Knives Out: Evolving Trends in State Interference with UN Peacekeeping Operations

Dirk Druet

The effectiveness of United Nations peacekeeping operations has always been heavily dependent on host-state support and international political backing. Governments that perceive their interests to be at odds with the mandates of these operations have long sought out ways to undermine the effectiveness of peacekeepers. In recent years, however, missions have begun to face new forms of state interference intended to influence, undermine, and impair their activities on the ground. Amid changes in the global geopolitical landscape, new technologies and tactics for manipulating missions have contributed to novel conditions that threaten the viability of missions' efforts to protect civilians, operate safely, and implement long-term political settlements. The shifting positioning of peacekeeping operations, both in the international arena and within individual conflict systems, raises profound dilemmas for UN officials attempting to promote international norms and implement their mandates on the ground. Similar dilemmas are also arising for the leaders of other international peace and security mechanisms, such as UN special political missions; African Union peace support operations; and subregional peace and security activities in Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Syria, among others.

A sizeable body of academic and policy literature has analyzed the ways in which shifting geopolitics have influenced the headquarters-level decision-making of the UN Security Council's five permanent members in their deliberations on the

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creation of new peacekeeping missions, the substance of their mandates, and the political settlements they are meant to support. Less attention has been given to the ways in which these same great powers, along with other influential state actors, interact with peacekeeping operations on the ground once they are deployed, and how recent trends in these interactions affect the operating environment for missions as they strive to execute their mandates and keep their personnel safe. In this essay, I identify three such trends that have accompanied the breakdown in the post–Cold War consensus on the international peace and security architecture, namely, the deployment of parallel security actors; the spread of mis- and disinformation; and threats to cybersecurity and the integrity of UN-owned information. I then assess the collective impacts of these trends on three fundamental conditions for the effectiveness of peacekeeping: host-state consent; safety and security; and the capacity to advance political settlements to conflict. I highlight efforts already underway at the UN to address these challenges, and suggest priority areas for future policy and capability development.

Trends in State Interference

New Parallel Security Actors

As peacekeeping operations expanded in number, size, and breadth of mandate during the post–Cold War period, so too did other types of international, regional, and bilateral interventions in armed conflict situations, resulting in an increasingly crowded operating space for international peace and security interventions. Consequently, almost all peacekeeping missions mandated after 1999 have operated for at least part of their life cycle alongside "parallel" operations, including missions fielded by the African Union, the European Union, subregional actors such as the Economic Community of West African States, and ad hoc security arrangements such as the Group of Five (G5) Sahel Joint Force in Mali.

More recently, new types of parallel security actors have presented a host of operational challenges to these same UN missions. In 2017, the government of the Central African Republic (CAR) signed a bilateral security cooperation agreement with the government of Russia, after which several thousand well-equipped armed fighters, widely understood to be part of what was then known as the Wagner Group, established bases throughout the country, part of a fast-moving trend in the deployment of Wagner forces across Africa.[1] Operating both unilaterally and jointly with the Central African Armed Forces (known by its French acronym,

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FACA), the Wagner Group launched a campaign of operations targeting the nonstate armed groups present throughout much of the country.[2] Human rights monitors during this period reported that these operations were often brutal and indiscriminate, regularly involving summary executions, torture, sexual violence, and forced rendition, including against civilian communities—particularly Muslim or Fulani communities—perceived to be associated with the armed groups.[3] A similar pattern unfolded in Mali in late 2021, when Wagner forces arrived after a security cooperation agreement was reportedly signed between the country's military junta, which came to power in a May 2021 coup d'état, and Russia.[4]

The Wagner Group's presence had profound impacts on the operations of the peacekeeping missions in CAR and Mali, until the latter mission was closed at the request of Mali's governing military junta in December 2023. First and foremost, the missions saw their freedom of movement drastically curtailed by Wagner fighters, who denied them access to certain parts of the country, occasionally resulting in testy standoffs between Russian and UN forces. The reasons for these denials varied: In some cases, the forces appeared to be closing off areas while they were conducting operations against armed groups.[5] In other cases, the obstruction of mission activities appeared to serve the purpose of limiting missions' capacity to investigate and document human rights abuses allegedly committed by the Wagner Group and national armed forces.[6] In still other cases, limitations on the UN's freedom of movement seemed to be linked to the Wagner Group's control of mineral mining sites in CAR and Mali, which is generally understood to be part of the arrangements providing for the deployment of the forces in support of the two governments.[7]

