

# Stabilization at the expense of Peacebuilding in UN peacekeeping operations: More than just a phase?

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## **Stabilization at the expense of Peacebuilding in UN peacekeeping operations: More than just a phase?**

### **Abstract**

The 'uploading' of stabilization to UN peacekeeping presents conceptual, political and practical challenges to the UN's role in global governance and international conflict management. While scholarly research on stabilization has generally focused on militarisation, its relationship to peacebuilding in the context of UN peacekeeping is underexplored. This article examines that relationship. A survey of UN policy frameworks highlights the simultaneous emergence of stabilization and clear expressions of peacebuilding. The article then draws on fieldwork in Mali and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to illustrate how stabilization is displacing peacebuilding in the practices of UN peacekeeping. We argue that the politics of stabilization impede local forms of peacebuilding, at odds with the 'sustaining peace' agenda, that risks jeopardising the lauded conflict resolution potential of UN peacekeeping.

# Stabilization at the expense of Peacebuilding in UN peacekeeping operations: More than just a phase?

## Introduction

The introduction of the term ‘stabilization’ into the peacekeeping lexicon has led to a number of studies over the form and function of UN interventions. Yet a gap exists as to the impact of stabilization on a long-standing characteristic of UN peacekeeping, namely, how operations support political dialogue after the cessation of violence to promote sustainable forms of peacebuilding. This article interrogates this relationship between ‘stabilization’<sup>1</sup> in the context of United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations, and the peacebuilding aspects of UN peacekeeping deployments<sup>2</sup>. It does so by asking three key questions. First, how the UN’s policy and guidance on peacebuilding as part of UN peacekeeping reflects stabilization; second, how stabilization missions reflect the key aspects of what the UN terms as peacebuilding; and third, how those implementing UN stabilization mandates manage and implement programs that incorporate elements of peacebuilding and stabilization.

As a consequence of answering these three questions, this research presents novel insights in a number of ways. Firstly, the research develops a unique dataset informed by a significant number of interviews with UN personnel at UN Headquarters and two stabilization missions – the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA)<sup>3</sup>. Secondly the article helps close a gap in both the scholarly and policy related discourses, utilising insights from conflict resolution research to investigate stabilization in the UN context, and introducing the concept of ‘liddism’. Here it responds to critiques of the stabilization literature for its tendency to focus on the increased robustness of operations, as opposed to ‘political problems’<sup>4</sup>.

Through these new insights, the research presented in this article helps advance knowledge of the ‘origins, spread, and implications of stabilization in United Nations circles’<sup>5</sup>, something which has been

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<sup>1</sup> We use the English (US) spelling ‘stabilization’ unless quoting from others.

<sup>2</sup> For this article, we use the term ‘peacekeeping operations’ when speaking about missions which are headed by the UN Department of Peace Operations. We do not examine specific peacebuilding missions which are not linked to peacekeeping deployments, nor do we examine the UN’s political and mediation support missions.

<sup>3</sup> These two cases were selected as they are the two largest UN stabilization missions (in terms of footprint and budget), and both facilitate peacebuilding processes where conflict is on-going. Mali and the DRC are also case studies for funded research projects that enabled the fieldwork that informs this article.

<sup>5</sup> Muggah 2014.

lacking in the extant literature base. This comes at a time when the UN is undergoing critical reforms of its peace and security instruments, flowing from three high level reports into Peace Operations, the Peacebuilding architecture, and the implementation of UN Security Council's (UNSC) Women Peace and Security resolutions. These reports are informing new approaches to understanding peacekeeping, including the 'Action for Peacekeeping' reform initiative. Moreover, in perhaps the most significant development, Secretary General Antonio Guterres is leading a substantial reform process to better align the UN to future challenges in the peace and security field and consolidating the 'sustaining peace' agenda across the organization. Although this paper understands that 'stabilization' in the UN context is a term lacking official definition,<sup>6</sup> we refer to earlier work discerning key aspects of broader western conceptualisations of the approach to define stabilisation as:

a combination of civilian and military approaches with a focus on re-establishing state authority in 'failed states'; this includes provision of 'legitimate' state authority, institution-building, and delivery of key state services. It is supported by the use of military force, bordering on counterinsurgency, and predominantly aimed against non-state actors who challenge the state's monopoly on violence<sup>7</sup>

