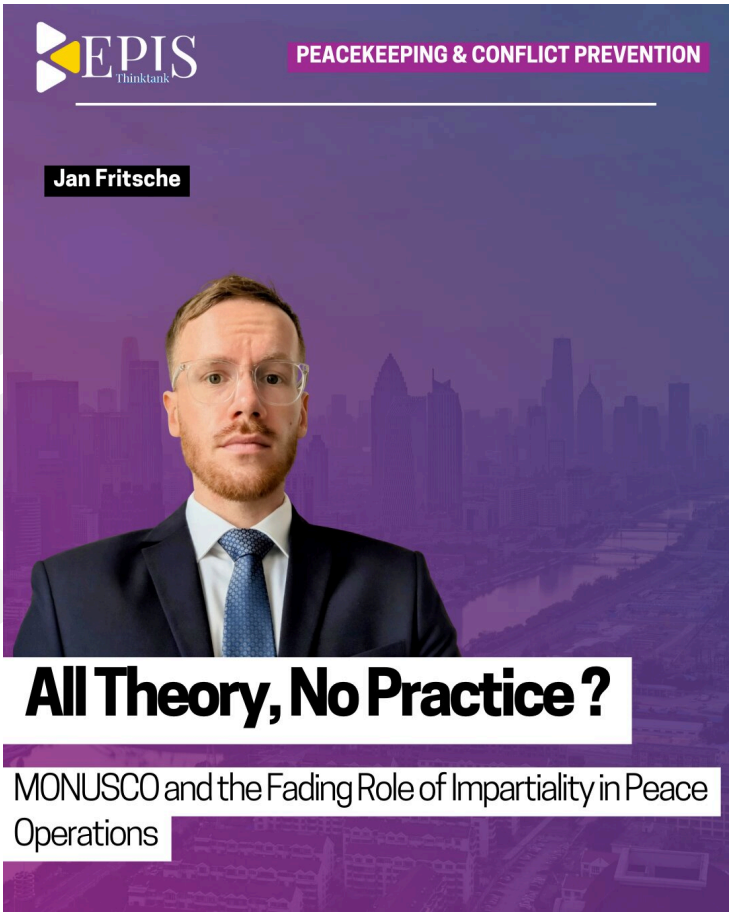
All Theory, No Practice?

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Introduction

Ever since its genesis, the necessity for "impartiality", "consent of the parties", and the "non-use of force except in self-defence and defence of mandate" have posed the three fundamental principles of UN Peacekeeping. Crucial in view of their perception as mediators in regions of conflict, UN peace troops were and are obligated to implement the respective mission's mandate in an impartial and unbiased fashion, reluctant to favouritism towards any party in conflict.

Nevertheless, multiple factors, such as the changing nature of conflict, required the UN to adapt its approaches towards global challenges and crises. Within the framework of the Brahimi Report in 2000, the UN

itself emphasised the importance of the three previously presented core principles as an essential foundation for UN Peacekeeping. However, in the wake of growing tendencies of intrastate and transnational wars, the Brahimi Report reiterated the importance of a stringently required distinction between the terms "impartiality" and "neutrality" (United Nations, 2000). Emphasising that impartiality does not mean neutrality in the face of injustice but adherence to the mandate and the principles of the United Nations.

However, developments towards robust peacekeeping, like the implementation of the Force Intervention Brigade within the framework of MONUSCO, catalysed doubts about whether the UN would be able to uphold its self-imposed commitment to impartiality on the ground.

Methodology

In the course of a qualitative process-tracing approach, this brief deconstructs the evolution of MONUSCO's (and its predecessor MONUC's) growing portfolio of tasks and analyses the mandate's development in light of the UN's core principle of impartiality – with particular attention to the sequential perception of the mission's personnel by the conflicting parties in D.R. Congo. Due to the limited scope of this brief, the analysis will focus on a selection of critical junctures that significantly affected and changed the mission's character – e.g., the deployment of the Force Intervention Brigade in 2013.

