss the mandate and political strategy 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 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 the series is examining the mandate of MONUSCO. 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

The UN Security Council is expected to renew MONUSCO's mandate on December 20, 2023. The upcoming negotiations will unfold against the backdrop of the government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo's (DRC) request to the Security Council on September 1, 2023, for the mission's accelerated withdrawal to commence at the end of 2023; the government and the mission's signing in November of a disengagement plan to implement this accelerated withdrawal; and the general elections, slated for December 20, 2023.¹ The past two months have also seen renewed fighting between the Armed Forces of the DRC (FARDC), the M23 rebel group, and other armed groups. The Nairobi and Luanda peace processes were disrupted by the resumption of hostilities and heightened tension between the DRC and Rwanda. The security and humanitarian conditions continue to worsen in the eastern provinces of the DRC, with persistent threats to human rights and the protection of civilians.

In this context, the International Peace Institute (IPI), the Stimson Center, and Security Council Report cohosted a roundtable discussion on November 21, 2023, to reflect on MONUSCO's mandate renewal. This roundtable offered a platform for member states, UN officials, civil society stakeholders, and independent experts to share their assessments of the situation in the DRC in a frank and collaborative manner. The discussion was intended to help the Security Council make more informed decisions with respect to the prioritization and sequencing of MONUSCO's mandate, as well as the mission's strategic orientation and actions on the ground as it prepares for a drawdown.

Given the context of MONUSCO's transition and withdrawal in the coming months, the mission will likely need to balance the following issues:

- Prioritizing the protection of civilians and safeguarding humanitarian access to prevent the widening of protection gaps during the mission's drawdown;
- Enhancing engagement with local communities and civil society organizations to execute the withdrawal plan in line with specific needs in regions within and outside eastern DRC;
- Improving coordination between the UN and regional partners that are present in eastern DRC through regular communication, information

¹ Moise M. Bahati, "DR Congo, UN Mission Sign Withdrawal Plan," *The New Times*, November 23, 2023.

- sharing, and joint planning;
- Providing a clearer definition of and political guidance on security sector reform to ensure the appropriate and timely transition of security responsibilities to national actors;
- Reinforcing support to the Congolese government on the implementation of its Demobilization, Disarmament, Community Recovery and Stabilization Program (P-DDRCS); and
- Supporting the revitalization of the Luanda and Nairobi processes following the December 2023 presidential election.

Conflict Analysis

The DRC's political, security, and humanitarian situation has rapidly deteriorated with the advances of M23 in the east of the country. Over the past two months, M23 has regained control of and consolidated its presence in parts of Rutshuru, Nyiragongo, and Masisi territories in the "Petit Nord" of North Kivu in violation of the Luanda Communiqué of November 23, 2022. However, M23 is not the sole threat. In Ituri and the "Grand Nord" of North Kivu, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) and Cooperative pour le développement du Congo (CODECO) have intensified attacks against civilians in recent weeks. The activities of the ADF have been particularly pronounced in Ituri, with risks of spillover into North Kivu. The deteriorating situation comes at a particularly sensitive moment for the country given the approach of the general elections in December 2023. Nevertheless, MONUSCO will commence its accelerated withdrawal and the transfer of responsibilities to national authorities within the framework of the disengagement plan, with the first phase of troop withdrawal to commence by December 2023.²

Political Dynamics

Ongoing preparations for the December elections have been marked by low voter registration and have coincided with renewed clashes in North Kivu between M23 and the FARDC beginning in early October 2023. The persistent violence poses an

obstacle for citizens looking to cast their votes, particularly as specific procedures for internally displaced persons (IDPs) to participate in the election remain unclear. While a significant portion of the opposition has engaged in the electoral process and the nomination of presidential candidates was finalized on October 8, 2023, one participant noted that key stakeholders, such as the Catholic Church, have voiced concerns regarding the transparency and inclusivity of the election preparation efforts.³ Some participants also expressed concern that potential external interference could complicate the outcome of the elections, particularly considering the rise in tension with Rwanda.

Participants also emphasized the importance of reactivating the Nairobi and Luanda processes after the temporary hiatus resulting from the resumption of hostilities and mounting tension between Rwanda and the DRC. One participant noted the prevailing focus on the impending election as another possible factor contributing to the pause. Some participants also stressed that the Security Council should reference the processes in MONUSCO's forthcoming mandate, specifying how to prioritize and sequence each initiative. Additionally, participants underscored the need for improved coordination and harmonization of diplomatic endeavors among the actors in eastern DRC. Despite the existence of a quadripartite coordination mechanism consisting of the East African Community (EAC), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), convened under the auspices of the African Union (AU), there is a lack of coordination. As a result, some of these initiatives by subregional organizations have competed with each other at times.