The presence of the Wagner Group in CAR and Mali, its behavior as an actor within the conflicts, and its actions toward the peacekeeping missions have raised myriad dilemmas for mission leadership and UN Headquarters, of which three are paramount. First, mission and UN leadership have been forced to contend with the question of how to manage confrontations with Wagner forces. The Status of Forces Agreements signed between the UN and the governments of CAR and Mali at the time of the missions' respective deployments guaranteed the freedom of movement of mission personnel throughout the two countries. This freedom is essential for a mission to execute its mandate comprehensively and impartially, not only for the purposes of investigating human rights abuses but also to protect civilians under threat of violence. The challenge is akin to those faced by other peacekeeping missions, such as in South Sudan, where national forces have

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flagrantly denied access by mission personnel to vulnerable populations. In that case, the mission gradually escalated its resistance to these denials over time, in some cases pushing through roadblocks erected by government forces.[8] In CAR and Mali, the aggressive and well-armed posture of Wagner forces, their unpredictable behavior, and the political implications of a conflagration appear to have dissuaded the missions from similar tactics, opting instead for indirect political engagement with host authorities. Initially, the Russian government disavowed any link to the Wagner Group, making UN reporting and political advocacy aimed at mitigating these challenges difficult. Since the involvement of the group in the war in Ukraine and the death of its leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, Russia has acknowledged a role in financing and directing Wagner's activities. However, direct discussion of the group has remained an extremely sensitive subject, and the UN continues to use "other security personnel" to refer to Wagner and other bilateral security presences. Thus, so long as the UN and Wagner forces continue to operate in the same environments, an armed exchange remains a possibility. Moreover, the capacity of missions to discharge their mandate, at least in physical terms, is likely to be severely constrained.[9]

While by far the most consequential to date, the Wagner Group is only one among a variety of new great- and middle-power security actors operating alongside peacekeeping operations. In 2019, Rwanda signed a bilateral security cooperation agreement with the government of CAR and later sent approximately one thousand soldiers to reinforce the government's security forces. This bilateral security cooperation has developed as part of overall increased Rwandan participation in multilateral operations: Rwanda is the largest contributor of troops to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA),[10] which, since 2022, has been led by a former Rwandan diplomat. Moreover, Rwanda has significantly expanded economic activities in the Central African economy, notably the mineral sector. This has led some observers to wonder whether Rwanda is copying the Wagner Group's approach to expanding its influence in the country, though it should be noted that Rwandan troops—both bilaterally and as a contingent of MINUSCA—have a far better reputation for adherence to international humanitarian law.[11]

Elsewhere, Chinese private security companies have gradually become a significant presence in Belt and Road Initiative countries, including some hosting peacekeeping operations such as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Lebanon, Mali, and South Sudan.[12] Focused primarily on the security of

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Chinese personnel and projects, these companies have maintained a low profile, operating primarily through local partners.[13] However, these actors have, in some cases, had significant impacts on local political economies and conflict dynamics in countries hosting peacekeeping operations; for example, in South Sudan, where Chinese companies, among others, have been accused of funding government militia responsible for attacking civilians and burning villages.[14] In 2023, the government of DRC purchased nine CH-4 armed attack drones manufactured by the China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation to be deployed in support of the Congolese armed forces' operations against the M23 armed group in eastern DRC, where the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) operates, and where China controls major mining interests.[15] Reportedly operated by third-party military contractors, the drones could signal a greater willingness by China to intervene in conflicts in parallel to UN operations.[16]

Mis- and Disinformation

The spread of mis- and disinformation is now a ubiquitous challenge in political systems around the world but is particularly insidious in conflict settings, which typically feature low levels of trust in public institutions, weak media ecosystems, and, in some cases, low levels of literacy. As an external intervention in these types of societies, UN peacekeeping operations are uniquely dependent on the trust of local actors and populations to achieve their mandates. With relatively few intelligence resources compared with national military operations, peacekeeping operations are heavily dependent on information gained from local communities on the threats they face, as well as the threats that peacekeepers themselves may face from armed forces operating around them.[17] In many ways, this mutual dependence is part of peacekeeping's comparative advantage, since peacekeeping missions are often better placed than other military interventions to gain the trust of local communities, offering an opportunity to understand local preferences for, and modalities for, protection, enabling protection strategies that empower local civilians as agents in their own protection.[18]