This article proceeds in four parts. We firstly situate this research into the broader theoretical approaches on UN peacebuilding and international conflict resolution. The article then tracks the 'uploading' – the process of policy transfer, uptake and implementation – of stabilization in the UN context, the repeated recognition of the importance of peacebuilding functions in UN policy, and the resultant incoherence whereby UN peacebuilding policy makes little mention of stabilization. Then, through using examples from two major UN stabilization operations (MONUSCO and MINUSMA), the article illustrates how the arrival of stabilization has: generated conceptual confusion; diverted funds, technologies and programs intended for peacebuilding; and, required partnerships with host governments that constrict the types of early peacebuilding that missions can facilitate. The third part discusses how the politics of stabilization jeopardises the impartiality of missions, decreasing the potential for missions to contribute to more inclusive and transformative peacebuilding. The conclusion takes a step back and reflects on what sort of phase the ascendancy of stabilization may constitute. Here we ask whether stabilization should be understood as an early stage of more sequenced missions, or in fact considered as the harbinger of more systematic change in the logic of UN interventions. Both point to potential implications for the future effectiveness of UN interventions

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<sup>6</sup> Gorur 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Curran and Holtom 2015, 4.

in building sustainable models of peace. The article is informed by field interviews with peacekeeping practitioners and other key experts in Mali, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and at the UN Headquarters in New York.<sup>8</sup> It is complemented by a survey of the UN's institutional approaches to peacebuilding.

### **Peacebuilding and conflict resolution**

This article contributes to the debate about the direction of UN peacekeeping in the age of the 'pragmatic turn' in global conflict management. At a time when there is increasing evidence that peacekeeping helps halt civil-war violence<sup>9</sup>, prevents conflict from diffusing<sup>10</sup>, reduces civilian atrocities<sup>11</sup>, and creates durable peace<sup>12</sup>, significant questions are being asked as to what sort of 'peace' the UN seeks to encourage once it has reduced direct forms of violence. Here we relate both to those who advocate more nuanced forms of post conflict peacebuilding, and those who are suggesting (with some concern) that trends in conflict management demonstrate a move away from more complex forms of peacebuilding. In the case of the former, we link to work by Cedric de Coning, who introduces the 'adaptive peacebuilding' concept, defined as being 'informed by concepts of complexity, resilience and local ownership'<sup>13</sup>. In the latter, we note work by John Karlsrud, who links developments in the UN to broader counter-terrorism agendas and claims that 'Liberal peacebuilding may be on its way to the scrapyard of history'<sup>14</sup>, as well as Mateja Peter's investigation<sup>15</sup> into the evolution of 'enforcement peacekeeping'<sup>15</sup>, and Louise Riis-Anderson's research which charts debates within the UN itself about the use of force and militarization of UN peace operations<sup>16</sup>. This second set of debates are reflective of broader concerns over 'liddism'<sup>17</sup> in the conflict resolution literature. First developed by Paul Rogers, liddism refers to the process of 'keeping the lid on dissent and instability', through means of public order, and military force. Approaches which encourage a form of

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<sup>8</sup> Approximately 80 semi-structured interviews were conducted in Mali (April-May 2017) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (May-June 2018). Interviewees included peacekeeping practitioners, senior mission leadership, civilian, military and police components and other key experts based in international organizations, NGOs, national institutions and local civil society organizations. Around 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted during research at the UN Headquarters in New York in 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Hultman, Kathman, and Shannon 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Beardsley 2011. Beardsley and Gleditsch 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Hultman, Kathman, and Shannon 2013. Kathman and Wood 2014. Melander 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Doyle and Sambanis 2006. Fortna 2008. Gilligan and Sergenti 2008.

<sup>13</sup> de Coning 2018, 305.

<sup>14</sup> Karlsrud 2018, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Peter 2015, 352.

<sup>16</sup> Andersen 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Pugh, Cooper, and Turner 2008.

liddism often pay little attention to root causes of conflict, instead, following the mantra of ‘maintain control, maintain the status quo, do not address the underlying problems’<sup>18</sup>.

