

III. The way forward for multilateral peace operations

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The three trends identified in 2022—the increasing effects of geopolitical rivalries; the growing tension in relations with host countries; and the increasing regionalization of peace operations—continued and intensified in multilateral peace operations in 2023.¹ However, the impacts on peace operations data were only partly the same. While in 2022 the number of multilateral peace operations and the number of personnel deployed in them increased, in 2023 the number of multilateral peace operations declined slightly, from 64 to 63, and the number of peace operation personnel declined markedly, by 13 per cent, to 100 568. Numeric developments in sub-Saharan Africa are particularly noteworthy, as four multilateral peace operations were discontinued in the region and the number of personnel declined by 18 per cent, to 76 372. Nevertheless, the United Nations remained the main organization deploying multilateral peace operations, accounting for one third of all operations and 67 per cent of all personnel, and regional organizations and alliances continued to be responsible for most operations, with 38 in total (or 60 per cent).

Geopolitical rivalries

Political agreement on how to manage armed conflicts became increasingly difficult in 2023, due to escalating geopolitical tensions. While it seemed to be business as usual in many multilateral peace operations, there was frequent disagreement in the UN Security Council and in the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council on the establishment of new operations or changes to existing mandates. At the same time, the attention of most Western governments continued to shift towards supporting Ukraine against the Russian Federation and strengthening their own capacities for collective defence and deterrence. In particular, these governments made less military capacity and funding available for multilateral peace operations in Africa, as illustrated by the focus of the European Peace Facility on Ukraine.² Simultaneously, Russia increased its engagement in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, offering governments the use of private military and security companies (PMSCs) to combat rebel groups.³

¹ Pfeifer Cruz, C., 'The way forward for multilateral peace operations', *SIPRI Yearbook 2023*, pp. 98–100.

² Alemayehou, M. and McNair, D., 'False economy: Why Europeans should stop slashing development aid to Africa', Commentary, European Council on Foreign Relations, 28 Feb. 2024; and European Parliament, BRIEFING European Peace Facility: State of play on 30 November 2023.

³ See also chapter 4, section I, in this volume.

Relations with host countries

Among donor countries and financial contributors to UN peacekeeping operations, discussions about value for money and effectiveness are nothing new. However, in 2023 the governments of host countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Mali, Niger and Sudan became more vocal in this respect, increasingly questioning whether missions were fit for purpose, as they actually wanted missions to defeat terrorist and rebel groups rather than to keep the peace. Indeed, the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel (JF-G5S), the East African Community (EAC) Regional Force in the DRC (EACRF-DRC), the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (SAMIDRC) and the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) were meant to fill such gaps.

In a geopolitical environment in which host governments have different options to choose from, their agency has been further enabled in recent years.⁴ As a consequence, countries were better positioned to be more directive in what they did and did not want from peace operations in 2023. Although it was not the first time, host governments felt more confident to withdraw their consent for missions when they no longer sufficiently served their purpose, as was the case for the EACRF-DRC, the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS). In a similar vein, the JF-G5S has been inactive since 2022.

The regionalization of peace operations

A move away from the UN had already started before 2023, as there has been no new UN peacekeeping operation since the establishment of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) in 2014. Furthermore, over the last decade the number of multilateral peace operations deployed by regional organizations has increased from 31 to 38, while the number of UN peace operations has decreased from 23 to 20. However, in 2023 there were two policy developments that also clearly supported the regionalization of peace operations. On 20 July 2023 UN Secretary-General António Guterres presented *A New Agenda for Peace*, describing his vision for the future multilateral peace and security architecture.⁵ This entailed a form of ‘networked multilateralism’ in which the UN has strong peace operation partnerships with regional

⁴ Staeger, U., ‘The war in Ukraine, the African Union, and African agency’, *African Affairs*, vol. 122, no. 489 (Oct. 2023).

⁵ United Nations, *A New Agenda for Peace*, Our Common Agenda Policy Brief no. 9 (United Nations: New York, July 2023).

organizations.⁶ Strengthening the role of regional organizations was also the purpose of UN Security Council Resolution 2719 on the financing of AU peace support operations authorized by the UN Security Council.⁷ Moreover, in the lead-up to the September 2024 Summit of the Future and the annual UN Peacekeeping Ministerial, further discussions will be held in which such a partnerships approach is likely to be at the top of the agenda.

Future developments

How the trends described above will impact the future peace operations and conflict management landscape remains to be seen, but based on extrapolation the following four developments may be likely.

Inaction

The continued regionalization of peace operations based on a partnership between the UN and regional organizations assumes that there are at least two functioning partners. Although all UN and AU peace operation mandates have been renewed so far, in an increasingly polarized world, the existing lack of consensus and consequent challenges to decision making surrounding the management of new conflicts within both the UN Security Council and the AU Peace and Security Council may endure. This would likely lead to more inaction in the field of peace operations and conflict management and negatively affect the functional partnership between the two councils.

Fragmentation

Inaction may in turn lead to an increasing fragmentation of approaches. The Central African Republic (CAR), Kosovo and Mali have already hosted complex constellations of multilateral peace operations in the same mission areas; and in Libya and Syria different international coalitions have even supported different sides of the conflict through their distinctive conflict management approaches. If international polarization escalates further, such a fragmentation may affect the cost and effectiveness of operations and may, in extremis, lead to a standoff between two or more peace operations or conflict management interventions operating in the same territory.

Deinstitutionalization

If international and regional organizations are deadlocked and unable to agree on future mission mandates, a further deinstitutionalization of conflict management—outside of regular institutional frameworks—can also be expected, as governments seek creative solutions to pursue their interests.

⁶ United Nations (note 5), pp. 24.

⁷ UN Security Council Resolution 2719, 21 Dec. 2023.

Although not yet visible in the data, this is likely to result in the growth of ad hoc coalitions or increasing numbers of 'other multilateral operations'. These have already included the use of non-state PMSCs, such as the Africa Corps (formerly known as the Wagner Group) in CAR and Mali, the Dyck Advisory Group in Mozambique and Asociația RALF in the DRC.⁸ Alternatively, bilateral operations, such as the Joint Force of the Rwanda Defence Force and the Rwanda National Police in Mozambique and the Kenyan-led Multinational Security Support (MSS) mission in Haiti, may also become more common.

Militarization

As multilateral peace operations increasingly feel pressured to live up to host government demands, the militarization and securitization of conflict management solutions can also be expected to increase. Indeed, the closure of MINUSMA and the pressure on MONUSCO to either combat rebels or close should be seen in this light, as should the establishment of the JF-G5S, the EACRF-DRC, SAMIDRC and SAMIM, and the increased use of Africa Corps and other PMSCs to combat terrorist or rebel groups. As a result, with host countries having the choice between multidimensional peacekeeping operations and militarized approaches to fighting rebels, multilateral peace operations may be slowly pulled towards more kinetic activities in order to maintain their consent in the future.

⁸ See also chapter 4, section I, in this volume.