

A lack of strategic vision: robust peacekeeping's unintended consequences

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ABSTRACT

This article shows the UN's 'robust' peacekeeping mandates have led to a clear mismatch between robustness in organisational policy and the realities of how a robust mandate is implemented by the UN. Evidenced by interviews with those experienced in working with or within robust peacekeeping missions, the data supports the argument that the implementation of robust mandates has resulted in unintended consequences, such as the shrinking of humanitarian space that exacerbates long-standing tensions between UN peacekeepers and humanitarian actors. This unique dataset significantly advances our understanding of the consequences of robust mandates within the literature on peacekeeping and civil-military coordination.

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1. Introduction

Since the late 2000s, the United Nations (UN) has commonly used the term 'robust' within its peacekeeping policies and mission mandates. In particular, large, stabilisation missions such as the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), and the recently closed United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) were mandated in the 2010s to use 'robust' force and maintain a 'robust' posture. There is a wealth of research that examines this shift, including the meaning of robustness, how robust force impacts our understanding of peacekeeping vs peace enforcement, and whether robustness makes UN peacekeepers less impartial. But there is limited research on the perceptions of robust mandates by those who have worked with or within robust peacekeeping missions.

This article argues that the UN's 'robust' peacekeeping mandates have led to a clear mismatch between robustness in organisational policy and the realities of how a robust mandate is implemented by the UN and its troop-contributing countries (TCCs). The implementation of robust mandates has resulted in unintended consequences, such as the shrinking of humanitarian space that exacerbates long-standing tensions between UN peacekeepers and humanitarian actors. Due to an unclear strategic vision of how to

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implement robust mandates, it is unclear what role specialised military units must play in providing robustness to the mission, how they will be utilised, and how their effectiveness will be measured.

31 semi-structured, one-to-one interviews were undertaken between September 2023 and February 2024 with participants who had experience of robust peacekeeping. Purposive sampling was used to find participants who had direct experience of peacekeeping at tactical, operational and strategic levels. This included individuals who currently or previously worked for the UN, including in the Secretariat, specific peacekeeping missions and other funds, agencies, and programmes, international NGOs, and troop-contributing countries. By presenting a rich dataset of experiences of individuals working in this space, the article draws out examples of what participants perceived to be positives of robustness and the aspects of robustness that negatively impact the mission, for example, on the relationships between the missions and other actors, such as NGOs.

Interviews utilised a topic guide but were responsive with unscripted follow-up questions in order to build trust, empower the conversational partner and allow the interviews to search for context and richness (Rubin and Rubin 2012). Interviews also employed active subjectivity in narrative practice to allow participants to tell the story of their experiences (Gubrium and Holstein 2012). In this sense, the interviews were both investigative and narrative depending on the interviewee and their own experiences that they wished to share. This enabled the gathering of a rich dataset of views on robustness, relations between different actors and unique stories of working under or alongside a robust mandate.

That being said, given the amount of funding for the project and time allocated, it was not possible to provide comprehensive coverage of all robust missions or compare different time periods. Instead, this project provides useful snapshots that will help inform and add colour to research on the conceptualisation and impact of robustness and prompt organisational learning on how to operate under or alongside a robust peace operation. The research has not sought to compare responses to an 'ideal' that has been theorised as the correct way of conducting robust peace operations.¹ Instead the dataset accounts for the diverse array of interviewees and their experiences in the field and working for a multitude of organisations by giving value to all the views collected.

First, I examine the trend of robustness and where this article sits within the existing literature. Second, I provide examples of robust capabilities of recent missions. Third, I unpack how participants perceived robust peacekeeping, its capabilities, and its impact on relationships between the mission, the UN, and non-UN actors. Particular attention is paid to lessons to be learnt from MINUSMA, which closed in 2023 and was at the forefront of many participants' minds given interviews took place during the draw down and shortly after the exit of the mission. Lastly, I argue the UN must adopt a clear strategic vision of how to implement robust mandates and that this could, in part, be achieved through improved leadership, open dialogue between actors, and shared training opportunities.

2. Robustness and the need to examine experiences of robust mandates

Following the adoption of the first protection of civilians mandate in 1999, it was not until the late 2000s that 'robust' peacekeeping becomes a common feature within UN policy. In 2008, the UN defined 'robust peacekeeping' as

the use of force by a United Nations peacekeeping operation at the tactical level, with the authorization of the Security Council, to defend its mandate against spoilers whose activities pose a threat to civilians or risk undermining the peace process (UN Department for Peacekeeping Operations 2008, 98).

Robust peacekeeping is therefore manifestly linked to the use of force and the protection of civilians is an integral feature of missions with ‘robust’ mandates (Albrecht and Podder 2020). Robust mandates enable a peacekeeping mission to employ armed force beyond self-defence, have sufficient rules of engagement to engage threats to the mission or civilians, and require the mission to generate the necessary military capabilities to adopt a robust posture that deters spoilers.

By adopting that definition, the UN clarified that missions with ‘robust’ elements are not peace enforcement missions and remain *peacekeeping*. This is because ‘robust peacekeeping and the use of force therein has been quite carefully proscribed to the tactical level and delimited as a defensive and ultimately impartial activity’ (Hunt 2017, 111). Consequently, *peacekeeping*, even where the mission possesses a robust mandate, remains distinct from peace enforcement that authorises coercive force at the strategic and operational levels against a specific hostile actor. Labuda (2015) explains,

Robust peacekeeping implies that force can be used in defence of the mission mandate, especially its ‘protection of civilians’ component. Instead of waiting for an imminent attack, peacekeepers can proactively eliminate individual threats to civilians or the peacekeeping mission. By contrast, peace enforcement implies that peacekeepers are mandated to use force against selected targets, irrespective of any individualized threat to the mission or civilians.

