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United Nations Peacekeeping and the Use of Force

The Intervention Brigade in Congo Is No Model for Success

Denis M. Tull

The number of uniformed personnel serving in UN peace missions reached a new record in 2016, at almost 123,000. Following grave failings of UN missions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan, there is growing awareness within the UN of a widening disjoint between the expectations placed upon peacekeeping forces and what they can actually achieve. One aspect of the debate relates to the question of how robustly UN missions should operate in enforcing their mandate. In some quarters the resolute use of force is seen as the key to greater success. Almost three years ago the UN sent a Force Intervention Brigade to Congo with an explicit mandate to neutralise armed groups. An assessment of its record reveals that the brigade cannot be regarded as an organisational model worth replicating, and that peace-enforcing mandates do not necessarily lead to greater success in peacekeeping.

Three years ago, on 28 March 2013, the UN Security Council decided to send a 3,096-member Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) to eastern DR Congo (Resolution 2098). The move came in response to persistent difficulties in establishing peace in the region after the March 23 Movement (M23) was able to capture North Kivu's provincial capital Goma in November 2012, unhindered by UN forces.

Resolution 2098 broke new ground in several respects. Firstly, "on an exceptional basis and without creating a precedent or any prejudice to the agreed principles of peacekeeping", an intervention force with its own separate remit was created within an ongoing UN mission, namely, MONUSCO (Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en République Démocratique du Congo). Despite claims to the contrary, this represented the abandonment of the principle of mission impartiality. The FIB was to conduct "targeted offensive operations" jointly with the Congolese army (Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo, FARDC) to disarm militias and rebel forces and thus lessen the threat such groups posed to the civilian population and "state authority". Despite its separate mandate, the FIB is part of MONUSCO and answerable to its force commander. On 30 March 2016 the Secu-

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rity Council extended the FIB's mandate for the third time.

Assessing the impact of the FIB means answering two questions. Firstly, can the coexistence of the FIB and the conventional UN mission serve as a model for future missions? And secondly, does greater robustness – critics speak of militarisation – promise greater success in peacekeeping?

FIB's Balance Sheet

The brigade passed its only real test to date in October 2013, just three months after arriving in Congo, when it defeated the M23 in a military offensive conducted jointly with the FARDC. Hopes that this would lead to the neutralisation of other militias and a general stabilisation of the region were not to be fulfilled. The situation in eastern Congo remains characterised by violence and persistent armed attacks on the civilian population.

Why did the FIB intervention fail to mark a turning point? Its success against the M23 was not a good yardstick of its influence on the overall security situation. Firstly, the defeat of the M23 was only partially attributable to military force. Massive international pressure on neighbouring Rwanda to abandon its support for the rebels played an equally important role. Secondly, while the M23 may have been eastern DRC's strongest group in military terms – and the greatest threat to the government of President Joseph Kabila – the Congo Research Group listed eighty-one armed organisations in the two Kivu provinces at the end of 2015. If the FIB had been able to repeat its initial success against other militias (including the Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda [FDLR] and the Allied Democratic Forces [ADF]), it would have been able to improve the situation in eastern Congo at least in the short term. But the momentum of the offensive against M23 quickly dissipated. Operations against other groups either fizzled out (ADF) or never occurred at all, as in the case of the FDLR, the largest remaining militia in eastern Congo with 1,000 to 2,500 fighters.

The reasons for the FIB's meek record are political rather than military in nature. Its origins play a role. The idea to establish an intervention force came not from the UN, but from Tanzania and South Africa as representatives of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Their intention was to rid their ally Kabila of his worst tormentor, the M23. To that extent the initiative was also directed indirectly against the M23's regional protector Rwanda, whose relations with South Africa and Tanzania are strained. The UN was greatly concerned about the idea of a regional intervention in its own area of operations, and the compromise of integrating the FIB in MONUSCO originated in efforts to rein in that initiative. However, this arrangement neither prevented regional rivalries from overshadowing the FIB, nor could it alter the fact that the countries behind the FIB never intended to do more than suppress the M23. In other words, the limited results of three years of the FIB merely reflect the limited goals of its initiators. After the neutralisation of the M23, the Kabila government also lost its briefly heightened interest in closer cooperation with the UN. MONUSCO found itself – as it has consistently since 2006 – in the role of the unpopular and politically marginalised bystander.

Even if the FIB had functioned as MONUSCO's enforcement tool, its impact would have remained modest on account of its lack of integration in a viable political strategy. In fact, the FIB mandate was certainly compatible with MONUSCO's. In pursuit of its objective of "stabilising" Congo, MONUSCO has for years prioritised supporting the FARDC against the militias, alongside its work of strengthening state institutions. The solution to the problem of violent conflict is seen to lie in establishing the state's monopoly on the use of force. This approach, however, has brought at best limited success, including in relation to the top priority of the MONUSCO mandate, the protection of civilians (PoC).

