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Prioritization and Sequencing of Security Council Mandates: The Case of MINUSMA

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On May 13, 2019, 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 Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). This event was the eleventh in a series of workshops examining how the activities included in peace operations' mandates can be better prioritized, sequenced, and grounded in a political strategy. This 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.

Introduction

The UN Security Council is expected to renew the mandate of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in June 2019. Amidst the potential stagnation of Mali's peace process, concerns over rising violence against civilians, and continued weaknesses of the Malian government in providing basic services, the upcoming negotiations on MINUSMA's mandate represent a critical moment to reflect upon the Security Council's strategic engagement in the country.

In this context, the International Peace Institute (IPI), the Stimson Center, and Security Council Report organized a workshop on May 13, 2019, to discuss MINUSMA's mandate and political strategy. This workshop provided a forum for member states, UN stakeholders, and outside experts to share their assessments of the situation in Mali. The discussion was intended to help the Security Council make more informed decisions with respect to the strategic orientation, prioritization, and sequencing of the mission's mandate and actions on the ground.

The first session of the workshop focused on the evolving political and security situation in Mali and the broader Sahel region, including the challenges facing the implementation of Mali's Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation, the protection of civilians, and the restoration of state authority. The discussion highlighted several tensions in the Security Council's approach to pursuing peace and security in Mali, specifically the tensions inherent in a conflict that is simultaneously transnational and hyper-localized. It also highlighted the debate around whether the mission should focus more on the north or the center of Mali.

In the second session, participants largely agreed that MINUSMA's current mandate remains relevant. At the same time, they put forward several proposals to further strengthen and adapt the mandate to help the mission advance its political strategy and achieve the Security Council's objectives in the coming year. Recommendations included expanding MINUSMA's political work to the center of the country and to support a national dialogue, making protection of civilians a strategic priority, increasing support to justice and reconciliation, and strengthening regional coordination.

Conflict Analysis

Progress toward the Security Council's objectives in Mali over the past year has been mixed. Implementation of the peace agreement has picked up since the presidential elections in July and August. Still, progress on some key elements of the accord—including decentralization—continues to be delayed. Meanwhile, the security situation throughout Mali continues to deteriorate as violent extremists widen their reach and violence spills over into Burkina Faso and Niger.

Against this backdrop, MINUSMA is struggling to protect civilians and deliver on its mandate. This is due in part to the Malian government's weakness in providing services, as well as the fact that the mission is ill-suited to address all the structural drivers of violence. The mission also faces various tensions, including between the regional and local nature of the conflict, between the urgency of the situations in the north and center of the country, between MINUSMA as an operational and a political tool, between the ongoing security crisis and the calls for MINUSMA to develop an exit strategy, and between the need for UN leadership and the proliferation of other international actors in the region.

STATUS OF THE PEACE AGREEMENT

The implementation of the peace agreement has been largely stagnant since it was signed in 2015. In late 2018, however, there were signs of renewed activity. A March 5th report from the secretary-general acknowledged limited progress in some key areas. However, this report also stated that more progress had been achieved within the past six months than ever before since the signing of the agreement. Some viewed this as proof that the international community's current approach of applying pressure to the signatories is effective and should continue. Under this approach, the Security Council has clarified which benchmarks it will use to assess progress and threatened and used sanctions. Pressure has also come from independent monitoring conducted by organizations such as the Carter Center.

Still, many participants expressed that progress on the implementation of the peace agreement remains unsatisfactory. Attendees criticized a lack of genuine engagement by the signatories on the

political reform agenda, including lack of significant progress on decentralization and improved governance. In this regard, they expressed high expectations for the new prime minister and his inclusive cabinet, which was appointed following a May 2nd political agreement between the government and several political parties (including from the opposition).

Moreover, some participants suggested that the council's insistence on demonstrable progress in the short term could prove counterproductive in the long term. For example, quick gains in the disarmament and demobilization of combatants may appear to show progress, but if not paired with similar progress on the reform of the security sector, these gains could be reversed. Pressure for short-term progress could lead to a focus on the more palatable aspects of the agreement and leave some of the most important, though controversial, aspects—like reintegration and decentralization—unaddressed.