In 2010 the UN’s Concept Note on Robust Peacekeeping defined robust peacekeeping as ‘a posture by a peacekeeping operation that demonstrates willingness, capacity and capability to deter and confront, including through the use of force when necessary, an obstruction to the implementation of its mandate’ (Department of Peacekeeping Operations 2010). Both the Capstone Doctrine and Concept Note are careful to delineate how robust peacekeeping is the use of force (a) at the tactical level and (b) limited to a direct, defensive response to spoilers. This is a conscious decision to clarify that missions do not wage war and must work with, not against, parties to the conflict (Andersen 2018).

By 2017 the UN, in its Guidelines on the Use of Force by Military Components in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations, had made clear that

Peacekeepers should not wait for hostile elements to attack civilians or United Nations personnel before using the appropriate level of force to prevent violence ... Thus, the actual use of force may not be necessary if peacekeepers display firm determination, readiness and capability to pre-empt/respond persuasively (Department of Peacekeeping Operations 2017, 12).

In this context, robust peacekeeping provides spoilers with an ultimatum that force will be used in the event of non-compliance (Nadin, Cammaert, and Popovski 2014).

There have necessarily been criticisms of the robust turn in UN peacekeeping. For instance, Hunt suggests that the robust posture and actions of UN peacekeepers would bring a ‘tarred with the same brush’ problem for the humanitarian community, imperilling the already fragile relationship (Hunt 2017, 118). Robust missions have also led to a shrinking of humanitarian space and encroached on space traditionally used for

peacebuilding (Curran and Hunt 2020; Sauter 2022). These concerns impact the impartiality of UN peacekeepers with authors suggesting the robust use of force presents a risk of undermining this cardinal principle, despite the UN maintaining its ‘formal script’ that its peacekeeping missions remain impartial (Gilder 2022; Karlsrud 2015; Laurence 2019; Tardy 2011). As will be seen below, the qualitative accounts of participants suggest the increasing robustness of missions has impacted the relationship between both UN and non-UN humanitarian actors. There is also the concern that where the more robust UN mission uses force against spoilers, those spoilers may retaliate against softer UN and NGO targets (Nadin, Cammaert, and Popovski 2014).

The other key criticism is the impact robust peacekeeping has on the political level. Some authors have focused on how robustness has led to the UN being ‘at war’ or enabling perpetual war, and that robust missions stray too far from traditional principles of peacekeeping, the more proactive use of force has led to the emergence of Chapter VII and a half missions (Charbonneau 2019; Karlsrud 2017; Karlsrud 2019c). The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) countries at the UN have opposed the concept of robust peacekeeping as for many member states, robustness is ‘a direct challenge to the principle of non-resort to force, and therefore to the very nature of UN peace operations’ (Tardy 2011, 158). Then looking at the host states, research has examined how there is a strong risk of losing impartiality and legitimacy when robust force is used to combat non-state armed groups in support of entrenching host state authority (Gilder 2022; Tardy 2011).

On a more practical level, the effectiveness of robust peacekeeping is constrained by the need for TCCs to be willing to provide troops to riskier, more deadly missions (Nadin, Cammaert, and Popovski 2014). Examples will be given below of how robustness has also led to greater military capabilities being afforded to UN missions. But even where TCCs do provide troops to robust missions, participants in this study reported that many will ‘hunker down’ in base and many contingents were simply ‘risk adverse.’²

Both conceptual and practical difficulties with implementing robust mandates are rooted in a lack of political strategy from the Security Council and strategic clarity in UN peacekeeping policy (Cammaert and Blyth 2013; Tardy 2011). This article fills a gap in the literature by providing data and analysis on how the realities of how a robust mandate is implemented by the UN and its troop-contributing countries (TCCs) have produced unintended consequences, including the shrinking of humanitarian space and unclear roles for specialised military units that are intended to provide ‘robust’ capabilities.

3. Examples of robust capabilities in MINUSCA and MINUSMA

To provide context for the subsequent qualitative discussion, it is important to show what robustness looks like on the ground. We can see in the examples of MINUSCA and MINUSMA that to be effective and capable of undertaking a robust mandate there must be special equipment, means for rapid transport and intelligence capabilities (Dorn 2023). In some instances, particularly in MINUSMA, those specialist military capabilities have been provided by Western TCCs in a resurgence of European contributions to UN peacekeeping. Experiences from one such unit, the UK’s Long-Range Reconnaissance Group (LRRG) contributed to MINUSMA from 2020–2022 (known nationally as Operation NEWCOMBE), will be discussed in greater depth in Section 4.

MINUSCA and MINUSMA both utilised attack helicopters to contribute to the robust posture of the mission. MINUSCA's Senegalese Mi-35s were equipped with effective weapons systems, defensive armour, and advanced surveillance technology for day and night intelligence operations (Dorn 2023). The Mi-35s were used to engage armed groups using rockets and machine-gun fire to counter an imminent attack and deter further threats (Dorn 2023, 79). This use of force was undertaken in the absence of any force used by the armed groups, but instead to prevent force being used against civilians (Longobardo 2020).

MINUSMA also possessed aerial capabilities with the Netherlands, Germany, El Salvador, and Canada all providing helicopters throughout the mission's deployment. The helicopters possessed reconnaissance capabilities and varying weapons systems. The Dutch AH-64s engaged armed groups, destroying a rocket launcher in 2015 and were able to cover large distances to collect important intelligence, such as the location of armed groups (Rietjens and Walter Dorn 2017).