However, this mutual dependence renders peacekeepers uniquely vulnerable to public narratives that undermine their reputation. Traditionally, the failings of the peacekeeping missions themselves have served as a prominent source of these narratives, notably as a result of failures by peacekeepers to effectively protect civilians, and of instances of sexual exploitation and abuse committed by peacekeepers against

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the local population.[19] More recently, as the use of social media has become more ubiquitous and global and local narratives have become more interlinked, the sources of narratives that undermine local trust in peacekeeping missions have proliferated. In particular, local grievances, including those resulting from the above-mentioned legitimate failings of missions, now blend more seamlessly with broader regional or global narratives. These narratives range from legitimate political perspectives, on, for example, anti-colonialism; to harmful misinformation, on, for example, the spread of infectious diseases; to malign propaganda and malicious disinformation.

There is no better example of the consequences of information disorder for peacekeeping than the role of MONUSCO during the 2018–2020 Ebola outbreak in eastern DRC, the first time in recent memory that a large-scale epidemic erupted during a situation of ongoing armed conflict. In response, the World Health Organization initiated a large-scale emergency health response program in the East, where the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) and other armed groups were active. This prompted the WHO to seek protection for its convoys and hospitals from MONUSCO and national armed forces while these forces were simultaneously engaged in an offensive against the ADF. As international health programs became intertwined with the drivers of the conflict in the minds of the population, misinformation and disinformation about the international response reached a fever pitch; rumors circulating at the time included the suggestion that peacekeepers were executing sick civilians and that the international community had infected the local population to enrich themselves. As a consequence, health workers encountered greater resistance to Ebola response measures and became targets of violence, inhibiting the health response and accelerating the spread of the disease. Amid this pervasive climate of fear and distrust, public anger against the mission surged, resulting in violent protests against MONUSCO, including the torching of a MONUSCO office north of the town of Beni in North Kivu.[20]

In recent years, the vulnerability of peacekeeping operations to mis- and disinformation, exemplified by the Ebola case, has become weaponized by state actors in other contexts seeking to undermine public and political trust in missions, aided by local proxies and social media. As Albert Trithart of the International Peace Institute describes, disinformation targeting peacekeepers in Mali and CAR coincided with the arrival of the Wagner Group and, "while it is difficult to identify the origins of this disinformation, researchers have traced much of it to local civil society organizations or media outlets with financial ties to Russia."[21] Disinformation spread in this manner includes allegations that the UN missions in the

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countries provided weapons to armed groups, that mission personnel were themselves mercenaries, and that the missions were actively working against the national armed forces. The same channels have been used to mobilize public protests against the missions' presences in CAR and Mali.[22] Much of the anti-peacekeeping disinformation appeared to be aimed at juxtaposing Russia and the UN as security providers in CAR and Mali, as a means of both justifying the Wagner Group's presence and undermining UN peacekeeping more generally by casting it as a tool for advancing neocolonial Western and/or French objectives.[23]

Cyber and Information Security

UN operations have long been vulnerable to cyber intrusion by state actors. The Snowden leaks revealed persistent hacking by the United States into the UN's videoconferencing systems, and recently leaked U.S. intelligence reports suggested that UN Secretary-General António Guterres's personal communications were systematically intercepted.[24] While cyber intrusions at the diplomatic level may be a fact of life, the security of information at a more tactical level could have life-or-death implications for peacekeeping operations and those they protect. Assuming that peacekeeping operations will always be at a cybersecurity disadvantage as compared to powerful state actors, it is critical to understand the particular vulnerabilities facing peacekeeping missions and how they could impact the strategic objectives of the missions, the safety and privacy of their personnel, and the security and human rights of members of the host population.

