



THE NEW GEOPOLITICS OF PEACE OPERATIONS II: A DIALOGUE WITH SAHEL-SAHARAN AFRICA

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On 16–18 November 2015, the ‘New Geopolitics of Peace Operations II: A Dialogue with Sahel-Saharan Africa’ took place in Bamako, Mali. The regional dialogue focused on five main lines of discussion, namely (a) the conflicts and security challenges expected in the region in the next 5–10 years; (b) the appropriate peace operations and conflict management response to these challenges; (c) the current regional capacity to address such challenges; (d) the assistance required from external actors; and (e) the lessons learned from deploying the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA). The regional dialogue was followed by a seminar on the relationship between the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the Malian Government. This workshop report outlines three key themes that emerged during the meetings: (a) the use of counterterrorism measures in peace operations; (b) the management of host-government–mission relations; and (c) the challenges faced by operations deployed by African regional organizations.

COUNTERTERRORISM IN PEACE OPERATIONS

Meeting participants identified terrorism as both a current and future security challenge in Sahel-Saharan Africa. While the June 2015 recommendations of the High-level Independent Panel on United Nations Peace Operations state that peace operations should not engage in military counterterrorism, there was no clear consensus among participants as to whether the mandates of peace operations should be expanded to include counterterrorism against militant Islamists.

The majority argued that peace operations should not cling to traditional peacekeeping approaches but adapt to the new security environment, which includes dealing with issues such as terrorism. A number of participants claimed that peace operations deployed in areas affected by terrorism are simply not able to improve the security situation without also addressing terrorism’s destabilizing effects. Some participants believed that UN peace operations—since they have to abide by UN standards and tend to be shaped by collective security interests—are more likely to address counterterrorism in a legitimate and accountable fashion. Others argued that the current trend of deploying unilateral operations (e.g. the French-led Operation Barkhane) that fight terrorists, sometimes alongside peace operations, is problematic.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

● The ‘New Geopolitics of Peace Operations II: African Outlooks on Conflict Management’ was launched with support from the Finnish and Dutch foreign ministries and in continued partnership with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES).

The project aims to enhance understanding of how to best prepare peace operations for the diverse security environments in Africa, while promoting local and international dialogue on the future of peace and security.

In order to achieve these aims, a series of five regional dialogue meetings were organized in five African regions, followed by a global dialogue event and a variety of SIPRI publications.

This report summarizes a workshop that brought together a range of leading experts, military and government officials, and representatives of civil society and international organizations to discuss the future of peace operations and conflict management in Sahel-Saharan Africa. It was jointly organized by SIPRI, FES and the Centre d’Etudes et de Réflexion au Mali (CERM) and was hosted at École de maintien de la paix ‘Alioune Blondin Beye’.

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This approach may be setting a dangerous precedent as individual states could use ‘combating terrorism’ as an excuse to pursue their own interests. A participant from Mali gave the example of Syria as a cautionary tale. She noted that while external actors, such as Russia or the United States, may deploy unilateral operations or provide military support in the name of combating terrorism and instability in a particular country, their involvement is often largely driven by the pursuit of their own geostrategic interests, which may in fact worsen the situation on the ground.

A number of participants thought that peace operations are not the appropriate means for combating terrorism and were against incorporating counterterrorism in the mandates of missions. Some participants, from Egypt in particular, warned that peace operations simply do not have sufficient capacity to tackle terrorism. Instead, states should use their legal systems and a longer-term national strategy for maintaining security in order to address terrorism. Furthermore, they saw peace operations as an inadequate response to terrorism because such operations would often be focused on crisis management and stabilization, and would not be designed to systematically address the root causes of terrorism. Some were concerned that including counterterrorism in peace operations would also by definition compromise the peacekeeping principle of impartiality, as it identifies an enemy. Lastly, engaging in counterterrorism would also risk the safety of peace operation personnel, which would become potential hot targets in the eyes of terrorists groups.

While there was no clear consensus among participants, several suggestions were made for the way forward. First, it was suggested that addressing underlying factors for radicalization and recruitment, such as economic or ethnic marginalization, would lead to more effective and sustainable responses. Second, the level of force used in counterterrorism efforts should be minimized to the extent possible as the use of excessive force is not only unsustainable but can also drive radicalization. Third, it was suggested that the steps undertaken in peace operations should follow a particular sequence: counterterrorism and stabilization operations should be deployed first, with peacekeeping and peacebuilding operations deployed only once the security situation has stabilized; however, some noted that a sequential approach is not realistic since conflict is not always linear. Fourth, one participant suggested that in cases where counterterrorism is included in a peace operation’s mandate, there should be a clear visual differentiation between those troops tasked with peacekeeping and those tasked with countering terrorism—comparable to the association of traditional peacekeepers with blue helmets and peace enforcement troops with green helmets. Such differentiation would help to prevent misconception among the population, and thereby better protect the impartiality and safety of blue helmets.

