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INFOFLASH

FROM OPTIMISM TO PRAGMATISM: THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF PEACE OPERATIONS AND THE EU RESPONSE

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Introduction

In recent days, articles have started to circulate regarding the end of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM). It has been reported that the Somali Minister of Foreign Affairs Aimed Moa Fiji has formally requested the United Nations (UN) to end the mission in a letter to the Security Council and to the Secretary-General Antonio Guterres (Ross & Paravicini 2024; Africanews 2024). This event would reflect a broader trend of growing scepticism and distrust towards peacekeeping missions, as well as a shift towards "pragmatic peacekeeping", characterized by smaller mandates focused on counterterrorism and counterinsurgency and by the prioritization of conflict containment (Karlsrud, 2023). Other examples of this tendency are the conclusion of the peacekeeping mission in Congo (MONUSCO) in 2024 and the expulsion of peacekeepers from Mali (MINUSMA) in December 2023.

While these missions are concluding, the UN has not launched a new multidimensional peace operation since 2014. What was once defined by US President Barack Obama as "one of the world's most important tools to address armed conflict" (Autesserre, 2019), has experienced increased criticism regarding its effectiveness and seems to be approaching its end. Amidst these developments, regional organisations and states' alliances have increased their participation and their role in peacekeeping, taking a more active stance in the past two decades (Bara & Hultman, 2020). These changes have prompted repercussions for the peacekeeping landscape and for its major players, such as the EU, which has increasingly solidified its presence in peacekeeping since 2003 (Tardy, 2019). The EU seems to be progressively aligning with the principles of pragmatic peacekeeping, emphasizing efficiency, local ownership and sustainable principles, also evident in its activity of supporting and establishing partnerships with regional coalitions such as the G5 Sahel Countries (Duursma, et al., 2023). This analysis explores the significant transformations that took place in the peacekeeping landscape due to the crisis of the traditional peacekeeping approach and the complexities posed by contemporary conflicts. It underlines the increased relevance of ad-hoc coalitions and regional partners taking more active roles, also supported by the EU which has recognized this change in peacekeeping dynamics and the consequent shift towards deploying more flexible, short-term missions.

I. UN Peacekeeping

In May 1948 the UN deployed the United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation (UNTSO) to oversee the Armistice Agreement between Israel and the neighbouring Arab states. The date pinpoints the first UN inception into peacekeeping (Duursma, et al., 2023).

Following that moment, UN peacekeepers have been tasked with an incredibly wide and diverse collection of responsibilities aimed at resolving conflicts and promoting stability, from monitoring truces to facilitating political transitions and providing humanitarian assistance (Kenkel, 2013). However, following the initial surge of overwhelming enthusiasm and optimism at the end of the Cold War, the high ambitions of the UN were ruined, confronted with a barrage of criticism and condemnation (Barnett, 1996).

Today, in assessing the effectiveness of peacekeeping efforts, it becomes evident that the outcomes and opinions are mixed. On one hand, these missions have succeeded in preventing or mitigating conflicts, facilitating the delivery of humanitarian aid, and supporting the establishment of democratic governance structures (Walter, et al., 2021). On the other hand, challenges such as insufficient mandates, limited resources and political dynamics have often hindered their success. The critiques faced by the UN mainly stemmed from the perceived failures in fulfilling mandates and meeting the expectations in missions such as the ones in Somalia, Rwanda and Bosnia (Autesserre, 2019).

In this matter, the challenges faced by UN peacekeeping have long been recognised and studied. For instance, Malone & Thakur (2001) identify three main levels that need to be tackled to address the factors that impact the effectiveness of peacekeeping missions: political, managerial and operational. However, while the need for reform has long been recognised, concrete actions to address and solve the problems are yet to happen, with peacekeepers on the ground having to face the consequences (Malone & Thakur, 2001). For instance, MINUSMA's peacekeepers faced multiple key obstacles in trying to complete the mandate within the country. The primary challenge concerning the mission arose at the establishment of the operations: despite inheriting forces and assets from AFISMA, by October 2013 MINUSMA was still operating at less than half of its mandated strength amidst a progressively volatile security environment (Lotze, 2014). MINUSMA found itself overstretched and under attack from the armed Islamist movements (Lotze, 2014), while the civilians endured grave human rights violations, displacement, and intimidation by armed groups and extremist organisations and the tensions between communities have continued to escalate, resulting in violence and targeting of civilians and peacekeepers (Bere, 2017). Furthermore, the current UN system, designed to address interstate conflicts post-World Wars remains ill-prepared for complex intrastate conflicts and violent extremism despite also endorsing the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) norm in 2005 (Bere, 2017).

