Finally Robust? – The United Nations is Showing Teeth in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Dustin Dehez

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Introduction

Until last year, other than renewing the mandates for peacekeeping operations already in place, the United Nations Security Council did not authorise any new, large-scale peacekeeping mission in about six years. This changed when the United Nations found itself faced with a couple of crises that demanded action: it issued a mandate for new peacekeeping forces in Mali and the Central African Republic and added an intervention brigade to the MONUSCO force operating in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). While the situation in Mali was making headlines in Western press, the United Nations mission in the DRC received far less attention. Even though the intervention brigade has since its authorisation been both widely hailed and criticised, mostly as a precedent for future peacekeeping operations and a break with past practises.

The authorisation for a new intervention brigade in the DRC marked a fundamental break with past practices of blue helmet peacekeeping efforts and will likely be regarded as a watershed moment in UN peacekeeping for years to come. The United Nations, however, has incrementally moved towards more robust mandates, shifting its focus towards population security, as the mandates for Haiti, Sudan and Liberia already included provisions to protect civilians and authorised the use of force to that end. But in the Congo, the United Nations is going a step further, dropping the principles of neutrality and impartiality—long considered hallmarks of UN peacekeeping—and acting as a party to the conflict, allied with the government, while targeting militias that are destabilising the Eastern parts of the country. And while the brigade itself was rather a small force, it did make a difference: it defeated the M23 militia that in November 2012 had overrun the North Kivu provincial capital of Goma.

Ironically, the change toward more aggressive and offensive peacekeeping comes at a time when Western nations, disenchanted from seemingly fruitless efforts in Afghanistan, are turning their back on prolonged peacekeeping operations with aggressive mandates. It is quite a contrast that the United Nations, after fourteen years of peacekeeping in the Congo with little to show for it, is choosing a strategy of escalation. The intervention brigade and its mandate, hence, raise important questions: Who and what is driving this change in peacekeeping? What policy implications are these changes likely to yield? And what can policymakers do to help further these advances?
The Unfolding: The situation in the DRC

In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to get an understanding of how this mission came about: In 1999 the United Nations first authorised a peacekeeping mission in the Congo. The mission’s objective was to help implement the Lusaka agreement, which ended years of civil war and paved the way for a more stable DRC. But even though progress was being made, peace in the Eastern parts of the Congo proved to be elusive. The North and South Kivu provinces remained particularly volatile and turned into the theatre of choice for any movement that wanted to spoil the fragile peace in the country. For years the United Nations had hoped to stabilise the country through its blue helmet missions: first through the United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC) that operated in the DRC until 2010. The Congolese government initially showed some uneasiness with extending the mission and the expectations directed at the government along with the mission, but finally it did agree to a slightly changed mission. Since 2010 the United Nations Mission Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) has taken responsibility for bringing stability to the war-torn country.

But while MONUSCO was initially perceived as the first stepping stone of an exit strategy from the DRC, the security situation in the Eastern parts of the Congo again began to deteriorate in 2011 and 2012. It became increasingly clear that although the United Nations invested heavily into stabilising the country, it had precious little to show for it. In November 2012, the M23 movement captured Goma, even though 1,500 UN peacekeepers and some 7,000 Congolese soldiers were supposed to protect the city and its population from the various militias still roaming the Eastern Congolese countryside. The fall of Goma was quickly perceived as the final straw for the faltering peacekeeping efforts and the United Nations, the United States and African nations all began considering more robust action to deal with the militias that had proven time and again that they could spoil any peace-building effort in Eastern Congo.