In 2015, MINUSMA was given a more robust mandate and the operation became increasingly proactive in its protection efforts (UN Security Council 2015). MINUSMA carried out operations 'to neutralise threats, targeting improvised explosive devices', area and axis control of main supply routes to identify and arrest terrorists, and conducted patrols with the support of attack helicopters (UN Security Council 2016, paras 32, 38). MINUSMA aimed to 'progressively dominate areas adjacent to population centres' to prevent access to terrorist groups and criminals (UN Security Council 2014, para. 66). The mission deployed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and combat helicopters as a deterrent, and the robust mandate from 2016 onwards was said to allow MINUSMA to 'pre-empt certain threats while carrying out proactive and preventive operations' (UN Security Council 2017a, 3).

Despite the Security Council's intentions to make MINUSMA more robust, 9000 civilians were displaced in early 2017. Nine months after that year's mandate renewal, none of the additionally authorised military and police personnel had been deployed. As a result, MINUSMA lacked 'critical capabilities' and was on the back foot to deter physical violence perpetrated by terrorist groups, including where a patrol was sent to deter violence only after civilians had been executed (UN Security Council 2017b, para. 52).

MINUSMA further contributed to its robust capabilities through the identification of groups and individuals considered a threat to the mission and included them in 'targeting packs' (Karlsrud 2019b, 13). MINUSMA had a sophisticated intelligence system that had, for example, made use of a German UAV unit and a Swedish reconnaissance company of armoured vehicles, among others (Cherisey 2017). The targeting packs were compiled by MINUSMA's dedicated intelligence unit, the All Sources Information Fusion Unit (ASIFU), which was tasked with collecting actionable intelligence and had included personnel from the Netherlands, Sweden, and Norway (Kjeksrud and Vermeij 2017). ASIFU also carried out non-military intelligence analysis on issues such as illegal trafficking and narcotics, ethnic and tribal dynamics, corruption and bad governance (Rietjens and Ruffa 2019). Dutch forces, as part of ASIFU, established systems to provide relevant timely, actionable and integrated intelligence analysis to the Force Commander which enables robust responses to threats posed to the civilian population. (Van Willigen 2016)

Support for counter-terrorism also led MINUSMA to use specialised contingents from NATO countries keen to support the ongoing French and EU efforts in the wider Sahel.

European TCCs provided transport and combat helicopters, and drones. Much of this was to meet the NATO requirements surrounding extraction of wounded troops to enable its member states to contribute forces to the UN. As a result, the package has been described as establishing ‘a new level of combat readiness’ in UN peacekeeping (Karlsrud 2019a, 72). Dieng has argued it is necessary to support state institutions and provide space for populations to take up responsibility for their development (Dieng 2019). However, the encouragement of a security-focused strategy ‘works to the detriment of other essential tasks such as state building and effective governance’ (Dieng 2019). The use of TCCs that are also members of NATO meant German and Dutch contingents (deployed as part of MINUSMA) had agreements to provide transport for French forces conducting counter-terrorism operations under Operation Barkhane.

The UK’s LRRG gathered intelligence during long-range patrols and in 2021 reportedly contributed to a ‘significant reduction in violence against the locals and prevented the terrorist groups from moving and acting with impunity’ after covering over 1500 km and visiting 60 villages over one month (Allison 2021). In one instance, the LRRG came under attack from armed individuals and ‘vigorously retaliated, neutralising the two individuals’ (GOV.UK 2021). The LRRG also seized weapons, supported the maintenance of supply routes to Gao, ensured freedom of movement for friendly forces, amongst other activities (‘Op NEW-COMBE ~ British Troops Engaged In Mali’ 2021). Nevertheless, there was the feeling that despite these achievements, ‘we didn’t do a huge amount of patrolling.’³

In these examples, predominately European TCCs provided niche capabilities that could be force enablers for the UN mission and allow a more robust posture (Koops and Tercovich 2016). These deployments were opportunities for European TCCs to test their capabilities in multilateral environments and provide experience to their troops (Nilsson and Zetterlund 2016). But importantly, the deployments were on a relatively small scale, which minimises the security and political risks associated with deploying forces overseas (Karlsrud and Smith 2015). These niche capabilities were said to be sorely needed on the ground, and provided a crucial contribution to the robustness of those missions, but were not without their challenges (Karlsrud and Smith 2015).

European troops found it difficult to adapt to UN procedures and the perceived lower standards of non-European TCCs in relation to force protection and medical evacuation capabilities (Koops 2016). One participant explained that European allies found the rules of engagement confusing as UN policy did not line up with UK, Swedish or German national rules on self-defence.⁴ Similarly, they found it ‘frustrating’ that they couldn’t achieve more despite the instability of the operating environment.⁵ Another noted that whilst they were able to patrol, the rest of the mission in Gao ‘were completely hamstrung by the fact they couldn’t get out [of the UN compound to engage with local communities]’ and those who could, British, Swedish and German forces, were ‘only reaching 100-200 km from Gao.’⁶ The next section will continue to dig into these experiences of robust peacekeeping and significantly improve our understanding of the challenges faced by those working as part of or in the vicinity of a robust mandate.

4. Experiences of robustness

As a result of the use of active subjectivity in narrative practice in conducting the interviews, participants reported rich experiences of robust mandates and consequently,

several wider impacts of those practices. Participants grappled with what they saw as positives of robustness, such as facilitating access for other actors, and their perceptions of peacekeeping ineffectiveness given their limited ability to protect civilians. Ultimately, ‘there’s a lot of questions being raised by troop and police contributing countries that are saying “this is not necessarily the approach that peacekeeping should be taking”.’⁷ Whilst a robust mandate to protect civilians to some is ‘absolutely a positive’ to others it is ‘absolutely farcical to think that we’re providing POC in the townships that we were happy to be patrolling through once or twice a day.’⁸ This section presents reflections on several themes that were explored in interviews. First, the impact of a robust posture and the challenges of working with the host state to extend state authority. Second, how robustness affects the delivery of humanitarian assistance and how the mission works with its partners in the field. Lastly, participants reflected on the contribution made by specialist units that brought specific capabilities to the mission to enable or contribute to robustness.