SECURITY DYNAMICS

In contrast to the narrative of relative progress on the peace agreement, the security situation in Mali has continued to deteriorate since the previous renewal of MINUSMA's mandate in June 2018. One participant observed that violence has escalated in recent months. The massacre of more than 160 Fulani civilians in Ogossagou in March 2019 shocked many and exemplified the level of insecurity that persists in the country.

Civilians in Mali face three main types of threats. First, they are threatened by armed groups affiliated with terrorist organizations, which conduct targeted attacks against traditional and religious leaders to intimidate and gain control over the population. Second, civilians are threatened by counterterrorism operations, including those conducted by the G5 Sahel Joint Force and Malian armed forces, both of which have been accused of committing human rights abuses during their operations. Third, civilians are threatened by intercommunal violence, which intersects with violent extremism and transnational organized crime, exacting high civilian death tolls, exacerbating longstanding grievances, and fomenting displacement.

Furthermore, the geographic area of the Sahel impacted by insecurity and violence has expanded

significantly. A year ago, violence and extremist activity was predominantly limited to central and northern Mali and northern Burkina Faso. In recent months, this insecurity has spread rapidly across Burkina Faso and Niger and is now impacting the northern regions of coastal West African states like Ghana, Togo, and Benin. Cross-pollination between entrenched illicit trade and trafficking networks and radicalized local armed groups affiliated with international and regional violent extremist organizations further distorts the mission's operational environment.

WEAKNESS OF STATE AUTHORITY

As security deteriorates, the Malian government remains weak. The government's struggle to provide security, justice, and basic services was cited throughout the workshop as one of the biggest challenges in the country, undermining MINUSMA's ability to fulfill its mandate.

The Malian government is navigating a period of significant political instability. At the executive level, the resignation of Prime Minister Soumeylou Boubèye Maïga and the appointment of a new cabinet in May took place against a backdrop of heavy opposition pressure and protests by civil society. At the legislative level, the mandate of the current National Assembly ended in December 2018, yet parliamentary elections will likely continue to be delayed past June. This delay threatens the legitimacy of the assembly and jeopardizes reforms like the decentralization of governance and development.

Meanwhile, the government continues to struggle to provide justice and other services to the Malian people. Government administrators have withdrawn from some areas of the country in recent months due to insecurity. Investigations into human rights violations are rarely completed, and the perpetrators are rarely brought to trial. Faced with government inaction, communities are taking action into their own hands through armed mobilization. Additionally, uncertainty surrounding the dossiers compiled by the Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission and how its investigations will advance accountability was highlighted to be an important factor for the legitimacy of the Malian government in Mali's northern and central regions.

Given that the Malian government is unable to

provide security throughout the country, community-based self-defense forces and ethnic militias have become increasingly prominent. The Malian government has implicitly endorsed some of their operations—for example, retired military officers are reportedly fighting with Dogon militias in Mopti. This has resulted in allegations that the government is an active participant in the intercommunal violence that these groups exacerbate and is further emboldening jihadist actors.

TENSIONS FACING THE MISSION

Throughout the workshop, tensions became apparent between the council's priorities and objectives in Mali. Many participants, for example, identified the conflict as both transnational and hyper-localized. This dynamic pulls the mission's attention in two different directions without the tools necessary for either: a country-specific mandate constrains regional approaches, while peacekeeping missions are inherently not designed to address local tensions. Insecurity, too, constrains the mission's ability to address local conflicts.

A second tension is between the mission's strategic priority—to support the implementation of the peace agreement in the north—and the need for a greater emphasis on the center of the country. However, some participants disputed the distinction between the north and the center as arbitrary and unconstructive, as political and security developments in both areas are interrelated. Also, even within these two areas, drivers of violence are localized and can vary significantly.