MANAGING HOST-GOVERNMENT-MISSION RELATIONS

While peace operations are generally deployed with the consent or on the invitation of the host government, a government or population may not always approve of aspects of the mandate or agree with an approach taken by the mission. An operation may, for example, act or withhold action in accordance with international principles, its mandate, or its capacity—regardless



of the individual preferences of the parties to the conflict, one of which could be the host government itself. In some cases, host governments may complain that inaction against armed groups puts those groups and the government on an equal footing, while in other cases they may accuse operations of undertaking tasks that they regard as being the responsibility of the sovereign government. Participants at the meeting extensively discussed the dynamics of this occasionally uneasy relationship between host governments and peace operations, with a particular focus on MINUSMA.

Malian participants at the meeting expressed discontent with MINUSMA's current mandate and approach. They argued that MINUSMA should focus on combating armed groups and militant Islamists in northern Mali which are undermining the territorial integrity of the state. Some suggested that by concentrating on facilitating political dialogue between armed groups and the state, MINUSMA is giving a platform to illegitimate actors and undermining the sovereign government. Some participants even went so far as to suggest that the mission implicitly supports terrorism by not taking sufficient action against terrorist acts and violations of the peace agreement signed in 2015 by various parties to the conflict.

From the point of view of the UN, MINUSMA is neither mandated to take part, nor capable of engaging, in the counterterrorism or counterinsurgency activities requested by the current government and its supporters. MINUSMA aims to assist in the implementation of a political solution that includes consultation with both the seated government and the armed opposition. A MINUSMA official noted that the mission aims to keep both the host government and other parties involved in the process in the lead, in order to achieve a lasting political solution. He also acknowledged that violations of the 2015 Peace Agreement should be addressed.

The divergent views between the UN and the Malian Government on the optimal approach for creating stability in the country will not, however, be easily resolved. The case of MINUSMA suggests that there is sometimes a dilemma between maintaining mission impartiality and perceived state sovereignty, in which the mission is always seen as biased by at least one of the parties to the conflict. If the UN sides with the government, the armed opposition obviously regards this as being an indication of partiality, whereas if the UN positions itself between the parties, the government is likely to perceive this as bias towards the armed opposition.

OBSTACLES FOR OPERATIONS DEPLOYED BY AFRICAN REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

The deployment of the African-led AFISMA in Mali and later its transition to the UN-led MINUSMA brought to light a number of challenges posed by operations deployed by African regional organizations. Participants at the meeting focused in particular on the institutional and coordination challenges (including during AFISMA's transition to MINUSMA) that AFISMA faced due to the discordant working relationship between the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the African Union (AU) and the UN. Participants also highlighted the deficiencies in capacity that the mission experienced during its deployment. Four key challenges emerged.

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Unclear division of labour between ECOWAS, the AU and the UN

The unclear division of labour in terms of AFISMA's planning and decision-making processes was seen as a major obstacle to the success of the mission. An official from ECOWAS suggested that the lack of clear leadership with regard to the planning process resulted in a mandate that was incongruent with the needs on the ground. This made it difficult for ECOWAS to devise the necessary logistical plans.

The difficult relationship between ECOWAS and the AU lead to knock-on effects for AFISMA

The relationship between the AU and the individual regional organizations in Africa is often tense, and their approaches and points of view can diverge. In the case of AFISMA, the lack of clarity in leadership was compounded by the difficult relationship between ECOWAS and the AU. The division of labour between ECOWAS and the AU in the mission—with ECOWAS in charge of logistics and financial support for AFISMA and the AU responsible for appointing the force commander—did not encourage cooperation but rather reinforced existing tensions.

Accepting UN support meant more bureaucracy and less ownership

Because AFISMA received support from the UN, it also had to go through the often-bureaucratic process of UN mandate authorization, which, according to an ECOWAS official, partly explains the slow deployment of the mission.

Lack of African capacity for deploying operations

In the case of AFISMA, ECOWAS did not have sufficient military capacity, logistics, and experience to carry out the mission. A security expert at the meeting noted that when it comes to military and security capacities in general, ECOWAS ultimately relies on its member states, many of which are poor countries with weak institutions that are preoccupied with dealing with their own instabilities. He also noted that the African Standby Force, in general, is not yet prepared to successfully deploy bridging operations.

Despite the significant hurdles that operations deployed by African regional organizations face, it is clear that both the international community as a whole and African actors themselves would like to see more African ownership in managing conflicts in Africa. Furthermore, many in the international community see African bridging operations like AFISMA as the way forward for cooperation between the UN and the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). However, in the end—even if the coordination and institutional challenges between the UN, AU and ECOWAS were to be improved—the lack of capacity within APSA would still create a significant hurdle for deploying successful African operations. In other words, until African actors are sufficiently capacitated to carry out peace operations, expectations about the result of such an operation would have to be managed.