4.1. *The impact of robustness*

Measuring the success of robust peacekeeping is difficult where other factors have impacted the ability of the mission to pursue its mandate, such as the host state hindering the UN. For instance, in MINUSMA

“we weren’t allowed to succeed by the Malian government. So I don’t think the mandate was actually given a fair opportunity to really test itself.”⁹ When you hold the robust mandate of MINUSMA up against what the Wagner Group is able to achieve, “the way the host nation would view it, Wagner is more effective. That’s the uncomfortable truth.”¹⁰

Participants raised an issue with measures of performance vs measures of effectiveness. The former can be satisfied by counting how many patrols have been carried out in a sector while the latter is much more complex and not always directly addressed by mission reporting. How do you measure the effectiveness of a contingent within their sector of responsibility particularly given the multifaceted nature of modern peacekeeping mandates that include numerous tasks such as broad civilian policing tasks alongside the duties of military contingents?¹¹

Peacekeepers must have a mission they can achieve and the politicisation of annual mandate renewal by the Security Council ‘means that you never have a feeling that we’re having a real review of what the operation actually achieve.’¹² One specific feature of recent robust mandates was highlighted as problematic, namely the extension of state authority by the mission. Described as the ‘biggest strategic mistake’ of the Security Council, the situation MINUSMA found itself in following years of extending state authority, leading to two coups, was perceived as damaging to the reputation of the UN.¹³ The closer affiliation of the UN mission with the host state to extend authority was said to ‘sound wonderful on paper but then the host state are one of the main culprits of human rights violations’ and consequently led to NGOs adopting a more cautious approach to cooperation with the mission and regarding the force as ‘toxic’ to work with.¹⁴ This cautious approach manifested in a reluctance to share information with civilian parts of MINUSMA in case the information made its way to the military part of the mission or the host state’s armed forces.¹⁵

Nevertheless, some positive aspects of robustness were highlighted including how robust peacekeepers had been able to provide important access to humanitarian actors to access those areas of the country that were hardest to reach, where armed groups normally have the greatest freedom of manoeuvre.¹⁶ Whilst some TCCs are better at robust peacekeeping than others and the impact may not be easily measured, participants recognised that departure would be ‘catastrophic’ and despite the difficulties of working alongside a robust mission ‘in practice it still brought a level of stability that will then disappear as soon as they leave.’¹⁷

For instance, a participant who previously worked as part of MONUSCO explained that the civilian population does not see the benefit of a traditional peacekeeping mission that monitors and observes when they are being attacked by armed groups.¹⁸ To the contrary,

I feel that the problem with many UN missions is that they haven’t been robust enough to protect people. They have just locked themselves in their camps. Every time someone says oh gosh the UN are going to use proactive force I think well there are not very many times the UN indeed has used proactive force. From the TCC perspective, proactive force is probably better than just staying inside your camp and not going out and doing patrols.¹⁹

In a similar vein, one participant felt the posture of the mission was much more important than troop numbers because the capability to move around the territory, whilst a tall order, is critical for a robust mission’s effectiveness.²⁰

A senior military officer explains that it is desirable for a mission to actively patrol because robust peacekeepers can ‘give some kind of assurance to the population and have a chance to deter potential perpetrators of violence.’²¹ However, participants reported that the motivation of units to demonstrate robustness differed wildly between TCCs with one refusing to patrol at night and another TCC refusing to patrol off the main roads.²² A former official with the UK’s Long Range Reconnaissance Group to MINUSMA stated,

Some countries are better at [a robust posture] than others. Some countries go all in when it comes to peacekeeping and do a phenomenal job. They are used to taking casualties and used to having people die in the service of the United Nations. But you also have those that, when things get a little bit too risky, hunker down and don’t really do much. They become a bit of a burden on the organization more than anything else.²³

This sentiment was echoed by a UN official who felt most TCCs ‘still perceive peacekeeping from its inception and the way it was in the early 1960s – toy soldiers with guns, but they cannot shoot.’²⁴ In essence, robust mandates could achieve more and provide greater protection, but have been hindered by whether TCCs at the unit level have been committed to displaying that robust posture.

4.2. Robustness and the relationship of the mission with other actors

The need for UN peace operations to work with partners in the field has been acknowledged for some time. In the 1992 Agenda for Peace, UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali explained that peacebuilding involves a range of actors that bring a variety of resources and skills. Since then peace operations have expanded their mandates and activities to include diverse ways of protecting people, statebuilding activity, and influencing the political sphere to ‘become an instrument of soft power’ (De Montclos

2014, 234). In 2008, the Capstone Doctrine recognised that UN missions are often deployed alongside many external actors with differing mandates but only asked missions to coordinate their own, internal military and civilian elements. It has been suggested that the protection of civilian efforts, in particular, cannot succeed without partnering more widely, such as between the UN mission, other UN agencies, and NGOs, because of the economy of scale all of those actors bring to the table and their different focuses that ensure there are no gaps in protection (Rolfe 2011).

Many participants reported that robust missions had put further stress on the relationships between the missions and other UN agencies and NGOs. Stress on these relationships already existed due to long-standing tension between the so-called blue and black UN. The blue and black UN get their names from the colour of their vehicles where the peacekeeping mission typically uses white vehicles with black 'UN' lettering and other UN agencies, funds and programmes use blue 'UN' lettering or blue UN logos for their specific organisation. This difference may not be immediately evident to communities on the ground that engage with the UN but it is an important distinction for humanitarians who are conscious of the need for humanitarian space that is not encroached upon by an actor who may be, or at least perceived by some to be, a party to the conflict, such as the armed robust peacekeeping mission.