To that end, the United Nations had to take a very close look at the principles usually guiding its missions. The United Nations had in the past maintained that only a neutral or at least impartial United Nations force could be successful. But while this was true in some missions, the situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and previous experiences in Bosnia had taught the organisation that this approach would only work as long as the conflict would not continue to expand or new actors were entering the field once the United Nations injected a peacekeeping force. In the DRC, however, it often appeared that the minute a settlement was reached with an adversary of the government, a new adversary emerged. In this context, what the United Nations needed was a deterrent.
In Northern Kivu, such new entrances into the war were commonplace, largely because peace-settlements broke down or demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) measures fell apart. In April 2012 members of the former Congrès national pour la défense du peuple (CNDP), disbanded in 2009, took up arms again and formed the M23 movement, coined after the peace-settlement of March 23rd 2009 that had now unravelled. The M23 quickly gained momentum and in November 2012 overran Goma and some smaller cities in the region. Breaking the cycle of peace-agreements and re-emergences of armed militias was more than just a military challenge. The intervention brigade, hence, always had a political function as well. It was to demonstrate to neighbouring countries, Rwanda in particular, that the meddling by proxy in Congolese affairs would no longer be tolerated. It also fed into a larger concern by United Nations officials that the militias were responsible for a significant deterioration in the livelihoods of the local population that would not only undermine the Congolese state but any future peace-building effort. In private sessions they worried about the disproportional impact on the level of violence in Eastern Congo militias had had long before M23 took Goma. In personal conversations, they expressed concern that next to the M23, the influx of fighters belonging to the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) destabilised the region. Since the demise of the M23 they argue that other militias, such as the forces démocratique de libération du Rwanda (FDLR) pose similar, if not starker risks to regional stability. Unsurprisingly, UN officers have been looking for deterrents such as attack helicopters and heavier armour for quite some time. But with the fall of Goma in November 2012 such calls became more urgent than ever and more and more stakeholders, African ones in particular, were listening.

The Political Process: Falling Into Place

Following the fall of Goma, the United Nations authorised an intervention brigade in Security Council Resolution 2098. The aggressive posture of the United Nations in the DRC has yielded largely positive results. But the deployment of the intervention brigade alone would have made little difference in the long-term, had it not been for political developments to fall into place at the same time. Put differently: The intervention brigade was basically a stopgap measure, but in order for lasting results to emerge, it needed an accompanying political process. The intervention brigade is often regarded as a paradigm shift in peacekeeping, but in the DRC it is only one component of the overall force and in fact an overall strategy. And it is only in the context of the overall strategy that the intervention brigade could be successful. After all, the use of military force is always and only a means to create more space for political solutions. By deploying a beefed up intervention force with a specific mandate to take on the spoiler movements, the UN created room for manoeuvre in the peace talks that the international community was eager to foster.

In July 2012, shortly after the formation of the M23, South Africa and Uganda—increasingly uneasy about the deteriorating situation in the Congo—used the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) to push for a renewed peace process. In February 2013 regional countries met at the seat of the African Union and agreed to a new framework agreement, which created the later basis upon which the United Nations could send the intervention brigade. Though the agreement was met with little optimism, it did pave the way for more intensive regional cooperation. At the same time, the Congolese government committed itself to far reaching

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1 Personal conversations with senior MONUSCO personnel.
reforms, including major security sector reform programmes. This marked nothing less than a
departure from the past when the Congolese government appeared to be rather reluctant to
address the need for reform in general and the security sector in particular. Against this
background, international actors felt comfortable with stepping up the military efforts in Eastern
Congo. The intervention brigade was made up largely of forces from South Africa, Tanzania, and
Malawi and its objective was to neutralise forces that undermined the peace process, or what the
United Nations called illegitimate armed groups. Much of the change, however, is not in the
mandate. After all, the mandate of MONUSCO under chapter VII already authorised offensive
military operations in order to protect civilians. In fact, even its predecessor mission MONUC had
a chapter VII mandate that authorised the use of all necessary means to live up to its mandate.2
Yet, troop contributing countries were hesitant to fully use the authority granted
in these resolutions.