Third, some underscored a tension between MINUSMA's role as an operational tool on the ground and its use by the council as a political tool to exert leverage. At times over the past year, members of the council have used the threat of reducing MINUSMA's presence and activities as an incentive for the government and other parties to the peace agreement to demonstrate more progress on implementation. Some participants noted the limitations of this threat given that that progress depends at least as much, if not more, on the engagement and good faith of the parties as on the mission itself. Another related point was that increased pressure can lead the mission to focus on "quick wins" as opposed to thornier issues. Other participants highlighted that MINUSMA is forced to balance proactive avenues for engaging in the

political process with fears that it is displacing national ownership over critical reforms.

Fourth, some highlighted a tension between the ongoing security crisis and the Security Council's request for MINUSMA to begin planning a strategy for its eventual exit. These participants noted their concerns that Mali's volatile political and security situation presents an inopportune moment for the mission to signal that it is considering exiting the country, even in the long term.

Fifth, participants acknowledged the tension between the Security Council's desire to maintain a leading role in Mali with the proliferation of other international actors in the country and the broader Sahel region. The African Union, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the G5 Sahel and its Joint Force, France and its Operation Barkhane, the European Union, Algeria, and other actors all influence the political and security environments in which MINUSMA operates.

All of these tensions highlight competing pressures within the Security Council for MINUSMA to accomplish even more in Mali amidst an increasingly restrictive political and financial environment.

Prioritizing and Sequencing MINUSMA's Mandate

Many workshop participants agreed that MINUSMA's current mandate, detailed in Resolution 2423, remains highly relevant. Participants noted that the mandate provides clear strategic guidance from the Security Council without micromanaging and praised its prioritized and sequenced approach. When considering the mandate's renewal, many argued that, for the most part, MINUSMA has the mandate it needs for the mission to continue its role in the political process, to prioritize the protection of civilians, and to support justice and reconciliation activities. However, participants also emphasized that the Security Council should provide MINUSMA with more strategic guidance on engaging the center of the country, and to better contextualize MINUSMA's role within the Sahel-Saharan regional.

However, one participant emphasized the need

to reassess the mandate of the mission in light of the request from the Security Council for the secretary-general to propose potentially significant adaptations to the mission in his upcoming report. Other participants emphasized that the Security Council should consider how to situate MINUSMA's contribution to stabilizing Mali in the context of the broader international and regional effort.

MINUSMA'S ROLE IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS

Participants noted that by explicitly laying out MINUSMA's strategic priority of support to Mali's political process, the Security Council sets a clear direction for the mission. The special representative of the secretary-general (SRSG) has been proactive in his good offices role, not only regarding the peace agreement but also reducing tensions between the government and opposition parties around the 2018 presidential elections. The fact that a diverse array of political actors in the country continues to turn to the mission for support demonstrates that there is a clear role for MINUSMA to play in the political process. As such, participants advocated that the new mandate continue to instruct the mission to focus on political tasks.

Attendees identified the sanctions regime established in Resolution 2374 as critical to supporting the Security Council's political strategy for Mali. Some noted the clear (though uneven) impact the threat of sanctions has had on the parties to the agreement to accelerate implementation. Beyond the direct impact of the sanctions, these measures have hurt the political standing of the individuals listed. However, as time passes and further sanctions are not imposed against those undermining the peace process, the threat becomes less and less credible. Some participants suggested it is time for the council to apply additional targeted sanctions against those undermining the peace process, including if necessary, individuals connected to the Malian government.

Considering MINUSMA's good offices role and the fact that the peace agreement does not address all drivers of violence in Mali, several participants also proposed that MINUSMA expand its political efforts further. This could involve a more active role for the mission in supporting the national

dialogue process that many Malian actors have called for, which would involve consultations across a large cross-section of the population (including elements of extremist groups) on the constitutional reform and other governance issues.

