

RESPONSE TO AND COMMENT ON “PEACE ENFORCEMENT IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO: REFLECTIONS ON THE FORCE INTERVENTION BRIGADE.”

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George Abel Mhango and Angelita Kithatu-Kiwekete’s article on peace enforcement in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) offers a rich perspective into the evolution of the applied methodology to conflict resolution by the United Nations (UN), as well as a brief historical overview of the various stages of disintegration of the Congolese state since its independence. Both have been intertwined since the 1960s, therefore discussing one without the other provides a conversation without substance. This shared history, however, has also turned the DRC into the largest experimental ground for UN peacekeeping missions.

The UN operations in the DRC have gradually evolved from, and constantly shifted between, its well-known trademark approach of “passive” observer to a more “active” role. Whether it is the confrontation in Jadotville (currently Likasi, in Katanga Province), between an Irish contingent of the UN and Katangese military forces loyal to secessionist Moise Tshombe in the 1960s, or the recent Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) discussed amply by the authors. While being heavily bureaucratic, the UN has demonstrated some relative fluidity at times, when treating certain cases as deserving a Chapter VII response during its large history in the DRC, which has not often been acknowledged. But despite this long shared history, the UN seems to ignore that the ultimate success of any of its missions must rest solely on supporting the consolidation of state formation efforts in the DRC. This failure was glaring in the first UN intervention in the country, the United Nations Operations in Congo (ONUC), which was a response to the first Congolese war in 1960. And this has predominantly been the case with the United



Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) where the UN has often assumed attributes and responsibilities of the state, thus stifling the emergence of a professional state and army in the country.

The authors made a valid point when stating “a common thread in the experiences of the missions has been the inability of the UN to act decisively in order to protect civilians and its own personnel”. It is in this context that the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) ought to be assessed, as its approach seems like a ‘radical’ shift to the traditional UN approach of “neutrality” and “impartiality”. Moreover, this article could not have been better timed as MONUSCO is currently exiting and ending its mission in the DRC, which is happening in the midst of a resurgence of the Movement-23 (M23) into the Eastern Congo conflict stage. As such, this article provided an opportunity to kick start an evaluative conversation on the true effectiveness of MONUSCO peace enforcement in the country, and specifically, on that of the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB), which is claimed as MONUSCO’s most successful initiative. The return of the M23 movement ought to raise the question over the legacy of MONUSCO operations, including that of the FIB. But this has not been addressed by the authors. The authors’ point of departure is that previous attempts to assess the FIB have underestimated the political context within which the mission took place. While the FIB possessed a unilateral mandate as well as a joint operations mandate with the Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC), ultimately it could only go as far as the DRC government allowed. As such, the authors’ answer to the question whether the FIB operations have matched the expectations set by its proponent, is basically no. As they state: “Hence, we argue that the ambition of robust operations inherent in Resolution 2098 that authorized the FIB operations has not matched reality as the operational context reveals complex political hurdles facing the MONUSCO in its engagement with the DR Congo government.” Moreover, the change in government in the DRC also deserves a second look, on whether the level of engagement and political will from the government have undergone any change.

The authors lay the failure of the FIB (UN at large) to fulfil its mission, solely on the DR Congo Government’s uncooperative attitude. Their evidence is that the FIB operation that targeted rebel/terrorist groups considered unfriendly to the government such as the M23 were successful and saw better coordination with the government, while FIB operations targeting rebel groups considered friendly to the Congolese government saw less success, even blunt failure. However, this argument falls short on many fronts. Many are of the opinion that the UN mandate in the DRC was too

ambitious, spreading from politico-military reforms to direct military confrontation. But the UN zero-in approach was narrow minded and ignored the economic aspect (resource exploitation) of the conflict, which is a significant consideration to omit. The UN mandate lacked ambition in how it dealt with countries that support rebel/terrorist groups in the DRC. Specifically, Rwanda, where substantial evidence proves their support to the M23 in the form of personnel, weapons and more.

The Security Council Resolution 1565 lead toward a peacekeeping posture that adopted a multi-dimensional peace approach. In practice, this approach was not holistic enough when dealing with belligerent states such as Rwanda, who on many occasions backed various rebel groups in the DRC. As such, the UN approach aimed directly at military action against rebel groups and political reforms in the DRC was only addressing the result of the problem and not the root cause, in this case Rwanda's borderline state-terrorism sponsoring behaviours. In fact, for practically the entirety of the UN mandate in the Congo, Rwanda's conduct in the Congo has received less than a slap on the wrist. Despite Rwanda's role as a signatory to various peace treaties in the DRC, the lack of mechanisms to ensure its respect of said treaties is astounding.

As such, how can it be argued that the UN mandate was comprehensive, when there is a clear absence of a 'stick' and 'carrot' mechanism to target and ensure that a third party such as Rwanda abide by their obligations? It remains incomprehensible that such a large operation will ignore the effect of an essential economic element as well as the role of a third party with an economic incentive in the perpetuation of the cycle of violence. In this case, it means that the UN mechanism was built on a false assumption, that a belligerent aggressor state (Rwanda) would act against their own economic interest. Peace in the Congo, for instance, would strip Rwanda of over 1 billion dollars of revenue from stolen coltan from the DRC. As such, the UN approach to conflict resolution proved to be more idealistic than realistic.

The UN mission in the DRC suffered from tunnel vision, demonstrated in its obsession with dealing only with the military and political aspect of the conflict, while ignoring the economic incentives that continuously fuel the cycle of conflict. Unsurprisingly, while the FIB might have demonstrated strong results over the short and medium term, over the long term the recent resurgence of M23 clearly demonstrated that the FIB was a failure over a long-term period. With the UN's latest mission coming to an end in the DRC, perhaps a different tactic should be considered. One that focuses on sanctioning economic assets of individuals and companies that benefit from the conflict. Harsher consequences for Rwanda for failing to uphold its part of the peace

treaties is something else to be considered. Lastly, the article would perhaps benefit from a brief review of the best practices from not only the UN operations but specifically the FIB operation on the ground.