In March 2013, the United Nations Secretary General appointed former Irish
President Mary Robinson as Special Envoy to the Great Lakes Region. In June
the same year, the United States followed by appointing former Senator Russ
Feingold as Special Envoy to the Great Lakes Region, both exerted
unprecedented diplomatic pressure on the Rwandan government to stop
supporting proxy forces in the Congo and urged Uganda to play a more constructive
role. In both instances the appointments marked significant political commitments to foster implementation of the various agreements that
were reached in the months before. Rwanda at least acquiesced to the political efforts to end the
violence and it too agreed to the framework agreement, even though uneasiness on the Rwandan
side continues to be a problem.3 In particular the FDLR, consisting largely of remnants of Hutu
extremists, needs to be the next focus of the intervention brigade and the Congolese army, if
continued Rwandan support is to be ensured. In conjunction with the intervention brigade's
deployment, however, it was the political process that enabled the success of the mission.

While the political process did fall into place, the ensuing military pressure exerted by the United
Nations and its allies in the Congo quickly broke the backbone of the M23 militia. But the
commitment by neighbouring countries and the intervention brigade's new approach itself will not
be enough to ensure that no fresh spoiler movement will emerge. The devil, as so often, is in the
detail. Just in any other peacekeeping mission which faces similar challenges, the question
remains, what Congolese armed forces are supposed to take over? For the moment, the only
thing that can be said with certainty is that even if no additional rebel movement were to emerge,
rebuilding a Congolese army that could one day replace the United Nations is likely to take years.

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2  Boshoff, p. 135.
3  United Nations 2013, p. 3.
Military Implications: Doing More with Less?

With the political situation falling into place, the intervention brigade was in fact in a position to improve the security situation in the Eastern Congo. It liberated Goma and drove M23 out of the city's vicinity. Along with Congolese forces, the brigade dealt a significant blow to the M23 rebel forces, liberated Goma, Kiwanja and most of the territory that was under rebel control. In doing so, the mission also improved the image of the United Nations in the Congo overall, where its image had suffered from the various setbacks in the peace-building effort it had to endure in the years before. With regional politics moving towards more and closer cooperation, the danger of another spoiler movement emerging has been significantly reduced. The mission can therefore tentatively be regarded as a success. At the same time, however, the deployment of the intervention brigade raises some questions of a military nature that carry implications for future peacekeeping operations: What sort of strategy could a more aggressive mission pursue when mandated with the protection of civilians? And what differences did new assets such as unmanned aerial vehicles make in the mission?

Firstly, the military strategy itself demands some attention by analysts and policymakers alike. Even though the mission appears to have been by and large successful, in geographic terms its actual impact was marginal at best. The intervention brigade numbers just about 3,000 troops in an area of responsibility that is as large as Western Europe, with no meaningful infrastructure in support of its operations. The brigade could cover only a small portion of its assigned territory and with troops that possess far less capabilities than European or American forces. Against that background, the force had two options: Either cover a small territory, hoping that security created there would have a stabilising effect on its surroundings or rely on targeted operations that would move through the region, trying to fully liquidate the militia. In essence, the choice was between creating an ink spot of stability in Goma or a search and destroy mission. The United Nations chose to focus on Goma and its surroundings, creating a heaven of stability. In return, the M23 movement was not fully annihilated, fuelling speculations that it might resurface should the United Nations draw down the intervention brigade. For all intents and purposes, the United Nations had opted for a small-scale counterinsurgency approach, a replication of NATO's counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan, with the United Nations head, Special Representative Martin Kobler, describing MONUSCO's approach as clear, hold and build. For such an approach to work it would usually require a long-term presence in order to yield sustainable results and even then it could only work if issues of political legitimacy are addressed. It is therefore quite possible that the gains made in Goma and the region are not, as David Petraeus put it in the context of Iraq, irreversible.

This question is all the more important, since the mandate expressis verbis calls for the protection of civilians, which should at least theoretically favour a population-centric, i.e. counterinsurgency approach. Still, the mission could not stop all attacks on civilians; the mission's footprint was simply too small to allow MONUSCO to fully live up to its mandatory tasks. Put differently, the

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5 It is important to note that though counterinsurgency has received a lot of scholarly attention, the exact relationship of legitimacy and success in counterinsurgency operations has yet to be studied in greater detail.  
6 In late January and early February 2014 a massacre in the Kivu provinces claimed the lives of about 70 people. UN Mission to visit DR Congo 'massacre' site, BBC News Africa. (http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-26184191/).  
7 There is still no consensus on how many troops are needed for a counterinsurgency strategy to work, let alone what sort of rules of engagement they would need. It has long been argued that the most important factor is a sufficient troop level, but recent evidence seems to call that into question. Friedman, p. 587.
military strategy, its tentative success and implications for future UN peacekeeping missions demand a great deal more scholarly attention.