In recent years, the intensification in the volume, structuring, and management of information gathered by UN peacekeeping operations has impacted the vulnerabilities of peacekeeping missions to cyber intrusions, both positively and negatively.[25] The increasing use of surveillance technologies—for example, unarmed drones provided by member states or commercially leased—to gather information has challenged missions to ensure chains of custody and control in the uses of the data gathered by these platforms.[26] Once collected, this data, in addition to information gathered from patrols, networks of sources, and open-source monitoring, is increasingly centralized in structured databases, often cloud based. As Allard Duursma and John Karlsrud argue, better-structured intelligence is crucial for peacekeepers to better anticipate and respond to threats.[27] At the same time, the centralization of sensitive information—which can include data on potential witnesses, survivors of violence, and trusted sources—within missions' relatively weak cybersecurity capabilities exposes this information to risks of hacking.

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Missions' cybersecurity risk profiles expose them to a variety of threats, including operational security risks and political liabilities. From a force protection perspective, access to patrolling data, including routes and personnel strength, could provide state and nonstate actors with information that could help them attack peacekeepers if desired. Malicious actors could also, conceivably, plant false intelligence intended to spur the mission into taking action against the actors' adversaries or placing the mission in a position of ambush. More likely, however, is the risk that information gathered by peacekeepers could be used for purposes other than those intended by the mission. For example, access to mission surveillance data—either as a result of the flow of that information through member state–owned surveillance devices such as drones or as a result of cyber intrusion into commercially leased technology platforms—could provide states with information used to target individuals for assassination. Similarly, access to witness testimony and community reports could help states suppress dissent within their own borders or those of their allies.

Challenges for UN Decision-Makers

The trends discussed in the previous section, those of state interference in the on-the-ground activities of UN peacekeeping operations, place these missions in an ever-more-constrained position as they strive to implement their mandates and uphold international norms. In particular, they raise dilemmas for mission leadership in maintaining host-state consent for their presence; in ensuring the safety and security of peacekeepers and protecting the population; and in supporting longer-term political settlements that are at the core of peacekeeping missions' objectives. In each of these three areas, missions have experimented with new strategies to pursue mission objectives, pointing to the emergence of new operational strategies that could be expanded and refined.

Managing Host-State Consent

There has always been push and pull between missions trying to foster long-term stability—through institutional reform and power sharing, democratic governance, and the protection of human rights, among other things—and the leaders of conflict or postconflict states who are usually members of a relatively small, elite, and centralized ruling class. Traditionally, missions have been able to advance these objectives while avoiding the loss of the host government's consent to their

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presence because of the stability they provide to the ruling authorities, which in turn affords these authorities a source of legitimacy.

The arrival of parallel security providers of the likes of the Wagner Group undermines this implicit pact, offering an alternative survival strategy for ruling elites that may appear more attractive, at least in the short term. The arrival of the Wagner Group in CAR and Mali coincided with a marked downturn in the relations between UN peacekeepers and host-state authorities. In addition to permitting and, in many cases, participating in the denials of freedom of movement, government authorities became less accessible to officials from MINUSCA and MINUSMA (the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali), who struggled to advance key political and institutional aspects of their mandates. In Mali, for example, the mission proved unable to persuade the transitional government of Assimi Goïta, who seized power in a 2021 coup, to make good on its commitments to hold elections for a return to constitutional order.[28] The elections have still not taken place and, with the closure of MINUSMA in 2023 on the request of the host authorities, it seems unlikely that they will take place in the foreseeable future.

Similarly, and often in parallel, the spread of state-sponsored mis- and disinformation targeting peacekeeping operations often serves to undermine host state and popular support for missions. Enmeshed with local networks of journalists and influencers, Russia- and Wagner-linked outlets have spread rumors linking peacekeepers in CAR to nonstate armed groups and even terrorists. In one incident in 2023, a mission's surveillance drones were accused of dropping bombs on Russian camps. Despite MINUSCA's denial of these allegations, the Central African authorities subsequently prohibited the mission's use of unmanned aerial vehicles, seriously hindering its situational awareness and reducing its capacity to monitor the activities of all armed actors, including the Wagner Group, especially in areas where it has been denied physical access.[29]

In response to these challenges, the UN Department of Peace Operations has in recent years sought to significantly scale up its analytical capabilities in the "information environment" and strategic communications activities. Newly released guidance from the department instructs missions on how to anticipate key moments of vulnerability—for example, in the lead-up to national elections or during security operations—and to proactively spread accurate information to key segments of the community and to "prebunk" anticipated malicious narratives. However, as Jake Sherman and Albert Trithart point out, the UN is limited in what

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it can do; it is generally agreed that the types of more manipulative "psychological operations" used by national militaries are incompatible with the UN's operating principles.[30] As such, it is likely that peacekeeping missions will remain on the back foot when such tools are deployed against them.