There is also a need for strengthened regional coordination among the various security actors operating in eastern DRC. The EAC Regional Force is expected to depart eastern DRC following the expiration of its current mandate on December 8,

² UN Security Council, *Transmission de la note officielle sur le retrait accéléré, progressif, ordonné et responsable de la MONUSCO de la RDC : Plan et calendrier de désengagement complet*, UN Doc. S/2023/904, November 22, 2023.

³ Anait Miridzhanian, "Congo's Catholic Church Questions Government's Election Preparations," Reuters, June 23, 2023.

2023.⁴ SADC is expected to deploy to the region following the signing of an agreement with the Congolese government on November 17th, but there is little clarity on what this new force would do differently. SADC plans to re-hat the MONUSCO Force Intervention Brigade (FIB), which is composed mainly of troops from SADC countries, to constitute its mission in the DRC. The new SADC force is likely to face pushback from the Security Council over financial resources and issues related to compliance with the Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP). In general, participants acknowledged that the crisis in eastern DRC cannot be resolved by military means alone and fundamentally demands a political solution.

Security Situation

The security situation has deteriorated since the recent clashes between the FARDC and allied militias and M23. Participants emphasized that the confluence of crises poses a threat to the stability of the DRC, with existing domestic political tensions heightened by the upcoming election and a regional security crisis sparked by the resurgence of M23. The conduct of free and fair elections will play a decisive role in shaping the long-term stability of the region.

The nature of the conflict and security threats varies across provinces. For instance, M23 is engaged in a conventional conflict with security forces and armed groups in North Kivu, while in Ituri, MONUSCO is facing asymmetrical warfare from armed groups including the ADF, CODECO, and Zaire. Moreover, participants highlighted that the security crisis is not limited to the eastern provinces, with localized violence and rising electoral violence in western provinces such as Mai-Ndombe. Pockets of insecurity have persisted in the south and west, including in Kwilu, Kwango, and Kinshasa provinces. Participants expressed concern regarding the capacity of the government to respond to a potential increase in violence ahead of the elections.

In addition to M23's resurgence and advances, the operations of ADF, which garners support from terrorist groups that have links in Somalia and Mozambique, are another destabilizing factor.⁵ At present, ADF is a particular concern in Mahagi (Ituri) and Beni (North Kivu). Although counter-terrorism operations are not part of MONUSCO's mandate, a future response to such threats would require the concerted efforts of multiple actors given the likelihood that a single actor would not have adequate capacity to respond.

Participants further acknowledged the complexities surrounding the regional dimension of the protracted crisis, highlighting its connection to a colonialist legacy; the increased tension between the DRC and Rwanda, characterized by mutual accusations over the use of armed groups as proxies; and the increasing number of cross-border incidents.⁶ The tension between Rwanda and Burundi is also a matter of growing concern.⁷

Some participants noted that the Security Council will need to more clearly articulate how the UN can support the regional forces deployed in the DRC. Given that the Congolese government has requested the deployment of such forces, it will be crucial for the council to acknowledge and support enhanced coordination between MONUSCO and these regional actors—as well as the FARDC—to avoid a security vacuum and any escalation in threats to civilians during the transition process. This will also require the UN and regional actors to have a shared understanding and strategic convergence on the application of human rights standards and accountability.

MONUSCO's Transition

Following the formal request by the government for MONUSCO's drawdown to commence at the end of 2023, the Security Council directed MONUSCO and the Congolese government to develop a comprehensive disengagement plan by

4 East African Community (EAC), "Communiqué: 23rd Ordinary Summit of the EAC Heads of State," November 24, 2023.

5 UN Security Council, *Final Report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, UN Doc. S/2023/431, June 13, 2023. The report confirmed the links between ADF and Ahl al-Sunna wal-Jama'a in Mozambique, as well as Da'esh in Somalia.

6 The Group of Experts on the DRC indicated that Rwanda's intervention in the DRC was either meant to reinforce M23 combatants or to conduct military operations against the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR). UN Doc. S/2023/431.