The tension between the blue and black UN can be evidenced in a few ways – both through clear instances of reticence of the blue UN to be seen with the black UN, but also other comments made by participants about differences in views, experiences, and working practices between military personnel and civilians that are part of or feeds into blue vs black tension. For example, a senior Irish peacekeeper spoke of having to 'beat our way into the meetings [with the Resident Coordinator and OCHA]' to engage with actors beyond the mission on the protection of civilians and having to 'deliberately and forcefully reach out and make the case for coordination between military and humanitarian parts of the UN.'²⁵ Similarly, a former UNPOL official recounted that he managed to get invites

to a few UN agency meetings and you could feel the suspicion and dislike in the room because my impression was that the UN agencies are more embedded in the country compared to the peacekeeping folk with our uniforms who fly in and out.²⁶

Robustness causes added friction where the mission is more proactive in the use of force. More frequent uses of force by the uniformed peacekeepers can mean 'other members of the UN family, particularly the humanitarians, will want to remain a little bit at arm's length.'²⁷ Even within the mission, civilian staff will sometimes not wish to be escorted by armed peacekeepers. The UK contingent in MINUSMA offered to provide support to the mission's civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) team

but they weren't prepared to have a military escort for purely reputational and optical reasons, which surprised me because it meant that they were doing their jobs from behind the desk, behind the wire and actually had very little engagement with the local population.²⁸

Between the mission and other UN agencies, a lack of previous experience of working together or an avoidance of working together in the current situation can lead to 'a real risk of people talking past each other.'²⁹ One participant spoke of 'real stove

‘piping’ between the military and civilian personnel due to the blue and black parts of the UN not necessarily being accustomed to working with one another.³⁰ Particularly on contentious issues linked to robustness, like the need to use of force to protect civilians, there may be fundamental differences in perspective between, for example, uniformed peacekeepers and a UN agency’s child protection staff that are predominately social workers with vastly different experience.³¹

Working in the same (post)conflict zone has necessitated UN peacekeepers learning how to approach and engage with NGOs. UN peacekeepers may be needed by an NGO for access and security (armed escort). But UN peacekeepers are not neutral, whereas NGOs rely on their neutrality as a core humanitarian principle that enables their work. Previous research has found that NGOs commonly worry about association with UN peacekeepers particularly where local support for the UN dwindles as this can impact the NGOs’ ability to operate (Dorussen and de Vooght 2018). In the same vein, NGOs are increasingly uncomfortable with sharing information with peacekeeping mission as information provided by them may be passed to political or military parts of the mission and used for non-humanitarian purposes (Glad 2012).

Force protection can be an important service provided to NGOs by the UN peacekeeping mission. But whether an NGO wishes to receive force protection has always been a source of contention, regardless of the mandate of the mission. This is because receiving force protection from the UN may impact the neutrality of the NGO and what they claim as their humanitarian space. One former civilian UN peacekeeper explained they would often seek to undertake joint missions with NGOs to speak to voters in the community but that as UN staff they would go with a military escort from the mission whereas, the NGOs

‘don’t like any military escorts. So we have to change how we work. I will go separately and we will meet somewhere so that they are not associated with me because they see me as a challenge to their mandate. It becomes very difficult.’³²

Some NGOs will simply not wish to be seen with uniformed peacekeepers unless they are forced to do so due to the security situation.³³

Whether UN peacekeepers fully appreciated how neutrality must work in the field was a point of disagreement amongst participants. One NGO official explained

[t]he problem is that if they come to a village, you’re walking around, and they just come and say hello to you, sometimes they offer you a cigarette ... and this is a complete lack of understanding of how the relationship should work.³⁴

Conversely, another participant stressed that all the UN personnel they spoke to ‘understood neutrality perfectly’.³⁵

Looking to how this phenomenon was experienced in a robust mission, NGO association with MINUSMA was problematic. A participant explained

because we became such a target in Mali we saw bunkerisation and the UN peacekeepers having to choose between supporting others or protecting themselves so they always chose the latter. This then led to a negative perception [of the mission by NGOs].³⁶

An NGO official drew a distinction between whether MINUSMA was a party to the conflict or not, and that if they determined MINUSMA was a party, then they needed to quickly

install very strong separation and not be seen to work alongside the mission.³⁷ Nevertheless, another participant found it ‘ironic that humanitarians are panicking that peacekeepers are withdrawing [from Mali] but they’ve been historically very critical of escorts.’³⁸

A further straining factor in the relationship between robust missions and NGOs is information sharing. It is difficult to develop positive relationships, communicate on programmes or plans for the NGO to visit certain locations, if in so doing sensitive information would need to be shared. Numerous participants raised this as one of the biggest areas of contention and ‘almost impossible to resolve’.³⁹ Generally speaking, NGOs were chiefly concerned with sharing information that could be used to assist military operations and missions are unwilling to share information about operations. One worry was that information sharing must be reciprocated which could lead to the NGO needing to disclose sensitive information which could then be used to inform decision-making on the use force.⁴⁰

4.3. Robust units and capabilities

In Mali in particular, robust mandates were paired with highly militarised, specialist units. Many of the participants regarded these niche capabilities as positive and provide an important tactical advantage.⁴¹ For instance, UAVs, long range patrolling capabilities, attack helicopters, and modern night vision equipment are a must to be able to deter perpetrators of violence and achieve a robust mandate.⁴² However, questions were raised around the strategic decision-making of how best to use these capabilities and the need for a strong relationship with the host state. When discussing the MINUSMA’s intelligence capabilities, one participant noted the difficulty the UN had with making effective use of that unit – ‘you have a Lamborghini on a dirt road and it’s cool. But what do we do with it’.⁴³ Planning around how to effectively use a particular capability can also be hindered by the fact the mission may not have the units for the whole deployment of the mission ‘making it very hard to establish a long-term vision including an actual exit plan.’⁴⁴ The host state can also impact the ability of those units to operate. For instance, if the mission does not have flight security assurance and cooperation from the state’s air traffic control, its helicopters won’t be able to contribute to the posture and deterrence offered by the mission.⁴⁵