UN peacekeeping is theorised as playing a ‘vital conflict resolution role’<sup>19</sup> insofar as UN operations seek to maintain, or broaden, political space amidst or immediately after violent conflict, with the aim of removing ‘the social structures that cause violent conflict in the first place’<sup>20</sup>. Theoretical approaches identify that the deployment of peacekeeping operations, when complemented by immediate peacebuilding activities, have the potential to support peace agreements,<sup>21</sup> and expand opportunities for political resolution<sup>22</sup>, including the rebuilding of government, civil society, and the ‘public space’ for debate<sup>23</sup>. This is reflected in studies of particular missions<sup>24</sup>, as well as in studies of the actions of individual peacekeepers.<sup>25</sup> With this in mind, this research explores the framing and implementation of early peacebuilding by peacekeepers as a project of opening political space to investigate the extent to which this aspect of conflict resolution is carried out in UN stabilization missions. This article then uses conflict resolution’s concepts of the multi-layered nature of peacekeeping<sup>26</sup> to investigate the links between macro-level policy articulations and micro-level implementation in the field when it comes to the UN’s peacebuilding efforts. This link is significant, not in terms of direct action because of policy directives, but rather how actors in missions navigate the terrain when vague instruction is given to them.

### **Stabilization, Peacebuilding and the UN’s Dilemma**

At the strategic level, stabilization has been ‘uploaded’ into the logic and practice of peacekeeping, while UN peacebuilding policy has increasingly focused on local level engagement. This has resulted in a vacuum where there is little attention paid to stabilization within peacebuilding policy.

#### ***The uploading of stabilization***

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<sup>18</sup> Rogers 2015, 102.

<sup>19</sup> Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, and Miall 2016, 147.

<sup>20</sup> Bellamy 2004, 19.

<sup>21</sup> Wallensteen 2015, 266.

<sup>22</sup> Fisher and Keashly 1991.

<sup>23</sup> Last 2000.

<sup>24</sup> Curran and Woodhouse 2007.

<sup>25</sup> Diehl and Balas 2014, 212.

<sup>26</sup> Fetherston 1994, 150.

Stabilization doctrine can be traced to approaches developed among NATO member states<sup>27</sup>. The primary characteristic of stabilization is intervention to support the re-establishment of state authority in a 'failed state'<sup>28</sup>. This includes provision of 'legitimate' state authority, institution-building, and delivery of basic services<sup>29</sup>. Military support to establish control over an area primarily targets non-state actors who challenge the state's monopoly on violence. Civilian approaches seek to implement short- and long-term projects with the aim to 'transition towards more civilian-led and ideally more democratic forms of maintaining security'<sup>30</sup>. The stabilization trend can be traced back to NATO operations in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, but incorporate as their most recent examples Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan, missions with significantly more resources, deployed personnel<sup>31</sup> and budgets<sup>32</sup> than UN operations.

Over the past decade, scholarship has charted a gradual 'uploading'<sup>33</sup> of stabilization into UN practice<sup>34</sup>. There has been significant growth in the usage of the term 'stabilization' by the UNSC<sup>35</sup>, reflecting 'increasing will' amongst its membership to mandate robust operations to contain aggressors and spoilers in the midst of conflict<sup>36</sup>, linked to strategies of 'development and humanitarian action to shore up the military gains made'<sup>37</sup>. This brings operational impacts, with the 'new category' of UN stabilization operations mandated with tasks centered around

*protecting civilians and governments, or governance structures, against an aggressor(s) or general destabilization, amidst ongoing violence, while at the same time being part of a larger process that seeks a political settlement for the conflict<sup>38</sup>.*

Commentators have suggested that the creation of stabilization missions in Mali, the Central African Republic, and the DRC<sup>39</sup> – three of the largest and most complex UN operations – means peacekeeping

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<sup>27</sup> Curran and Holtom 2015.

<sup>28</sup> Gilder 2019, 50.

<sup>29</sup> Rotmann and Steinacker 2013. UK Stabilization Unit 2019.

<sup>30</sup> UK Stabilization Unit 2019, 13.

<sup>31</sup> At its height, the ISAF deployment in Afghanistan had over 130,000 deployed personnel from over 51 countries- See: NATO 2015.

<sup>32</sup> At the height of UK engagement costs to the UK reached between £3.5 – 4 billion per annum: Berman 2012, 5.

<sup>33</sup> Curran and Holtom 2015, 1.

<sup>34</sup> Aoi, de Coning, and Karlsrud 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Curran and Holtom 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Karlsrud 2018, 23. Boutellis 2015, 4.

<sup>37</sup> Karlsrud 2018, 87.

<sup>38</sup> Aoi and de Coning 2017, 299.

<sup>39</sup> In addition to MONUSCO (2010-) and MINUSMA (2013-); the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) (2014-).

is becoming more like the stabilization operations in places like Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>40</sup> This has consequences for the UN's declared approaches to peacebuilding.