7 Patrick Ilunga, "M23 Go for Burundian Troops in DRC Clashes," *The East African*, November 13, 2023.

November 2023. On November 21st, the disengagement plan was signed by Special Representative of the Secretary-General Bintou Keita and Foreign Minister Christophe Lutundula.⁸ The plan outlines a path to both force disengagement and the transfer of relevant responsibilities from MONUSCO to government security forces. The plan was presented pursuant to the Security Council presidential statement on October 16, 2023, following consultations between the government and the mission.⁹ The presidential statement outlined the steps required to further fast-track the accelerated withdrawal and emphasized the continued relevance of the three benchmarks guiding MONUSCO's transition—security sector reform (SSR), P-DDRCS, and the protection of civilians—which also remain at the core of the disengagement plan. Some participants noted the importance of the presidential statement and the disengagement plan in fostering cooperation and a positive partnership between the DRC and the UN.

In developing the disengagement plan, three joint technical teams were established, with the special representative of the secretary-general and the minister of foreign affairs providing overall leadership. The plan emphasizes the protection of civilians, troop deployment to hot spot areas, and SSR. The mission's withdrawal is to be conducted in three phases, starting in South Kivu. Each phase is expected to last between four and five months.¹⁰ Under the plan, the Congolese government requested continuous assessments of the situation on the ground and the plan's implementation through measurable and attainable objectives.¹¹ Regarding political engagement, the plan focuses on supporting the continued disarmament of armed groups, which was identified as a priority in the post-election period. As indicated by one participant, the disengagement plan goes beyond being a mechanical project, emphasizing the essential role of political engagement at both the local and regional levels to address tensions in volatile areas.

Participants recognized that MONUSCO can both learn from past mission drawdowns and serve as a model to be replicated in other transition processes. The withdrawal from Kasai and Tanganyika demonstrated the benefits of collaboration with the government with the support of the council to mitigate potential challenges or setbacks. In this regard, the effective and continuous communication of the disengagement plan to forge common understanding at the national and provincial levels and within the UN is critical for the success of the transition.

While the disengagement plan may have helped foster greater cooperation between the Congolese government and the UN, other participants expressed concern over the lack of consultation with civil society organizations in its development, as this excludes those most affected by ongoing insecurity. Emphasizing the need for a responsible and progressive approach to the withdrawal, participants also noted that the sudden drop in financial support to the DRC could have negative cascading effects.

Prioritizing and Sequencing MONUSCO's Mandate

Recognizing the immense responsibility of determining the fate of MONUSCO, participants acknowledged that MONUSCO's transition comes with significant risks due to more than two decades of political, security, and economic engagement in the country. Implementation of the mission's disengagement plan will be a complex process, and accelerated withdrawal may create security and protection gaps. However, some participants noted that if the transition is undertaken sustainably and responsibly in consultation with regional, national, and local actors, it could be an opportunity to demonstrate that UN peacekeeping is still relevant and can lead to successes. Participants generally agreed that as Security Council members negotiate

8 MONUSCO, "The Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and MONUSCO Sign a Disengagement Plan for the Withdrawal of the Mission," press release, UN Doc. PR/OSMR/2023, November 22, 2023.

9 UN Security Council, *United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Presidential Statement*, UN Doc. S/PRST/2023/5, October 16, 2023.

10 UN Doc. S/2023/904.

11 UN Doc. PR/OSMR/2023.

MONUSCO's new mandate, the three benchmarks of SSR, P-DDRCS, and the protection of civilians remain relevant and critical to the drawdown process.

Protection of Civilians

Considering the high toll the past three decades of conflict have taken on civilians, participants acknowledged the need to prioritize the protection of civilians in the formulation of MONUSCO's mandate. They highlighted the imperative of working with national partners, including the FARDC and national police, as well as coordinating with regional forces to fill physical protection gaps. The planning and execution of the transition will also need to be localized to ensure its sustainability, including by strengthening communication and programming with civil society organizations and supporting the transfer and durability of early-warning mechanisms.

Previous mission drawdowns offer several lessons for MONUSCO. Building on the peacekeeping experience in Darfur, participants stressed the importance of preventing a vacuum in the protection of civilians after the mission's withdrawal. Effective asset management will be critical to prevent UN vehicles and equipment from falling into the wrong hands and potentially endangering civilians. In planning how assets will be managed and handed over, some participants urged the UN to help establish mechanisms to allow civil society organizations to use these assets as appropriate. Another lesson from past transitions is that a funding vacuum can emerge once member states are no longer required to support the mission through assessed contributions. To prevent such a vacuum, similar funding will have to be reassigned from other sources to support peacebuilding efforts.