TCCs may also have their own political reasons for contributing a specific capability to the UN. One commanding officer of a tactical element explained, ‘[a]t no stage was [our deployment to the UN mission] about improving security ... it was about being a good partner to big institutions.’⁴⁶ The officer explained this fact was evidenced by the first deployment of their tactical element not having a mission statement which is key because ‘if you don’t tell us what to do we will, by default, just destroy stuff and I knew this mission wasn’t about that. It was about connecting people to civilian services and that was how I designed the force.’⁴⁷ However, when they arrived the operating environment for the mission had changed. They knew they wouldn’t be able to undertake all the tasks they had designed the force to achieve ‘but for moral reasons we knew we needed to get out and do stuff so we did’.⁴⁸

Specialist units are also ‘small, they’re expensive and you’re not going to solve the world’s problems. You need mass and you need peacekeepers to come out from

behind their camps and be a noticeable presence on the battlefield to deter activity and maintain peace.⁴⁹ In this sense, specialist units are only a cog in the wider machinery of the UN mission and the success of the robust mandate as a whole demands a consistent, robust posture as opposed to having a high troop ceiling with less effective units.

The use of these capabilities was not without critique. One NGO official felt that ‘despite the fact [MINUSMA] would patrol and be authorised to shoot first, they weren’t actually on search and kill missions going after terrorist groups. So what’s the point of having an attack helicopter in that situation?’⁵⁰ Similarly, displaying a robust posture must be counterbalanced with the perception that the mission is a Western invading force. Terrorist groups in Mali communicated that perception to local communities to undermine the reputation of MINUSMA.⁵¹

The deployment of one specialist capability, the UK’s Long Range Reconnaissance Group (LRRG) (known nationally at Operation NEWCOMBE) was a frustrating experience. First, when preparing for deployment it was decided the troops should do various training packages at the UN ‘to break them out of that destroy mode, learn about civil pillars, and then they can go and connect with people in the right way and overall that makes the UN better.’⁵² But by the time they arrived ‘the UN in Mali was a dead duck’ with several TCCs withdrawing their forces and the breakdown of the transitional government.⁵³

As a specialist unit, the LRRG ‘had the capacity and the willingness to go further than most people would. And in some respects, yes, I think we did achieve that.’⁵⁴ But their impact was limited because, in Gao, many other contingents were unable or unwilling to patrol with only the European contingents able to effectively patrol up to 200 km from Gao.⁵⁵

The LRRG was shadowed by Russian private military companies every time they went out and getting information from local populations proved difficult.⁵⁶ MINUSMA was able to benefit from some information gathered:

[A]fter only a couple of days you got a sense that you cannot possibly understand this place unless you’ve got an agrarian and a vet because it is all about the movement of cattle. You spot a big herd of cattle and you think, right that guy knows this place like the back of his hand ... and that guy controlling that herd is crossing tribal boundaries and crossing areas which means he has permission to or power and he knows the network of power dynamics economically and probably socially more than anyone else ... We got quite a bit of information from talking to internally displaced people around Gao. We could take that information back to the civil pillars and help them understand what the IDPs need to be able to return to their homes.⁵⁷

The LRRG also encountered difficulties around MINUSMA’s rules of engagement and where they were permitted to use force to protect civilians. Each TCC had a different interpretation of the interplay between their own national rules of engagement for self-defence and the UN’s rules on using force.⁵⁸ Ultimately the LRRG is a microcosm of robustness and demonstrates how MINUSMA failed to take full advantage of a high-capable unit capable of delivering a robust posture.

5. Improving how the UN achieves and implements robust mandates

Whilst there may not have been any new UN peacekeeping missions in over a decade, robust peacekeeping practices continue in several missions, and the future of

peacekeeping is on the minds of many policymakers and researchers alike. The experiences of participants working with or as part of robust missions have demonstrated the clear mismatch between robustness in UN policy and the realities of how a robust mandate is implemented by the UN and its troop-contributing countries (TCCs).

The UN and TCCs must ensure they have a clear strategic vision on how specialised military units will be utilised and their effectiveness measured. Dorn (2023) calls for UN missions to be given the ‘proper tools’ to enable peace. However, this research has shown that the UN must first communicate a clearer strategic message, with crucial buy-in from TCCs, to avoid situations such as the above tactical element that was deployed without a mission statement.

It is not enough for UN policy to define robustness and the Security Council to adopt mandates that require forces to adopt a robust posture. The differences in how TCCs approach robustness are a result of a lack of strategic oversight and guidance from UN HQ on what robustness means in practice. UN leadership and TCCs need to deconflict their understandings and misconceptions on what robustness entails to ensure units are trained, briefed, and deployed in a consistent manner. Only then can contingents implement a coherent and shared understanding of robustness that avoids the unintended consequences identified in this research.

Given the impact robustness had had on the traditional principles of peacekeeping, De Coning (2023) suggests ‘those who lead and command peacekeeping operations employ an iterative, adaptive mission management approach based on the feedback generated by a proactive, experiential learning, and performance assessment process.’ This requires mission leadership to have productive, two-way communication with UN HQ to work together on understanding how to implement robust mandates in the future.