Secondly, given the small contingent deployed to execute the mission, much of the tactical success rested on superior battlefield intelligence and situational awareness. Without a large footprint, the intervention brigade had no means to acquire intelligence through traditional means of intelligence collection and instead—another first for a United Nations operation—had to rely on the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). The employment of drones met resistance from Rwanda, which argued that the mission was illegitimately used as a laboratory for intelligence devices. Drones, however, proved to be a valuable asset for the United Nations since they helped offset the major disadvantage that had haunted MONUSCO throughout its deployment: its small footprint. Critics maintain that their deployment would only be of consequence had the UN mission had the capacity to act on the collected information, which in MONUSCO's case was rather doubtful. This point is not totally without merit, however, the deployment of drones to support the intervention brigade had another upside, which was of decidedly political nature. Given that spoiler movements such as the M23 relied on outside support, the UAVs raised the potential costs for extending such support to outside powers. Though it is unclear what triggered the Rwandan decision to withdraw support from the M23, the ability of drones to at least potentially collect evidence of and expose such support might have been a factor in that decision. Put differently, even though the direct impact of drones on the intervention brigade's mission's conduct might have been limited, they did serve as a political deterrent.

Political Fallout: All Peacekeepers all the time?

The change in the peacekeeping mandate towards more aggressive operations does not come totally out of the blue. It is being driven largely by African nations that are increasingly wary of long-term peacekeeping missions that still overshadow the enormous strides the continent has made towards more prosperous and stable economies. At the same time, these nations have made some positive experiences in aggressive peacekeeping within the African Union and its peacekeeping operations. The mission in Somalia, despite having to endure heavy casualties, has in fact created stability in Mogadishu and its surroundings and now collects the returns on its resilience. And the same holds true for other African Union peacekeeping missions as well. Since most analysts have thus far approached the intervention brigade deployed to the DRC strictly in the United Nations context, it did appear to be a break with past practices. However, seen in the context of recent developments in African Union peacekeeping, it looks like a natural extension of experiences in Somalia and elsewhere.

That still raises the question of whether to use the positive experience as a template for future peacekeeping operations. While the United Nations was quick to point out that the intervention

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8 Drones were used before by the Belgian contingent deployed to the DRC as part of EUFOR RD Congo. However, MONUSCO marks the first instance where a UAV capability was not deployed alongside a UN mission or inherited through re-hatting, but were to be put under UN command from the moment of their arrival in operational theatre.

9 Blyth, UN Peacekeeping Deploy Unarmed Drones to Eastern Congo, The Global Observatory, (http://theglobalobservatory.org/analysis/445-un-peacekeeping-deploys-unarmed-drones-to-eastern-congo.html). On the other hand, some researchers have argued that the availability of drones creates a moral obligation to put them to use: Karlrud/Rosén 2013.

10 There is little to no research in the political deterrent of UAVs in general and in the DRC in particular. Rectifying that should be a focus of further research.
brigade's mandate and deployment should not be regarded as a precedent for future missions, its political head, Special Representative Martin Kobler, indicated that other mandates that require the protection of civilians might well call for similar approaches in the future. However, there are two important caveats to keep in mind.

First, the situation in the Congo is in many ways unique. Ideally, a UN peacekeeping mission is deployed after conflict parties agree to some sort of a political settlement. The mission would then only assist in the implementation of the agreement and foster cooperation through its presence. In these circumstances an aggressive mandate is hardly ever necessary. In the case of Eastern Congo, however, the peace process was repeatedly spoiled by outside actors, allegedly the government in Rwanda, which was not an official party to the conflict and has always denied its involvement in it. In this context the United Nations had little choice but to guarantee the safety of the population through more aggressive means. While similar developments might ensue in other peacekeeping operations, UN missions in particular hardly ever have to navigate as sophisticated a political environment as in the Eastern Congo.