### ***The direction of UN peacebuilding***

While stabilization is being transferred into the UN system, the UN's policy and guidance on peacebuilding aspects of its peacekeeping operations continues to develop almost independently. Reports from the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations (C34) regularly go into detail about the peacebuilding aspects of operations, including the importance of inclusive approaches which account for the 'needs of all segments of society.'<sup>41</sup> UNSC Resolution (UNSCR) 2086, specifically on the topic of peacekeepers as facilitators of peacebuilding, emphasized the 'comparative advantages' of multidimensional peacekeeping missions in early peacebuilding<sup>42</sup>. These declarations mirror work by the peacekeeping bureaucracy expressing the ways in which the military component of a peacekeeping mission undertakes 'early peacebuilding' tasks, including 'expanding and preserving political space' themselves<sup>43</sup>.

The importance of peacekeepers to peacebuilding is predicated on a strong normative position that effective peacebuilding processes need to be locally driven and owned.<sup>44</sup> UN policy seeks to better understand how to identify local partners, and incorporate them into 'national capacities at all levels for conflict management.'<sup>45</sup> This is most clearly articulated through the 'Sustaining Peace' agenda, first outlined in two High Level Panel Reports in 2015, one on Peace Operations (hereafter HIPPO Report), the other on the Peacebuilding Architecture (hereafter AGE Report), and formalised by the identical resolutions passed in the General Assembly and Security Council in 2016.<sup>46</sup> The joint resolutions state that sustaining peace is a 'goal and a process' undertaken throughout different stages of conflict escalation and de-escalation, primarily aimed at engaging the UN system to help 'build a common vision of a society, ensuring that the needs of all segments of the population are taken into account.'<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Peter 2015, 352.

<sup>41</sup> See: United Nations 2015, 29. United Nations 2016, 34. United Nations 2017, 37. United Nations 2018, 41.

<sup>42</sup> UNSCR 2282 (2016) reaffirmed this, "noting with appreciation the contributions that peacekeepers and peacekeeping missions make to peacebuilding...and a comprehensive strategy for sustaining peace". United Nations 2016, 3.

<sup>43</sup> United Nations 2010.

<sup>44</sup> von Billerbeck 2015, 301.

<sup>45</sup> United Nations 2010, 5.

<sup>46</sup> United Nations 2016.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.



Sustaining peace firmly anchors peacekeeping on a continuum of efforts aimed at working towards durable peacebuilding.

The language of HIPPO and Sustaining Peace dovetail with existing operational guidance on areas where peacekeeping and peacebuilding overlap. This includes guidance on civil-military coordination, and quick impact projects; UN training programs which focus on peacebuilding<sup>48</sup>; and, practical handbooks given to deployed personnel<sup>49</sup>. Here, UN guidance towards civil-military coordination seeks to differentiate itself from NATO-led approaches, as utilised in non-UN stabilization efforts. Whereas UN guidance is ‘conducted in support of the wider peace process’<sup>50</sup>, NATO approaches engage civilian actors in order to ‘achieve the commander’s intent’<sup>51</sup>.

### ***Peacebuilding and stabilization: an awkward silence?***

Stabilization is conspicuously absent in peacekeeping policy documents. In reports of the C-34 from 2015, the term barely appears, beyond references to ensuring ‘stability’ in volatile post-conflict environments. The only mention of stabilization in UNSCR 2086 (referred to above) relates to coordination with national authorities to ‘stabilize and improve the security situation and help in economic recovery’<sup>52</sup>. In the HIPPO report, stabilization appears in just one of the 321 paragraphs. Here, the report acknowledges the usage of the term ‘stabilization’ by the Security Council and Secretariat ‘for a number of missions that support the extension or restoration of state authority and, in at least one case, during ongoing armed conflict’. Yet it notes the concept has a ‘wide range of interpretations’, and that the ‘usage of this term by the United Nations requires clarification’<sup>53</sup>. This high-level advice echoes broader scholarly critiques that stabilization is difficult to define,<sup>54</sup> and arguably provided an opening for a process of reflection on the concept and its use within the UN. However, the follow up 2015 Implementation Report of the Secretary General made no mention at all of stabilization in UN missions<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup> United Nations 2014. United Nations 2009. See also Curran 2017.