The use of robust mandates must also be balanced with the fact that at field level, local communities cannot always differentiate between the blue and black UN.⁵⁹ Peacekeeping has long been criticised for militarising humanitarian assistance (Whitman 1998). Robustness continues the trend and exacerbates these tensions. Contributing further evidence to the findings of Dorussen and de Vooght (2018), the UN must be conscious of how a robust posture and highly militarised units impact the wider mission’s relationships and collaboration with UN agencies, funds and programmes and NGOs operating in the same environment as well as the perception of the mission by local communities. Bottom-up engagement with communities is key to preventing the spread of disinformation by spoilers regarding the mission’s objectives.

Relationships within the UN and how the mission cooperates with NGOs can be negatively impacted by robust mandates. Whilst the robust posture and militarisation itself was not universally seen as negative, many participants reported problems rooted in communication and misunderstandings of each other’s missions. There needs to be open and respectful dialogue between the mission, other UN bodies, and NGOs to lay the groundwork for supporting each other’s mandates, where appropriate, and deconflicting where a robust peacekeeping force would potentially damage the work of another UN body or NGO. What is key here is clear and precise internal guidelines and procedures on civil–military engagement (Dorussen and de Vooght 2018).

Several participants highlighted the need for leadership amidst dysfunctional organisations, systems and processes that negatively impact how actors collaborate.⁶⁰ Leadership can shape how staff engage with others and leaders can lead from the front to

influence those behaviours.⁶¹ Due to how personality driven these situations are, how leaders interact and engage with others can positively influence congenial relationships built on trust allowing the sharing of information where appropriate, inclusion of organisations in planning efforts, and a better understanding of the challenges each organisation faces. However, research has shown that the tenure of civilian heads of mission is not impacted by mission performance, perhaps suggesting that even where civilian leadership is poor the UN is unwilling to make a change (Lundgren, Oksamytna, and Bove 2022). Similarly, where the UN is tied to satisfying both institutional powerful states and large TCCs, this ‘can be a source of dysfunction if it prevents the organization from selecting effective peacekeeping leaders’ (Oksamytna, Bove, and Lundgren 2021).

Shared training opportunities between the UN, TCCs and NGOs may help build relationships and change the culture to foster a more positive and trusting collaborative environment between these actors working in the same (post)conflict environment. Different TCCs will have varying degrees of engagement with civilian and humanitarian agencies in their home operating environment. The consistent and authentic inclusion of NGOs in UN training courses on PoC, Women, Peace and Security (WPS), Children in Armed Conflict, and other thematic areas would help civilian and military personnel better understanding each other’s approach and goals.

Communication between organisations and an understanding of how military and civilians will have different backgrounds and experience are key. Some NGO staff may not have worked in the same environment as military personnel and military personnel may not have any prior experience of UN deployments and the relationships that exist in those spaces. Uniformed participants spoke of how complete neutrality of humanitarians was ‘difficult to grasp’ particularly within the UN family and that they would step in and defend NGO colleagues despite not being completely clear on where the NGO would want such force protection offered.⁶² One participant explained that whilst neutrality of humanitarians is important, common sense must prevail for relationships between the missions and other actors to be supportive and prosperous.⁶³ An Irish military officer explained that military personnel may need to deliberately aim to work with humanitarians, demonstrate their willingness and understanding, and at times be discreet to account for humanitarian neutrality.⁶⁴ This shows that the task is not insurmountable, even in the context of a robust peacekeeping mission. Where leadership figures and individuals across the organisations are willing, act as honest brokers, and engage positively there is scope for UN peacekeepers, other UN actors, and NGOs to work together to improve protection and the livelihoods of civilians.

Supporting the position of Dorn (2023) that technologies and equipment, like attack helicopters, are crucial for peacekeeping missions, the niche military capabilities that enable robustness were largely seen as positive by participants as they allowed the UN to be more visible, accessed the local population, and provide tangible improvements to the security situation due to greater freedom of movement. Those who perceived robust mandates negatively often did so not due to believing the UN mission did not benefit from those units or mandates but instead because of a lack of understanding from those forces of their impact on the humanitarian environment and that their actions could lead to blow-back on the humanitarians and restriction of humanitarian

space. For example, a senior NGO official felt ‘the fact that [the mission was there] under Chapter VII was probably the most appropriate. It would have been highly problematic if they couldn’t shoot first in some instances’.⁶⁵ Similarly, the niche capabilities provided by Western TCCs in Mali could prevent a village from being encircled and impact the passive control armed groups held over areas.⁶⁶

Other negative perceptions were similarly at the political and strategic levels, not on the tactical benefits provided by niche military capabilities that enabled a robust posture. For instance, the linking of robustness to the closer relationship with the host state and mandates to extend state authority were perceived as a ‘strategic mistake’.⁶⁷ The fact robustness has become intertwined with mandate tasks to pursue stabilisation led to more of a gap between the political and humanitarian objectives of the missions.⁶⁸ Whilst robust capabilities provided tactical benefits, the missions remained hindered by political issues at the strategic level, such as the host state’s air traffic control not servicing UN aircraft.⁶⁹

Given a specialist military capability may not be available to the mission long-term, the UN must improve how it works with TCCs to ensure a shared understanding of the robustness, its mandate, applicable rules of engagement, and how the unit will implement the mandate at the tactical level. This requires both clear communication between the unit, the Force Commander, the political leadership of the TCC, and UNDPO and effective leadership that ensures the coordination and deployment of the unit.