What were the UN's assumptions underlying the stated aim of neutralising? Transferring "liberated areas" to Congo's largely dysfunctional state authorities has not turned out to be a promising solution. To this day, the government demonstrates little interest in demands – repeated ad libitum by donors and the UN – to reform the security sector. Army and police are ineffectual, and often no less brutal than the armed groups. In October 2015, for example, the FARDC was responsible for twice as many human rights violations as the "worst" non-state militia. The state of the judiciary is little better. Both with respect to the overarching objective (stability) and the priority of the mandate (PoC) there is to date no convincing evidence to suggest that MONUSCO and the Congolese government have compatible interests. The fact that MONUSCO has suspended its military support for the FARDC for more than a year on the grounds of the latter's human rights violations, and that the Kabila government continues to insist on the mission's withdrawal, suggest the opposite.

The FIB: Valium for MONUSCO

The FIB's deployment led to a series of unexpected negative consequences. The coexistence of two mandates, with diverging interpretations and approaches, caused frictions and rivalries and ultimately prevented an effective cooperation between the FIB and MONUSCO.

The most important unexpected consequence of the FIB operation was that parts of MONUSCO's contingents (the so-called framework brigades) fell into apathy, whether because they now regarded the FIB as the force responsible for active and robust peacekeeping, or because the M23 as the most important armed group had been eliminated. To their alarm, the mission leadership soon realised that the already weak willingness of the framework brigades to interpret their mandate actively and robustly had largely evaporated. Passive, static and at best reactive behaviour led to a widely noted "garrison mentality" among the framework brigades. The de facto refusal of these contingents to implement the "proactive" interpretation of the mandate demanded by MONUSCO's civilian and military leadership (including frequent patrols, also at night, greater visibility in high-risk areas, checkpoints) – up to and including refusal to obey orders – generated considerable conflict between the mission leadership and the framework brigades and between the framework brigades and the FIB.

MONUSCO leadership's hopes that the FIB's aggressive mandate would reinvigorate the mission as a whole proved fruitless. This is clearly revealed in the case of protection of civilians. While the mission leadership (mirroring the FIB mandate) believed that civilians had to be protected through an aggressive stance towards armed groups, MONUSCO's North Kivu Brigade continued to insist on a more static approach, known as "protection by presence", which relied on a multitude of small bases distributed throughout the territory. This approach is widely regarded as a failure, due to the limited resources and the huge geographical area. This passivity exacerbated MONUSCO's credibility problem. On the ground this generated increasing criticism and even protests against the mission.

Another problem that arose with the FIB was political disagreement within the mission over the question of which armed groups to target in FIB military operations, following the successful neutralisation of the M23 (FDLR, ADF etc.).

Conclusion

In the case of the FIB in Congo, the question of whether (even) more robust peacekeeping also means more successful peacekeeping is likely to be answered in the negative: Not because the FIB energetically pursued the objective of "enforcing peace" and failed, but because political problems quickly piled up to an extent that called into ques-

tion the feasibility and wisdom of such an approach. The most important of these was the diverging interests of the protagonists – the Congolese government, the FIB troop contributors and MONUSCO – which could be expected to recur in similar form in other cases. Another problem that emerged was the interests of the traditional troop-providing countries, most of which oppose a "militarisation" of UN peacekeeping on account of the risks associated with robust peacekeeping. In ongoing operations these countries and their troops decide themselves how much force they are prepared to use, regardless of what the mandate and the UN Secretariat tell them. This issue is unlikely to be resolved. The often-repeated suggestion that Security Council members should involve troop contributors more strongly in formulating mandates, in order to achieve more realistic mandates and more binding implementation, will not change that.

In any case, Chapter VII mandates, which legitimise the use of military force, already grant MONUSCO and other peace missions adequate possibilities to defend their mandate actively and robustly, even against armed groups. The creation of the FIB points instead more to the problem of inadequate implementation of mandates by peace operations, rather than evidence of the consequences of the lack of a mandate for the use of force.

There is still need for a clarifying debate over the appropriate measure of robustness in peacekeeping, and how this should be implemented. A greater degree of robustness is no doubt necessary in some circumstances. But the idea that greater use of force will automatically solve the persistent problems of peacekeeping is an illusion. The causes of the situation in Congo – persistent violence, the existence of numerous armed groups and an ineffectual state – are political. They need to be understood and tackled as an interconnected set of factors. Unfortunately, the present trend in peacekeeping is in the opposite direction, namely to isolate individual problems from their political context. This is reflected for example in the almost excessive attention given by UN missions to the question of what they can do themselves to protect civilians (and other priority tasks). This is not to downgrade the importance of PoC. MONUSCO has generated important innovations in that respect, some of which will be emulated elsewhere. Unfortunately, however, they only tackle symptoms, and ineffectively. It would be more promising to ask what MONUSCO and other missions can do to influence the political environment such that civilian populations live in greater security. Then one would arrive at answers that direct attention more strongly towards political and institutional processes and towards local ownership – and thus also towards the government of the host state, an actor that is a partner as well as part of the problem (see also South Sudan).

If, as in Congo, even repeated attempts by a mission to influence political processes fail in the face of resistance by local actors, including the government, focussing on military aspects is nothing but a diversion. As such, it would appear advisable to return to the question of finding appropriate political strategies that can potentially be supported using robust means (should). In that context the relatively new UN concept of "stabilisation" has not proven to be useful. Neither in MONUSCO nor within the UN system as a whole would there appear to be a shared understanding of what stabilisation means. The concept should either be concretised or abandoned.

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