<sup>49</sup> United Nations 2011.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>51</sup> United Nations 2010, 3.

<sup>52</sup> United Nations Security Council 2013. This silence has continued see, for example: UNSCR 2378 (2017) on UN peacekeeping reform which also made no mention of stabilization United Nations 2017.

<sup>53</sup> High-level Independent Panel on United Nations Peace Operations 2015, 30.

<sup>54</sup> Muggah 2014. Mac Ginty 2012.

<sup>55</sup> United Nations 2015.

The AGE Review (which heavily influenced the *Sustaining Peace* agenda) rarely made an explicit mention of the term ‘stabilization’, instead interrogating questions of ‘national ownership’. The review outlined significant challenges regarding how the UN relates to national leaders in conflict-affected states. In particular, the relationship between conflict recidivism, and the UN’s closeness to leaders who are driven by narrow self and group interests, which have been ‘proved not to be aligned with peacebuilding’<sup>56</sup>. It also outlined concern that attempts to rebuild or extend central authority may in fact extend violent conflict, overlooking local capacities to engage in early stage peacebuilding, defined as having ‘more to do with strengthening local domains of governance than trying to re-establish strong central authority’<sup>57</sup>. Although ‘stabilization’ is not addressed specifically, the AGE’s caution is clear.

A dilemma thus exists. It is apparent that stabilization has gained traction in the UN vernacular, particularly with certain member states on the UNSC. Meanwhile, UN policy towards peacebuilding effectively ignores that stabilization has become an activity that extends beyond the point when violent conflict has abated and a deployment zone is ‘stabilized’<sup>58</sup>. That UNSCR 2086, the HIPPO Report, and the AGE report were all produced whilst stabilization missions were deployed and the term became increasingly normalised in UN debates indicates an almost wilful ignorance of the term. The fact that there are such cognitive dissonance within the UN system may be of little surprise to those who study the organization.<sup>59</sup> However, as Riis Anderson’s research into the use of force and militarisation of UN peacekeeping shows,<sup>60</sup> a lack of clarity over key normative aspects of UN interventions can have broader ramifications for the organization’s activities.

### **Stabilization displacing Peacebuilding? Perspectives from the field**

With this in mind, the article now offers examples from the UN’s stabilization missions in the DRC (MONUSCO) and Mali (MINUSMA) to illustrate the disconnects between stabilization and peacebuilding presented above. The analysis focuses on three main issues: conceptual confusion; conflation of peacebuilding means and stabilization ends; and the ramifications of interlinking stabilization and peacebuilding for political space to pursue sustainable peace.

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<sup>56</sup> United Nations 2015, 34.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 16; see also: Hunt 2018.

<sup>58</sup> See for instance Eide et al. 2005. Lipson 2007.

<sup>59</sup> For further elaboration on this, see: Lipson 2007.

<sup>60</sup> Andersen 2018.

### ***Conceptual confusion***

As argued above, stabilization in the UN context is ill-defined at the strategic level. This leads to differing interpretations at the operational and tactical levels in the field – including in terms of how the concept relates to peacebuilding. A degree of conceptual ambiguity can be constructive for mission leadership if it allows for delegated authority to result in more context-sensitive decision-making. However, strategic vagueness appears to be manifesting in unwitting confusion in field missions. Fieldwork in both Mali and the DRC confirmed that it is not unusual for field personnel to conflate stabilization with peacebuilding.<sup>61</sup> Many see the two sharing the same aim – tackling the root causes of violent conflict – and therefore either mutually reinforcing or entirely synonymous.<sup>62</sup> In Mali, for instance, an interview with a senior stabilization adviser revealed that the focus of the ‘stabilization and recovery’ section in MINUSMA is identifying stabilization projects aimed at winning hearts and minds by bringing quick peace dividends to particular communities. These usually take the form of Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) or Community Violence Reduction (CVR) programming and focus on restoring state authority so it can rehabilitate basic infrastructure and services – often following the ‘clearance’ of armed groups and recovery of territory by national and parallel international forces – rather than efforts to transform the relationships that led to violent conflict per se.<sup>63</sup>