II. The Decline of Liberal Peacebuilding and the Rise of Pragmatic Peacekeeping

Since its origin after WWII, the changes in global politics have deeply impacted and influenced the activities and growth of UN peacekeeping. Over the last decade, as multilateralism and liberalism have increasingly come under pressure, the UN peacekeeping system has mirrored this change. The widespread conviction that emerged in the 1990s that the principles of political and economic liberalism held the key to resolving a wide array of social, political, and economic challenges, has, with time, been fading.

The belief encompassed issues ranging from underdevelopment and famine to the containment of disease, environmental preservation, and the mitigation of violent conflicts. It was against this backdrop of optimism and transformation that the United Nations embarked on its first series of peacebuilding operations (Paris, 2012). Since then, western states have shifted from liberal peacebuilding to stabilization and counterterrorism mandates, meaning peacekeeping missions have increasingly been deployed alongside and with closer collaboration with "coalitions of the willing", particularly involving peace enforcement and counter-terrorism missions (Karlsrud, 2023).

For instance, MINUSMA was also tasked with supporting the ongoing counter-terrorism operation of the Group of Five Sahel Joint Force. Occurrences of large-scale violence under the observation of the United Nations, such as the Rwandan genocide of 1994, raised skepticism about the UN's capacity to safeguard civilians, a principle that has been highlighted as fundamental to UN peacekeeping efforts (Hultman, et al., 2013). These challenges encountered by liberal peacekeeping, along the constant growth of the demands for mandates that better serve the interest of authoritarian regimes from host states, as well as their rising resistance towards external interventions has prompted this shift in peacekeeping dynamics (Karlsrud, 2019).

For years, disillusionment over post-conflict interventions conducted under liberal theory has been increasing. For instance, in conversation with the Security Council, Mali Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Abdoulaye Diop, highlighted MINUSMA's shortcomings and emphasised that its mandate inadequately addressed prevailing security challenges (Security Council, 2023). He also underlined how: "MINUSMA seem[ed] to have become part of the problem, fuelling inter-community tensions exacerbated by extremely serious allegations that are highly detrimental to peace, reconciliation and national cohesion" (Security Council, 2023, p.20). Amidst these developments, and probably as also a consequence of them, the interests of states such as China, France, and the USA, as well as missions' host states, seem to have moved towards increased use of force with less focus on human rights, more multilateral support to counter-terrorism, and the strategic use of financing to engage in low-intensity conflicts at minimal cost (Karlsrud, 2023).

III. EU Peacekeeping Strategy

Under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the EU has emerged as a major player in peacekeeping operations, conflict prevention, and reinforcing international security in a growing complex environment, characterized by the rise of new and diverse challenges stemming from nontraditional security threats and evolving intrastate conflicts The CSDP is one of the primary elements of the EU's efforts to foster peace, stabilise conflict areas support transitioning states, and improve the EU's security. The European peacekeeping approach contained in the CSDP is also deeply interconnected and influenced by that of the UN (Friesendorf, et al., 2024).

The first European involvement in peacekeeping occurred in Bosnia and in Congo: in the first case the operation followed a UN mission and in the second, in Congo, operated along the UN mission. Since then, most EU missions involved some degree of cooperation with the UN such as in the case of Mali (Tardy, 2019). Stemming from this relation, the EU inherits some of the UN challenges such as lengthy decision-making processes and conflicting strategic interests that combined with the persistent issue of financial burden-sharing have more than once come to obstruct CSDP missions and operations (Reykers, et al., 2023). Nevertheless, European missions hold a unique approach distinct from other institution's experiences: in addressing crises, they combine civilian and military responses, focusing on rather short-term and consensual activities, almost always in support of existing state authorities, and while respecting and adhering to international legal instruments and a set of values and principles (Tardy, 2019).

Over time the UN-EU partnership has shifted from being relatively close to becoming more political in nature. In the first decade after the establishment of the EU's CSDP, the collaboration between the UN and the EU enabled the former to develop and assess its crisis management instruments on the ground. However, the EU has gradually distanced itself from the UN, shifting towards more specialised activities, such as training and capacity building (Duursma, et al., 2023). The EU has implemented missions varying in size and scope, ranging from aiding the Iraqi government in reforming its security sector (EUAM) to assisting the Malian Armed Forces in rebuilding their military capabilities through advisory support, training, non-executive accompaniment, and military assistance (EUTM). Furthermore, the EU also engaged in the maritime sector with operations such as ATALANTA, the counter-piracy military mission conducted at sea off the Horn of Africa and in the Western Indian Ocean (EEAS, 2023).