Ensuring Safety, Security, and Protection

The emerging tactics described in this essay threaten the safety and security of peacekeepers in myriad ways. In addition to the risk of confrontation with parallel security actors, undermined public support and the spread of malicious information and falsehoods have repeatedly exposed missions to violent public demonstrations. While public expressions of legitimate frustration and dissent should be protected, the increased threats posed by mis- and disinformation and intrusions on internal mission data also pose a significant risk to the privacy and security of UN personnel, leading to risks of doxing, extortion, or the release of information—true or false—intended to trigger their being declared persona non grata by the host state. These latter threats to individual personnel are not currently covered by the UN Security Management System and arguably present a new category of threats to UN safety and security.

The reduced capacity of missions to monitor their surroundings and maneuver freely and safely has similarly serious implications for the security of the populations who peacekeepers are mandated to protect. Without access to key parts of their host territories, missions are dramatically limited in their ability to respond to threats of violence against civilians, and to investigate and hold accountable those who are responsible, including the parallel actors themselves. In March 2022, for example, a joint operation of Wagner and the Malian Armed Forces (known by its French acronym, FAMa) was accused of summarily executing more than five hundred people over a four-day period in the village of Moura in central Mali as part of an operation ostensibly targeting the al-Qaeda–linked Katiba Macina armed group. MINUSMA human rights investigators were subsequently denied access to the village.[31]

In light of these challenges, and given the capacity of any of the Permanent Five, or P-5, members of the United Nations Security Council to block meaningful political action at the headquarters level, how might missions endeavor to constrain intrusive state actors and disincentivize activities to undermine them and/or cause harm to civilians? Surprisingly, human rights monitoring and reporting may still serve an important role in dissuading these types of activities. Though risky and

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made more difficult by the restrictions imposed upon them, UN human rights monitors and Security Council sanctions experts have continued to monitor and publicly report on violence attributable to parallel security forces. In CAR, the Human Rights Division of MINUSCA reported a positive, if temporary, improvement in the behavior of Wagner and joint Wagner-FACA forces following the release of a report detailing widespread abuses during the 2020–2021 electoral period.[32]

Another tool available to peacekeeping missions is the UN's Human Rights Due Diligence Policy on UN Support to Non-UN Security Forces, which requires that the UN undertake an assessment before providing operational support to national armed forces—rations, transportation, fuel, and the sharing of information—to gauge the risk that this support might be used in the commission of human rights violations. Given the Wagner Group's track record of violence against civilians in CAR, for example, this due diligence policy could justify withholding MINUSCA support from any units of the FACA that coordinate or operate jointly with Wagner fighters in the hopes of disincentivizing this cooperation. This, however, would almost certainly result in further degradation of the mission's relationship with the host government, jeopardizing its access to and influence over government authorities and potentially resulting in further limitations on its freedom of operations. Moreover, insofar as parallel forces are present in the country at the host government's request, missions that appear to be overtly undermining these parallel operations may give rise to complaints of interference in the sovereignty of their host states.

Supporting Political Settlements

The presence of new parallel actors, the weakening of the implicit pact between missions and their host governments, and the undermining of missions' credibility in the eyes of local populations and nonstate political actors pose serious challenges to the ultimate aim of peacekeeping operations: the negotiation and implementation of a durable political settlement to end the conflict and promote a positive peace. In light of these obstacles, peacekeeping missions are now forced to seek alternative approaches to incentivize political dialogue.