PRIORITIZE PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS

Some participants argued that MINUSMA's mandate does not sufficiently prioritize the protection of civilians, particularly in relation to the mission's other priority tasks. The mission was not initially designed to prioritize the protection of civilians, as there were fewer protection concerns when the mission was established in 2013. As a result, protection of civilians is listed fourth among MINUSMA's priority tasks, which some suggested may signal to the mission that it is not a top priority. Some appraised that the mission's leadership is primarily occupied with political tasks and does not afford enough attention to protection. One recommendation was to elevate protection of civilians to the level of a "strategic priority" for MINUSMA.

Others disputed this analysis, stating that protection of civilians is a "core task" for MINUSMA and that the mission's mandate and structure sufficiently prioritize civilian protection. Additionally, they highlighted that the mission's leadership is ensuring a holistic approach to protection, including through military and politically driven engagements. Despite these differing appraisals of the mission's current role in this area, participants agreed that the protection of civilians should be one of MINUSMA's highest priority tasks moving forward.

JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION

Given the integral role that the lack of access to justice, and impunity, have played in the recent deterioration of security in Mali, participants stated that MINUSMA should do more to support justice and reconciliation efforts. Although some argued that the mission already has the mandate to perform these tasks, many agreed that it could do more to raise their operational priority.

For example, MINUSMA could provide further support to implementing the recommendations that come out of the soon-to-be-released report of the Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission. It could also increase support to the Malian government's efforts to establish accountability

mechanisms to address intercommunal disputes and support the special mechanism on transnational organized crime in Bamako.

Participants urged the council to send a clear message in the upcoming mandate that support to justice and reconciliation—both within and outside the scope of the peace agreement—continues to be a priority for the mission.

STRATEGIC GUIDANCE ON THE CENTER

Attendees noted that the weakest part of MINUSMA's current mandate is its language on engagement in the center of Mali, because it does not provide an adequate strategic vision for the mission's efforts there. This is in part because the Malian government itself has not advanced a cohesive political strategy for engaging the region and accelerating governance reforms. Attendees lamented that without such a vision, the redirection of mission assets to the center of the country, including increasing the number of troops, will be unlikely to have a concrete impact.

Many participants argued that one of the factors limiting MINUSMA's ability to engage in the center is that the situation there lacks an overall political framework, such as that outlined for northern Mali in the peace agreement. Some suggested that MINUSMA could play a role in facilitating consultations to pursue such a political solution to the violence in the center.

BROADER REGIONAL COORDINATION

Finally, participants noted that given the territorial expansion of armed groups and violent activity in the region, it is important for MINUSMA to amplify its regional coordination on political and security initiatives in Mali and throughout the Sahel. While MINUSMA is already mandated to ensure adequate coordination and exchange of information and provide support to other security forces present in the region, the council could consider enhancing coordination, including with the G5 Sahel Joint Force, ECOWAS, the African Union, the European Union, the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), and France. This could include authorizing MINUSMA to share information with all relevant UN country teams in West Africa. Participants also called upon the UN to provide more direct support to the African Union's Nouakchott Process, a forum for

security cooperation and information exchange among countries in the Sahel-Saharan region.

Conclusion

The political and security situation in Mali remains tenuous and highly volatile. While some progress has been made on implementing elements of the peace agreement, gains are tentative, and signatories have yet to demonstrate genuine political will to implement outstanding elements of the accord. Instability is spreading in the region, and violence is intensifying, threatening civilians on multiple fronts. The Malian government remains unable to provide effective security, justice, and other services to its population. The mission continues to be asked to balance a variety of priorities and objectives, some of which are in tension with one another.

In this context, MINUSMA's current mandate remains highly relevant. In the upcoming mandate renewal, the Security Council could consider reinforcing MINUSMA's political role, prioritize the protection of civilians, raise the priority level of the mission's tasks related to justice and reconciliation, provide more strategic guidance on the role of the mission in the center of the country, and broaden regional coordination beyond the G5 Sahel to include other ECOWAS nations and the AU more generally. It is critical, however, for the Security Council to also consider MINUSMA as one part of a broader constellation of political and security actors in the region. The upcoming mandate should reflect how best the peacekeeping mission can function within a broader strategic approach to the Sahel.

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