Secondly, it is not by coincidence that the strategy of creating ink spots or islands of stability is reminiscent of the American strategic approach in Iraq during the so called Surge or NATO's more recent counterinsurgency approach in Afghanistan. While the mission in Congo might have been successful, the comparison to Iraq and Afghanistan is important since Western powers in either country did not show the willingness to stay on long enough for a counterinsurgency approach to fully work out. While the strategy had some success in Iraq, the conclusion drawn in Western capitals is that these sorts of missions ought to be avoided. Hence, even though much is being talked about a return of Western nations to UN peacekeeping after the winding down of the war in Afghanistan, Western capitals will in all likelihood remain very cautious when it comes to more offensive peacekeeping.

Conclusion: A Watershed Moment

As mentioned earlier, in deciding to deploy a more robust intervention brigade to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the United Nations Security Council has not simply taken a side in an ongoing, and occasionally escalating civil war – it has pushed aside principles of non-intervention and neutrality that have long been hallmarks of United Nations peacekeeping. To some analysts, this is belated acknowledgement of reality; to others it sets a dangerous precedent.

Some traditional troop contributing countries (TCCs), however, are cautious in the face of more robust mandates and more aggressive missions, arguing that more offensive operations will eventually increase the risks to the lives of their contingents. India, a classic troop contributing nation, has expressed such concerns and others such as Uruguay have followed suit. In June this year the Security Council took up the issue and India and other concerned countries found an ally in Russia. Some of the traditional TCCs have used blue helmet missions to either temporarily outsource the financial burden of maintaining armed forces or to gather experience, which would

otherwise be difficult to obtain, but they do not expect a significant risk to their contingents. Should these sort of mandates become more frequent, it might well influence the willingness of some states to contribute quite so freely to UN missions. These state’s governments fear that even if they do not contribute to the intervention brigade directly, their forces within the larger UN mission might invite reprisals. This anxiety is not without foundation, since the intervention brigade is part of the same mission and under the same UN command, reprisals against other parts of the MONUSCO force could in fact materialise. On the other hand, within MONUSCO some traditional TCCs have begun to defer more dangerous tasks to the intervention brigade, turning it into the primary tool for any offensive operation, creating a significant danger of overextension for the rather small brigade.

At the same time, there is a widespread expectation that in the wake of the drawdown in Afghanistan NATO countries will, as it is sometimes put, return to United Nations peacekeeping operations. But given NATO’s disenchantment with counterinsurgency operations and a general casualty aversion, it is unlikely that European nations in particular will embrace the more aggressive approach displayed in the DRC. Inadvertently, this might create a situation, where both, traditional TCCs and Western capitals both oppose such missions and the heavy lifting in peacekeeping operations falls increasingly to African nations.

Policy Implications

The intervention brigade is the result of both African nations taking on a leading role in formulating and implementing peacekeeping missions and a learning process within peacekeeping operations that highlights the value of early and decisive interventions over gradual expansion of missions. In contrast to Western nations, whose appetite for peacekeeping missions has largely vanished in the aftermath of the intervention in Afghanistan, African nations have stepped up to the plate in recent years and demonstrated a surprising readiness to endure casualties.

It is important to remember that though the intervention brigade is the first direct attempt by the United Nations to use offensive tactics in an peacekeeping operation, it is not the first offensive peacekeeping operation by the international community in the DRC. The 2003 mission ARTEMIS, then spearheaded by the French and beefed up by the European Union took a largely similar approach to stabilising the city of Bunia before a revamped MONUC force moved in to relieve the mission. The fact that the United Nations and EU forces already have conducted missions in similar fashion makes it difficult to argue that the United Nations is treading into fully uncharted territory. Though it is unlikely that political considerations of TCCs will not be part in the deliberations of a UN mission’s mandate, the mission’s mandate should be driven by the situation on the ground. That this — albeit belatedly — is what has happened in the case of the DRC should in fact be encouraging.