Nonmilitary approaches to the protection of civilians will remain vital to ensure the safety and security of civilians in eastern DRC. This will require MONUSCO to engage in systematic dialogue with civil society to address protection needs and ease intercommunal tensions when

necessary. Additionally, connecting civil society groups across the DRC is essential to facilitate their mutual support for and communication with each other during MONUSCO's drawdown. Such engagement can help MONUSCO protect civilians more effectively, particularly as its capacity diminishes due to its drawdown.

Participants also reflected on how to bring together humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding actors to protect civilians. In this regard, the UN country team and civil society organizations need to engage in joint coordination, monitoring, and analysis to identify and assess protection needs and help address the root causes of conflict.¹² Participants acknowledged that such an approach may face challenges at the provincial level given the poor public perception of UN agencies, funds, and programs and international NGOs. This necessitates a greater role for national and local civil society organizations in the protection of civilians. UN agencies, funds, and programs operating in the DRC will also require more predictable funding.

There is also more to be done to clarify the roles of the plurality of international and regional actors in the country and coordinate among them. With MONUSCO's transition in progress, regional forces will play a critical role in supporting the Congolese authorities in fulfilling their responsibility to protect civilians. In this context, the UN will have an important role in promoting compliance with human rights responsibilities and accountability for violations, which will support protection efforts in the longer term. Additionally, the Office of the Special Envoy for the Great Lakes could contribute to the protection of civilians through political engagement, high-level advocacy, and coordination of UN efforts. Given the severe humanitarian needs in eastern DRC, with a record high displacement of 5.6 million people in the three provinces, it remains critical to promote and support principled humanitarian access, particularly given the added demands and constraints MONUSCO's departure will place on humanitarian actors.¹³ Participants thus urged the Security Council to maintain language on the necessity of safeguarding humanitarian access and ensuring

¹² CIVIC, "Integrated UN Approaches to Protecting During Peacekeeping Transitions: Lessons Learned from MONUSCO," November 2023.

¹³ IOM, "Record High Displacement in DRC at Nearly 7 Million," October 30, 2023.

that MONUSCO continues to support humanitarian action through logistics, infrastructure, and safety analyses.

Community Engagement

Participants regretted that efforts to systematically bring the conflict-affected Congolese population into the formal transition processes remain limited. They highlighted the need for the mission to undertake greater community engagement and local consultation. The UN could support such engagement by transferring MONUSCO's community liaison assistants to the UN country team. Participants also recommended that the UN map actors that have been working with communities to ensure their needs and perspectives are integrated into the transition process to facilitate a more bottom-up approach.

Unarmed protection and self-protection are critical tools, but for them to work, MONUSCO's interventions need to be guided by and tailored to the diverse realities of specific provinces. In this context, participants stressed that going forward, civil society organizations need to be better included in transition planning and implementation at both the provincial and the national level. Civil-military cooperation also remains key to building trust and helping to establish community protection groups.

Stabilization and Extension of State Authority

SSR and DDR will remain priorities for the DRC's long-term stabilization well beyond MONUSCO's presence in the country. Given the numerous armed groups operating in the east, P-DDRCS will be critical to reintegrate former combatants and ensure security in the east going forward, although this will require a substantial financial commitment from the government. To prevent a security vacuum and facilitate a smooth transfer of security responsibilities, some participants noted that the mission will need to be mandated to continue, and

possibly strengthen, its support for SSR during the accelerated drawdown and will need to be allocated funding to support this work. Participants also recommended that MONUSCO build on the disengagement plan to identify the kinds of security structures the government needs to establish or consolidate after the withdrawal of MONUSCO and the EAC force.

Workshop participants acknowledged that there has been little analysis of the political economy of the crisis in the DRC and none of the peacekeeping or military interventions to date have adequately addressed the economic aspects and political economy of the conflict. Participants noted that international financial institutions could play a greater role in helping to address these economic dynamics. Moreover, the UN's medium- and long-term presence in the country will likely require linking stabilization efforts to the work of the Peacebuilding Commission and Peacebuilding Fund.

Conclusion

Increasing hostilities in eastern DRC and mounting regional tensions could jeopardize the December 2023 elections and MONUSCO's ongoing transition. It is therefore critical that the council provide MONUSCO with substantial political backing and enhance its coordination with regional actors and processes that are also providing political and military support. MONUSCO continues to play an invaluable role in eastern DRC, but its responsibilities will shift as the mission transitions and withdraws in the coming months. Workshop participants agreed that several developments need to be reflected in the mandate language to enhance the mission's contributions while it continues its transition, particularly in relation to coordinating with regional forces, prioritizing the protection of civilians and the facilitation of humanitarian access, enhancing community engagement, and supporting SSR and DDR.

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