In the DRC, changing interpretations of stabilization over MONUSCO’s lifetime demonstrates that clarity around stabilization is difficult to achieve.<sup>64</sup> The original stabilization mission in 2010<sup>65</sup> prioritised longer-term strategies for consolidating peace guided by the *International Security and Stabilization Support Strategy* (I4S).<sup>66</sup> The first phase of the I4S (2009-2012) was later criticised for being too state-centric and underplaying the destabilizing effects of local level conflict dynamics.<sup>67</sup> However, attempts to better recognise this reality in the second phase of the I4S (2013-2017) were quickly overmatched with the advent of the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB), a robust UN military force attached to MONUSCO tasked to neutralize specific armed groups in order to, *inter alia*, create space for ‘stabilization activities.’<sup>68</sup> This new iteration of stabilization in MONUSCO was driven largely by a Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) with recent experience in Afghanistan and

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<sup>61</sup> Interviews with MONUSCO officials – Goma/Beni, DRC (May 2018); Interviews with MINUSMA officials – Bamako/Mopti/Gao (April 2017).

<sup>62</sup> Interviews with MONUSCO officials – Goma/Beni, DRC (May 2018); Interviews with MINUSMA officials – Bamako/Mopti/Gao (April 2017). See, also: Gorur 2016, 16.

<sup>63</sup> Interviews with MINUSMA officials – Bamako/Mopti/Gao (April 2017).

<sup>64</sup> De Vries 2016. Solhjell and Rosland 2016.

<sup>65</sup> UNSCR 1925 (28 May 2010) ushered in the transition from MONUC to MONUSCO United Nations 2010.

<sup>66</sup> United Nations 2013.

<sup>67</sup> De Vries 2015; Paddon and Lacaille 2011.

<sup>68</sup> United Nations 2013, para12 (b).

influenced by counter-insurgency models.<sup>69</sup> The approach spawned the ‘Islands of Stability’ concept, predicated on a ‘(shape), clear, hold, build’ approach, but struggled to produce the stability envisaged and was heavily criticised for two main reasons. First, for failing to hold and build these islands of stability once spoilers were cleared out. Second, for effectively creating ‘swamps of insecurity’ around the focus areas that proved impossible to drain.<sup>70</sup> As a result, the ‘islands of stability’ concept only lasted two years and was “effectively killed by the office of the SRSG in 2016.”<sup>71</sup> Stabilization in MONUSCO consequently reverted to a less coercive approach,<sup>72</sup> with the MONUSCO Stabilization Support Unit (SSU) overseeing the dispersal of stabilization funds for reconstruction and development projects such as efforts to address land issues, customary authority disputes the challenges presented by legal pluralism.<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless, like in Mali, these were directed towards key ‘hotspots’, in part to placate sites of resistance and avert possible conflagration in the lead-up to repeatedly postponed Presidential elections that eventually occurred in December 2018.<sup>74</sup> Notwithstanding the attempts to promote national ownership, focus on particular locales and on state-society relations, the different shades of stabilization in DRC have consistently privileged a state-centric capacity-building agenda at the expense of a more inclusive and localised approach to peacebuilding.<sup>75</sup>

### ***Peacebuilding means for stabilization ends***

The most recent mandates for the UN’s two biggest stabilization missions analysed here make little or no mention of ‘peacebuilding’.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, both make use of the funds and tools of the UN’s peacebuilding architecture and have employed them towards stabilization ends.<sup>77</sup> Strong linkages have emerged between stabilization missions and the UN’s Peacebuilding Fund (PBF).<sup>78</sup> In the case of Mali, PBF funds are dispersed through the *Immediate Response Facility* (IRF)<sup>79</sup> devoted to MINUSMA stabilization projects.<sup>80</sup> In the DRC, PBF support has been part of an integrated UN effort to support

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<sup>69</sup> Interview with MONUSCO officials – Beni, North Kivu and Kinshasa, DRC (May 2018).

<sup>70</sup> Vogel 2014, 1-2. Barrera 2015.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with senior MONUSCO official – Kinshasa, DRC (May 2018).

<sup>72</sup> Interview with senior MONUSCO officials – Goma, Beni & Kinshasa, DRC (May 2018).

<sup>73</sup> UNSCR 2348 tasks MONUSCO to contributing to: “stabilization, reconstruction and development efforts in the DRC.” United Nations 2017, 3.

<sup>74</sup> E.G. In 2018 US \$7million stabilization fund was set-up for Beni territory in North Kivu province - historically an opposition stronghold in geopolitically important location near the borders with of Uganda and Rwanda. Interview with MONUSCO official – Beni, DRC (May 2018).

<sup>75</sup> Interviews with MONUSCO officials and community members – Goma/Beni, DRC (May 2018); See, also: Solhjell and Rosland 2017, 2.