Western nations should do their utmost to help consolidate the gains and assist in such missions – whether it be in the DRC or in similar missions in the future. Which begs the question, what is it that Western nations can do to encourage the development and help facilitate the gains made?

- **Offer more clarity on Western contributions:** Since Western nations will continue to be risk adverse in future peacekeeping operations, they should be clear on what they will feel
able to contribute. Given that most European nations, with the notable exception of France, will in all likelihood not contribute larger contingents to peacekeeping operations on the African continent, they should offer the technology that only they could make available. This should include UAVs and other intelligence collection assets, as well as MedEvac and airlift capabilities. In the past these capabilities were mostly offered as a compensatory measure to avoid being drawn into these missions. In the future these assets ought to be made available as a matter of principle.

- **Better equipment for African peacekeepers:** United Nations missions still rely heavily on troop contributions from African and Asian nations. Western states restrict themselves mostly to symbolic contributions — usually volunteering staff officers to mission headquarters. The brunt of the peacekeeping effort is hence been carried by actors who usually possess only marginal capabilities, other than infantry-heavy units. Logistics, attack helicopters, armoured personnel carriers (APCs), heavy artillery and air support are in short supply in all these forces, if they exist at all. And where such equipment does exist, it is either old, suffering from poor maintenance or hardly ever adapted to the often tropical environment in which it is needed. So far, it is mostly the United States that is offering material assistance to African contributors, but even that assistance consists mostly of surplus APCs and does not fill all the gaps that these forces encounter when deployed to complex peacekeeping scenarios. Helicopters and airlift capabilities are mostly missing. That is despite the fact that such weaponry through its mere presence can be deterrence to potential spoilers.

It is in this context that Western nations can and should do more. While most nations returning from Afghanistan consider leaving part of their APCs either to Afghanistan or its neighbours, the knowledge gained from their deployment to the Middle East should be used to upgrade APCs and make them available to African peacekeepers. But more importantly, when the United Nations asks for attack helicopters and aircraft, European nations—including Germany—should volunteer to contribute.

- **Devote more resources to study African militaries and counterinsurgencies:** Western nations should not reject the aggressive posture by UN peacekeeping missions out of hand. The decision for an intervention brigade in Eastern Congo was driven largely by African nations willing to shoulder the burden of the mission themselves. Given that most UN missions are deployed to African countries and are to no small degree staffed by African militaries, Western capitals would be well-advised to view the intervention brigade not in isolation, but rather in the context of other African peacekeeping missions, particularly the African Union mission in Somalia. Seen in relation to AU missions, the intervention brigade is not unique and will likely pave the way for more offensive mandates in the future. At the same time, the situation in the DRC shows that the understanding of counterinsurgencies and the role African militaries can play in these kinds of operations is still limited and needs further examination.

- In the wake of the tragedies of Somalia and Rwanda, the West called for African solutions to African problems, without really addressing the lack of African capabilities. Much was invested in training programmes, but the continent continued to lack the equipment and political structures necessary to fill the promise of African solutions and for some time it
also lacked the political will. At least the latter has changed. The international community
and Western capitals should welcome and encourage the stand African nations are taking.
References


About the author

Dustin Dehez is a managing partner at Manatee Global Advisors.

Dustin has previously been with the Global Governance Institute’s peace and security section and worked for Deutsche Bank Research. In addition to his responsibilities at Manatee Global Advisors, he is a member of the Young Atlanticist Working Group of the Atlantic Council of the United States (ACUS) and the Foreign Policy Experts of the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation (KAF). He also serves as a regional chairman of the German United Nations Association (UNA Germany).

He has published extensively on international relations, national security and the global economy. His articles have appeared in Foreign Affairs and numerous German journals. His first book was published in 2013. His major area of interest includes civil-military relations and globalisation.

Get in touch with the author: dustin.dehez@manatee-global.com

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