Background

Following the end of the Belgian colonial rule, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (D.R. Congo) gained its independence in 1960, whereupon Joseph Mobutu seized power, renaming the country to Zaire. Following Mobutu's dictatorial regime, change was imminent in 1994, when deeply entrenched ethical conflicts between Hutus and Tutsis tragically climaxed in the genocide in Rwanda – spilling over into the neighbouring countries of Burundi and Zaire.

A development ultimately resulting in the outbreak of a civil war, ranging into the territories of Uganda, Angola, Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Chad. The conflict, which due to its range and fragmentation carries the name "Africa's World War", is said to have claimed the deaths of more than five million people as a result of direct involvement in conflict or because of consequential aftermath, e.g., malnutrition and diseases (Spijkers, 2015). After his deposition in 1997, rebel leader Laurent-Desiré Kabila replaced Mobuto as president of the country that reverted to its former name, D.R. Congo. Assassinated in 2001, Kabila was later succeeded by his son Joseph Kabila.

Consequential after decades of the colonial rule, Mobutu's dictatorship, and persisting violent action in the course of the civil war, the D.R. Congo

saw a severe crisis in various dimensions – ranging from widespread civilian suffering and a desolate infrastructure to malfunctioning governmental and economical conditions. An initial ceasefire in 1999 and the adoption of a peace agreement by the warring factions – the Government of the D.R. Congo, the rebel movement Rassemblement Congolais pour la Democratié, and the Mouvement de Libération du Congo – in 2003 sparked hope. Nevertheless, the D.R. Congo was designated to remain a region of crisis for decades to come.

UN Mandate

With an authorised strength of close to 6,000 military personnel, the first United Nations Organization Mission to the D.R. Congo, MONUC, commenced its operation in 2000, following Security Council Resolution 1291 (UN SC, 2000). The initial mandate instructed MONUC's personnel to centre on the monitoring of 1999's ceasefire agreement and associated violations as well as the provision of humanitarian assistance. Notwithstanding, drastically deteriorative developments in the country urged the UN to revise the mission's mandate, repeatedly expanding the portfolio of tasks assigned to MONUC's continuously increasing personnel. Persisting violent action by rebel groups and the troops of the transitional government drew the UN mission's focus to the deployment and maintenance of presence in key areas of potential volatility, aiming to protect both civilians' and mission staff's lives.

The UN's operation in the D.R. Congo reset its organisation following Resolution 1925 in 2010. While the Congolese government initially tended to instigate the mission's withdrawal, the parties agreed on the continuation of the operation, renamed MONUSCO, with the aim to improve the security situation by the restoration of state authority in the eastern parts of the country. Inter alia, the Tutsi rebel group National Congress for the Defence of the People of the Congo (CNDP) – led by Laurent Nkunda – had established a dominant presence in the eastern Kivu region, continuously harming the security situation as well as hindering the establishment of governmental rule.

Rebel groups, such as the CNDP, posed a crucial factor towards the UN Security Council's decision to authorise MONUSCO to use all necessary means within its capacity and in areas where its armed units were deployed (UN SC, 2010). A development that laid the foundation towards MONUSCO's robust peacekeeping, which up to this day sparks doubt regarding the UN troops' ability to maintain their perception as impartial actors in the region.

Critical Junctures: M23 and the Force Intervention Brigade

MONUSCO's impartiality began to be contested when the Peace Accord that the government of Congo and the CNDP had agreed upon on March

23, 2009, did not result in eased tensions but resulted in an even deeper division among the conflicting parties. Alongside the prospective treatment of the CNDP as a political party, the agreement designated the integration of its military troops into the Congolese Armed Forces (FARDC). However, as President Kabila aimed to restore his influence in the eastern Kivu region, his effort to arrest the former commander of the CNDP, Bosco Ntaganda, led to a mutiny among the CNDP soldiers in the FARDC – consequently reorganising themselves as a rebel group in the **March 23 Movement (M23)** (Favor, 2023). While the M23 perceived itself as an advocate of the Tutsi and their interests in the D.R. Congo, accusations of severe violence, abuse and violations of human rights rose in the course of the rebel group's recurring siege in the D.R. Congo's East (Stearns, 2012).