<sup>76</sup> United Nations 2018; United Nations 2019.

<sup>77</sup> Interviews with MONUSCO officials – Goma/Beni/Kinshasa, DRC (May 2018); Interviews with MINUSMA officials – Bamako/Mopti/Gao (April 2017).

<sup>78</sup> United Nations Peacebuilding Fund, n.d.

<sup>79</sup> The IRF provides flexible and rapidly disbursed project funding for immediate peacebuilding and recovery needs.

<sup>80</sup> United Nations Peacebuilding Fund, 2015.

stabilization since 2009.<sup>81</sup> A number of IRF projects have been approved to assist in implementing the I4S, and funds have provided capacity support to the MONUSCO Stabilization Support Unit (SSU) as part of the Peacebuilding Priority Plan 2015-2017.<sup>82</sup> Since 2018, PBF funds have been used to target key sites of vulnerability in the east including projects in Kalehe (South Kivu) and Mambasa (Ituri) coordinated through the MONUSCO SSU.<sup>83</sup>

In effect, the everyday business of peacekeepers deemed to contribute to early peacebuilding is being relabelled as stabilization activity.<sup>84</sup> In Mali, MINUSMA Civil Affairs officers are tasked with facilitating local level dispute resolution. This is explicitly articulated within the mission as part of the stabilization effort.<sup>85</sup> Similarly, in the DRC, efforts to address local conflict dynamics such as land disputes have now been incorporated into stabilization programming.<sup>86</sup> Here too, it is worth noting that the QIPs and growing number of CVR projects – previously major delivery mechanisms of early peacebuilding work – are also subject to this rebranding and strategically delivered to populations in areas recently recovered from spoilers. With stabilization funding being dispersed by MONUSCO to a range of implementing partners (including other UN agencies and funds and INGOs), it is unavoidable that their development and peacebuilding work becomes associated with the overarching stabilization agenda.

### ***The politics of stabilization***

The UN approach to stabilization in both Malian and Congolese contexts has important political dimensions. Most obviously, stabilization is manifesting in strong partnership between missions and host governments – in certain circumstances underpinned by military force.<sup>87</sup> Effectively picking the side of incumbent governments that are party to an on-going conflict, and on occasion supporting those authorities to ‘neutralize’ specific armed actors, undermines the UN’s impartiality in the eyes of some stakeholders. These perceptions of partiality and exclusionary practices shrink the political space for broader participation – including by those most capable of ‘spoiling’ the peace processes in place.<sup>88</sup>

In Mali, MINUSMA’s stabilization activities include efforts to ameliorate drivers of conflict at the local level through mediation and CVR activities. However, these occur within a meta-stabilization agenda that is directly buttressing a central government that shows little interest in promoting a more inclusive peace process. It also cements a partnership with the Government’s security forces that are

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<sup>81</sup> United Nations Peacebuilding Fund 2017.

<sup>82</sup> See: United Nations n.d.

<sup>83</sup> See: United Nations Peacebuilding Fund, n.d.

<sup>84</sup> For similar argument regarding P/CVE, see: Karlsrud 2018, 5.

<sup>85</sup> Interviews with MINUSMA officials – Bamako/Mopti/Gao (April 2017).

<sup>86</sup> See EN 82.

<sup>87</sup> Bellamy and Hunt 2015.

<sup>88</sup> Hunt 2016.

independently seeking to militarily defeat those excluded and treated as illegitimate spoilers.<sup>89</sup> The exclusion of groups labelled as ‘terrorists’ from the peace agreement, and political dialogue, has not only limited progress towards stabilization but also contributes to the UN becoming a major target for those groups. This significantly constricts the effectiveness of extant peacebuilding efforts and forecloses on more ambitious projects.

Similarly, in the DRC, MONUSCO’s coercive approach to armed groups in the east (such as the *Allied Democratic Forces* [ADF] and a range of Mayi-Mayi self-defence militia) disregards their embeddedness in communities and their importance to generating support for a political process that can lead to broad-based peacebuilding rather than consolidation of predatory state power. The UN’s own complicity in these politics limits its ability to act as an impartial third party. The logic of overall support to the host government allows the government in Kinshasa to put severe restrictions on MONUSCO’s ability to support the more ambitious, transformational elements of its stabilization strategy such as wide-ranging security sector reform. This renders MONUSCO’s support to peacebuilding as almost entirely about strengthening government institutions and extending state authority rather than challenging the status quo that currently perpetuates the existing distribution of power.