6. Conclusion

UN policy on robust peacekeeping has failed to guide the implementation of a clear, cohesive approach within missions that complements the wider mandate. Instead, the data presented here shows the lack of a consistent and effective strategic approach to robust peacekeeping has led to misunderstandings between missions and TCCs on how to operationalise a robust posture at the tactical level. First, some participants felt that robustness was necessary to provide dividends to the population, but how robustness has been framed and implemented has led to problems, such as how UN support for the extension of state authority has negatively impacted relations with humanitarians. Second, robustness adds friction between peacekeepers and humanitarians where the mission is more proactive in the use of force. Particularly in Mali humanitarians had concerns around association with the UN mission and sharing information. Lastly, the UN’s lack of a coordinated vision on how to achieve robustness resulted in the underutilisation of robust units and specialist military capabilities available to MINUSMA.

Regardless of whether robust peacekeeping is here to stay or if we are witnessing the sunset on this hybrid notion of peacekeeping, there is important institutional learning that must take place as the UN undertakes its after-action reports from the large, robust missions of the 2010s, particularly given MONUSCO’s current draw-down. The interviews showed that the UN must revisit its understanding of robustness to ensure cohesion across the organisation and its member states. There must also be improved communication between different actors, particularly in relation to civil–military cooperation, which works proactively to improve relationships and avoid conflict between robust peacekeepers and humanitarian space.

The experiences of participants in this research provide useful snapshots that can significantly inform and add colour to research on the conceptualisation and impact of robustness and contribute to organisational learning on how to operate under or alongside a robust peace operation. Ultimately, these voices are from individuals that have worked in the relevant missions, have wider experiences of other operating environments, and have provided indispensable insights that organisations can incorporate into the development of future peacekeeping mandates that ensure alignment of the purpose of robustness.

Notes

1. See the following examples of theoretical research that look to the future of mandates (Curran 2017; Karlsrud 2023).
2. Interview with a former official with the UK's Long Range Reconnaissance Group to MINUSMA; Interview with the commander of a UN contributing nation tactical element.
3. Interview with a former official with the UK's Long Range Reconnaissance Group to MINUSMA.
4. Interview with MINUSMA's Long Range Reconnaissance Group's Legal Advisor.
5. Interview with MINUSMA's Long Range Reconnaissance Group's Legal Advisor.
6. Interview with the commander of a UN contributing nation tactical element.
7. Interview with an anonymous participant.
8. Interview with a former official with the UK's Long Range Reconnaissance Group to MINUSMA; Interview with senior official at UN Women.
9. Interview with a former official with the UK's Long Range Reconnaissance Group to MINUSMA.
10. Interview with senior official at UN Women.
11. Interview with a US Government official.
12. Interview with a senior NGO official.
13. Interview with Major General (Dr) AK Bardalai (Retd).
14. Interview with a senior NGO official.
15. Interview with a senior NGO official.
16. Interview with an anonymous participant; Interview with a former official with the UK's Long Range Reconnaissance Group to MINUSMA.
17. Interview with a senior NGO official.
18. Interview with a former staff officer who served with MONUSCO.
19. Interview with a former staff officer who served with MONUSCO.
20. Interview with a member of the Protection of Civilians Team at PAX.
21. Interview with Major General (Dr) AK Bardalai (Retd).
22. Interview with a former staff officer who served with MONUSCO.
23. Interview with a former official with the UK's Long Range Reconnaissance Group to MINUSMA.
24. Interview with a former UN peacekeeping civilian official currently working within a UN Country Team.
25. Interview with Colonel Timothy O'Brien, Irish Defence Forces.
26. Interview with Simon Blatchly OBE, Former Police Commissioner (UNMIL), Chief of Mission Management and Support Section (Police Division, UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations), and Senior Police Adviser (UNAMI).
27. Interview with an anonymous participant.
28. Interview with a former official with the UK's Long Range Reconnaissance Group to MINUSMA.
29. Interview with an anonymous participant.
30. Interview with a US Government official.

31. Interview with a senior official at UN Women.
32. Interview with a former UN peacekeeping civilian official currently working within a UN Country Team.
33. Interview with Major General (Dr) AK Bardalai (Retd).
34. Interview with a senior NGO official.
35. Interview with an anonymous participant.
36. Interview with an anonymous participant.
37. Interview with a senior NGO official.
38. Interview with an anonymous participant.
39. Interview with an anonymous participant.
40. Interview with a senior NGO official.
41. Interview with a UN official.
42. Interview with Colonel Timothy O'Brien, Irish Defence Forces.
43. Interview with a UN official.
44. Interview with an anonymous participant.
45. Interview with an anonymous participant.
46. Interview with the commander of a UN contributing nation tactical element.
47. Interview with the commander of a UN contributing nation tactical element.
48. Interview with the commander of a UN contributing nation tactical element.
49. Interview with a former official with the UK's Long Range Reconnaissance Group to MINUSMA.
50. Interview with a senior NGO official.
51. Interview with a senior NGO official.
52. Interview with the commander of a UN contributing nation tactical element.
53. Interview with the commander of a UN contributing nation tactical element.
54. Interview with MINUSMA's Long Range Reconnaissance Group's Legal Advisor.
55. Interview with the commander of a UN contributing nation tactical element.
56. Interview with the commander of a UN contributing nation tactical element.
57. Interview with the commander of a UN contributing nation tactical element.
58. Interview with MINUSMA's Long Range Reconnaissance Group's Legal Advisor.
59. Interview with a senior NGO official.
60. Interview with a UN official.
61. Interview with Major General (Dr) AK Bardalai (Retd).
62. Interview with a senior UK police officer seconded to a UN mission; Interview with MINUSMA's Long Range Reconnaissance Group's Legal Advisor.
63. Interview with an anonymous participant.
64. Interview with Colonel Timothy O'Brien, Irish Defence Forces.
65. Interview with a senior NGO official.
66. Interview with a senior NGO official.
67. Interview with Major General (Dr) AK Bardalai (Retd).
68. Interview with an anonymous participant.
69. Interview with a former official with the UK's Long Range Reconnaissance Group to MINUSMA.

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Ethics

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