IV. The EU's Strategic Shift and the future of Peacekeeping

Some of the issues tackled by International and Regional Organisations (IROs) are standardised approaches, poor inclusivity and the imbalance between expectations and capabilities (Levorato & Sguazzini, 2024). Similarly, the EU has been especially observant and receptive to these changing dynamics in the peacekeeping landscape, increasing its focus on European-led ad hoc coalitions to address crisis response. Examples of these initiatives and short-term pragmatism are the Task Force Takuba in the Sahel region and the European Maritime Awareness mission in the Strait of Hormuz, both aimed to accomplish particular achievements and provide quick and effective answers to complex problems (Reykers & Rieker, 2024). For this reason, the task force was purposely established outside of the EU's CSDP structure, in an attempt to prevent delays and maintain operational independence (Reykers, et al., 2023). Despite its establishment, its operational activities were closely intertwined with the EU training and advisory missions, the JF-G5S and MINUSMA, further underlining its distancing from the endemic problems of the EU and the CSDP framework (Reykers, et al., 2023). In this sense, while there were expectations that the EU would assume a leadership role in the Takuba operation, , active actions were never taken (Reykers & Rieker, 2024).

Nevertheless, the Strategic Compass of March 2022 explicitly declares the ambition to "strengthen mutual support between CSDP missions and operations and European-led ad hoc missions and operation" (EEAS, 2022, p. 30). Following the announcement of renewed collaborations, on February 2024, the European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell announced a new defensive EU naval operation in the Red Sea under the CSDP, called EUNAVFOR ASPIDES (Council of the EU, 2024). This new operation aims to restore maritime security in a region that, after October 2023, has increasingly become the target of Houthi attacks on international commercial boats. The mission, whose task is the protection of commercial and security interests, is built upon Operation Agenor, the military component of the European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH) (Reykers & Rieker, 2024). This operation, active since January 2020 is another example of European-led ad hoc coalitions built outside of the CSDP framework.

Although the traditional peacekeeping approach appears imperfect and ineffective, interventions like the one in Liberia provide compelling evidence to the contrary. This intervention effectively disarmed over 100,000 combatants, secured approximately 21,000 weapons, facilitated the return of around one million refugees and displaced persons to their homes, and assisted in the organization of three peaceful presidential and legislative elections (Ighobor, 2018).

Conclusion

With the end of the Cold War, the international community has increasingly tried to address internal conflicts, using peace operations to foster peace and establish stable representative governments in conflict-affected regions. Despite the high ambitions, the implementation of these missions has not been able to obtain the anticipated results, failing the expectations. Furthermore, the last decade has observed a constant growth of the crisis of liberalism and multilateralism that has affected the political scene and caused transformations in the peacekeeping and security landscape, having major consequences on key actors such as the UN and EU. Nonetheless, despite these challenges, peacekeeping remains crucial for its role in global peace and security efforts, particularly in safeguarding and assisting civilians in conflict zones.

The idea that effective post-conflict transition entails "local, non-western, non-universalist" approaches has increasingly been spreading, and in the meantime operations participants and host states have started to push for narrower mandates and short-term missions (Dunton, et al., 2023). This shift towards stabilisation and counter-terrorism efforts is problematic for the UN, since it undermines its legitimacy, particularly in interventions, humanitarian work and peace operations. It threatens the UN's role as a key player in the international peace and security landscape (Karlsrud, 2019). Conversely, having partially moved away from the UN model, Europe has observed and embraced the rise of ad hoc coalitions and European-led initiatives that are becoming an integral part of the European security and defence framework, while the EU is also working and moving towards strengthening mutual support between these coalitions and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) (Reykers & Rieker, 2024).

Looking ahead, it's necessary to address the multifaceted challenges of UN and EU peacekeeping and take concrete actions, combining the efforts of member states, regional organizations, and stakeholders alike. To ensure the efficacy of peacekeeping operations and foster lasting peace and stability in conflict-affected regions, adequate resources, clear mandates, and political support are indispensable. Ultimately, the shift towards pragmatic peacekeeping and ad-hoc coalitions is only the last symptom of an endemic crisis that has long been affecting the traditional peacekeeping paradigm. This highlights the urgent necessity of reevaluating and bolstering international efforts to effectively address the complex crisis of the twenty-first century. Only by addressing its problems and through unified action can the international community aspire to surmount the challenges confronting peacekeeping and lay the ground for a more peaceful and secure global landscape.

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