The critical development of M23's increasing influence in the Kivu region reached a climax in 2012 when the rebel movement occupied the city of Goma. A siege that meant defeat for 1,500 MONUSCO personnel and 7,000 soldiers of the FARDC stationed in the region (IPI, 2013). The following response by the Security Council to the tragic developments in the eastern D.R. Congo was set to change not only MONUSCO but also the character of UN peacekeeping in general. Aiming to compensate for the mission's previously exposed inability to deter armed rebel groups, the **Force Intervention Brigade (FIB)** was initiated and deployed in 2013. Operating under MONUSCO's peacekeeping mandate, the offensive brigade FIB consisted of infantry, artillery, special forces, and reconnaissance units commissioned with the offensive task of containment and disarmament of rebel groups as well as threat reduction (Favor, 2023).

Resolution 2098 highlighted the changing nature of the UN's approach in the D.R. Congo, instructing the FIB to actively "neutralise negative forces" (UN SC, 2013) and condemning actions by rebel groups violating human rights, such as M23, the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). In the following months, the FIB carried out multiple joint operations with the FARDC, achieving the reconquest of eastern territories from M23. Nevertheless, a UN mission entailing an armed intervention brigade like FIB came at the price of persisting concerns regarding the UN troops' impartiality on the ground as well as MONUSCO's legitimacy in general.

Resonance and Perception of UN's Impartiality in the D.R. Congo

Assuming that the UN Security Council deployed the Force Intervention Brigade in accordance with UN Chapter VII, its offensive direction still sparks debates about whether its troops became a legal party to the conflict in the D.R. Congo by engaging in joint offensive operations with the FARDC. Alongside its offensive posture, it is the close cooperation with the FARDC that was a root for concern and diminishing public trust. The

FARDC itself had frequently been accused of violations and occasional cooperations with the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) – another rebel group that the FIB was initially commissioned to neutralise (Day, 2017). A factor that, in consequence, harmed the perception and legitimacy of the FIB as part of the UN's operation in the country.

Furthermore, the UN and FIB seemingly underestimated the influence of the rebel groups operating in the D.R. Congo. Not limited to the siege of territory, rebel groups like the ADF have been gaining momentum and influence within society – epitomising not only a military force but also a political actor engaging in local communities, especially in the eastern parts of the country. A dimension in which MONUSCO could not present significant progress, which led to the assumption that the mission's focus shifted towards military engagement – which again degraded local trust in its operation (Favor, 2023).

Negative resonance regarding the effectiveness and track record of the FIB did not only emerge from non-governmental actors and rebel groups. In 2024, the President of the D.R. Congo, Félix Tshisekedi, shuffled governmental accountability by communicating his discontent with MONUSCO's inability to improve the security situation, imposing the mission's rapid and complete withdrawal. Despite the FIB's joint engagement with the FARDC and a continuously dramatic security reality – from expanding rebel attacks to the displacement of approximately 7 million Congolese citizens (Nantulya, 2024).

Conclusion

The case of the D.R. Congo and MONUSCO remains a critical juncture for UN peacekeeping and its core principle of impartiality. As intrastate conflict and deeply embedded ethical fragmentation in hosting states are likely to remain as preconditions for peacekeeping, approaches towards robust peacekeeping and more offensive engagements need to be considered. However, MONUSCO illustrated the dangers and negative aspects that robust and offensive peace operation approaches inhere.

If not backed by notable progress across other dimensions of a mandate's portfolio – e.g., the restoration of political structures and protection of human rights – offensive peacekeeping troops will always be at risk of being perceived as a party of conflict. Especially if mandate-driven operations remain closely aligned and in cooperation with government forces, as became observable in the FIB's joint missions with the FARDC.

In this regard, lessons taken from MONUSCO and the FIB must include the awareness of the potential of robust peacekeeping to protect civilians – as became evident in FIB's successful operations against M23. However, the necessity for a clarification regarding an intervention component's legal status and the embedding in the mandate context, as well as awareness for the potential of an offensive engagement to be perceived as complicit in conflict rather than a mediator in crisis, must be considered just as imperatively.

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