A critical and difficult decision facing UN leadership is thus whether to cooperate or coordinate political activities with the in-country political representatives of state sponsors of parallel operations known to be undermining the peacekeeping mission. At the risk of lending credibility to the model of interconnected political,

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economic, and security pacts that underpins the presence of several parallel security actors in peacekeeping settings, it is undeniable that the sponsors of these models have considerable influence over the political economy of the conflict and the interests of many national stakeholders. Moreover, as decisive actors in the conflict, parallel security forces have the capacity to influence conflict dynamics in ways that could enable or impede political processes. In both Mali and CAR, for example, the targeting of Muslim militias and the apparent failure to distinguish between armed fighters and civilians has exacerbated intercommunity tensions, making reconciliation more difficult.

Future political settlements facilitated by the UN and other international actors may need to address the sources of and incentives for external state interference in peace processes. Political settlements in Mali and CAR could, for example, include provisions for the demobilization and withdrawal of foreign fighters, as is the case in the 2020 ceasefire signed in Libya. Beyond the forces themselves, political negotiations could also more directly tackle the incentive structures of external state actors, notably through greater transparency in the processes of granting concessions for extractive resources. In the longer term, human rights abuses committed or enabled by external actors and ethnic cleavages exacerbated by information campaigns will likely form central aspects of transitional justice and reconciliation efforts aimed at building social cohesion.

Conclusion

Changes in the geopolitics of international peace and security, combined with new technologies and models of irregular warfare, have created a new operating context for UN peacekeeping operations. When these dynamics play out at the international level, they have profound consequences for the day-to-day activities of missions on the ground. The plans and strategies of peacekeeping operations have become more porous and vulnerable to interference and manipulation by state actors working within their theater of operations. While the activities of the Wagner Group and associated actors are by far the most visible and well-documented examples of intrusion in peacekeeping settings to date, the use of proxy forces, mis- and disinformation, and cyber intrusion is increasing by many, if not all, major and middle powers active in conflicts where UN peace and security mechanisms are also deployed.

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Ultimately, the strategic viability of peacekeeping operations will continue to be determined at the international level, as the place of such operations within the framework of great power interests continues to evolve. Nonetheless, the eleven peacekeeping missions deployed today and those of the future will require new tools and tactics to increase their resilience to external intrusion by state and state-sponsored actors, if they are to remain effective in protecting civilians and promoting peaceful settlements to conflict, all the while keeping their personnel safe.

Notes

[1] Candace Rondeaux, *Decoding the Wagner Group: Analyzing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare* (Washington, D.C.: New America, November 2019). With the death of its chief, Yevgeny Prigozhin, in August 2023, the Wagner Group's Africa operations have become more closely associated with the Russian defense forces, alternately referred to as the "Expeditionary Corps" or the "Africa Corps." See Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Nonstate Armed Actors in 2024: The Middle East and Africa," Brookings, January 16, 2024, www.brookings.edu/articles/nonstate-armed-actors-in-2024-the-middle-east-and-africa/.

[2] United Nations Security Council, *Midterm Report of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic Extended Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2399 (2018)*, S/2018/729 (July 23, 2018).

[3] Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission, *Rapport public sur les violations des droits de l'homme et du droit international humanitaire en République Centrafricaine durant la période électorale* (Geneva: UN Headquarters, July 2020–June 2021), www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/CF/report_abuses_violations_HR_InternationalHumanitarianLaw_Elections_CAR.pdf.

[4] Jared Thompson, Catrina Doxsee, and Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., "Tracking the Arrival of Russia's Wagner Group in Mali," Centre for Strategic and International Studies, February 2, 2022, www.csis.org/analysis/tracking-arrival-russias-wagner-group-mali.

[5] For example, in early 2021 Wagner-FACA forces in CAR undertook a counteroffensive against the Coalition des patriotes pour le changement armed group, during which the secretary-general reported a "widespread, unprecedented pattern of incidents [of denials of MINUSCA's] freedom of movement, in some cases seriously endangering its personnel." United Nations Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General: Central African Republic*, S/2021/571 (June 16, 2021).

[6] For example, following the 2022 Moura massacre in Mali, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSMA) and other UN agencies were denied access to the town, impeding both an investigation into the circumstances of the incident and the provision of humanitarian assistance to survivors. See United Nations, "Amid Executions, Forced Disappearances in Mali, Mission Head Tells Security Council Little Progress Made towards Implementing Peace Agreement," SC/146856 (9012th Meeting, April 7, 2022). Russia subsequently blocked a proposal in the Security Council to call for a UN investigation into the incident.

[7] Catrina Doxsee, Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., and Jennifer Jun, "Central African Republic Mine Displays Stakes for Wagner Group's Future," Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 3, 2023, www.csis.org/analysis/central-african-republic-mine-displays-stakes-wagner-groups-future.

[8] Adam Day, Charles T. Hunt, He Yin, and Liezelle Kumalo, *Assessing the Effectiveness of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan / UNMISS* (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2019).

[9] Dirk Druet, "Wagner Group Poses Fundamental Challenges for the Protection of Civilians by UN Peacekeeping Operations" International Peace Institute Global Observatory, March 20, 2023. "Physical protection," including the use of force, is only one way in which peacekeeping operations discharge their mandates to protect civilians. Other activities that do not necessarily require direct physical access to affected populations include political engagement, such as with national government or security forces, and longer-term efforts to strengthen the protective environment, such as security sector reform. See United Nations, Department of Peace Operations, United Nations, *Policy: The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping*, Ref. 2023.05 (New York: UN, 2023).

[10] Department of Peace Operations, United Nations, "Contribution of Uniformed Personnel to UN by Country, Mission, and Personnel Type," February 29, 2024, peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/03_country_and_mission_71_february_2024.pdf.

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[12] Christoph Nedopil, "Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)" (Shanghai: Green Finance & Development Center, 2023), greenfdc.org/countries-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/.

[13] Alessandro Arduino, "The Footprint of Chinese Private Security Companies in Africa" (Policy Brief No. 42/2020, China Africa Research Initiative, Johns Hopkins University, School of Advanced International Studies, Washington, D.C., March 2020), www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/248221/1/sais-cari-pb42.pdf.

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[18] Emily Paddon Rhoads and Aditi Gorur, "United Nations Peacekeeping and Civilian Protective Agency," in Jana Krause, Juan Masullo, Emily Paddon Rhoads, and Jennifer M. Welsh, eds., *Civilian Protective Agency in Violent Settings: A Comparative Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), pp. 227–43.

[19] For example, MONUSCO bases in the province of North Kivu, DRC, faced a groundswell of public resentment in 2010, when it emerged that the mission had failed to respond to pleas from residents of a village in the Walikale region of the province that subsequently endured a campaign of mass rapes by armed group fighters. See David Smith, "UN 'Ignored Congo Rape Earnings': Assistant Secretary-General to Investigate after Community Leaders Say They Begged for Help Before Villagers Were Raped," *Guardian*, September 2, 2010.

[20] Dirk Druet, *Peace Operations at the Intersection of Health Emergencies and Violent Conflict: Lessons from the 2018–2020 DRC Ebola Crisis* (Cambridge, Mass.: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2022). See also Congo Research Group, *Rebels, Doctors and Merchants of Violence: How the Fight against Ebola Became Part of the Conflict in Eastern DRC* (New York: Center on International Cooperation, New York University, August 2021).

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Abstract: While peacekeeping operations have always been heavily dependent on host-state support and international political backing, changes in the global geopolitical and technological landscapes have presented new forms of state interference intended to influence, undermine, and impair the activities of missions on the ground. Emerging parallel security actors, notably the Wagner Group, have cast themselves as directly or implicitly in competition with the security guarantee provided by peacekeepers, while the proliferation of mis- and disinformation and growing cybersecurity vulnerabilities present novel challenges for missions' relationships with host states and populations, operational security, and the protection of staff and their local sources. Together, these trends undermine missions' efforts to protect civilians, operate safely, and implement long-term political settlements. This essay analyzes these trends and the dilemmas they present for in-country UN officials attempting to induce respect for international norms and implement their mandates. It describes nascent strategies taken by missions to maintain their impartiality, communicate effectively, and maintain the trust of those they are charged with protecting, and highlights early good practices for monitoring and analyzing this new operation environment, for reporting on and promoting human rights, and for operating safely.

Keywords: peace operations, peacekeeping, mercenaries, private military and security companies, misinformation, disinformation, Central African Republic, Mali