### **The ramifications of stabilization for UN peacekeeping operations and early peacebuilding**

Our survey of strategic-level policy and examination of how stabilization is manifesting in the UN’s missions in Mali and the DRC identifies both political and practical challenges for the authorisers, architects and implementers of UN peacekeeping operations. The ways stabilization is interpreted and implemented in MINUSMA and MONUSCO are antithetical to the UN’s own articulations of peacebuilding. While stabilization at the field level incorporates a certain degree of ‘localism’ in line with UN peacebuilding policy, this is ultimately subjugated by an overarching militarised and state-centric blue-print for stabilization. In these cases, stabilization is essentially conflated with ‘extending state authority’. This should not come as a surprise when mission exit strategies are almost exclusively tied to achieving basic acceptable levels of state capacity to maintain order.<sup>90</sup> It is, however, problematic as these stabilization missions, in effect, have become ‘entangled in fractious and arguably unethical relationships with national leaders who, driven by greed or fear, have little real

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<sup>89</sup> Boutellis 2015.

<sup>90</sup> E.G. MONUSCO’s exit strategy threshold was until recently “the threat posed by armed groups to civilians has been reduced to a level that can be effectively managed by the Congolese State.” (MONUSCO Mission Concept, 2016, on file with the authors)

interest in stable, open and inclusive political systems<sup>91</sup>. As Boutellis argues, invariably ‘weak and contested state authority is part of the problem rather than the solution.’<sup>92</sup> By providing support – at times in the shape of joint military operations – to governments with questionable levels of credibility amongst their own population, the UN compromises its ability to achieve its own peacebuilding goals.

While peacebuilding and stabilization may have a shared aim – an end state of resolution of conflict and an exit strategy for the mission – the UN’s extant modalities of stabilization are limited and limiting what it can achieve through its own early peacebuilding. In these large stabilization missions, the normative calls for recognising local agency and focusing on inclusive bottom-up forms of peacebuilding continue to be relegated in favor of a more conservative and conventional securitisation agenda. This renders the lofty rhetoric around peacebuilding (highlighted in part one of this paper) as little more than lipstick on the pig.

This is significant from a conflict resolution perspective. The politics of stabilization as currently pursued limits space for initiatives which possess the potential to foster sustainable, inclusive forms of peacebuilding. We understand that, at times, this is a natural consequence of operations undertaking activities ‘during the most intense period of destruction’<sup>93</sup>. However, our research identifies that these limits are self-imposed by the UN itself. Through mandates that adopt stabilization approaches that prioritise state authority over transformative programs, the UN is pushing the lid down on insecurity and limiting alternative visions of medium and longer-term peacebuilding. This is in agreement with Lotze and Williams’ observations of stabilization efforts by the African Union in Somalia, where they argue that ‘extending state authority is not synonymous with peacebuilding, at least in the short term.’<sup>94</sup>

It is important to note that stabilization is not the sole responsibility of *in situ* UN peacekeeping operations. The comparative advantage that deployed UN missions tend to offer does however make these missions a focal point and key actor in implementation. For instance, their transportation and logistical capabilities alone make UN peacekeeping operations one of the only stakeholders in these settings capable of facilitating access to remote locations and managing complex programs.<sup>95</sup> Despite significant limitations, stabilization missions with a mandate to assist in implementation of peace agreements often have unparalleled political access and capital that can be leveraged with key

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<sup>91</sup> Gowan 2015.

<sup>92</sup> Boutellis 2015.

<sup>93</sup> Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, and Miall, 147.

<sup>94</sup> Lotze and Williams 2016, 17.

<sup>95</sup> Interviews with MONUSCO officials – Goma/Beni, DRC (May 2018); Interviews with MINUSMA officials – Bamako/Mopti/Gao (April 2017).

stakeholders drawn from local and national political elites. As Solhjell and Rosland argue in the case of DRC, these competencies can lead to peacekeepers being *de facto* burdened with responsibility for full implementation, rather than simply coordination, of major programming that they are not well-trained, prepared or placed to undertake.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, UN personnel in the field are often left to make sense of competing agendas and sometimes contradictory priorities.<sup>97</sup> Consequently, localised strategies and programs are often *ad hoc* and necessarily guided by pragmatic choices in order to optimise the limited resources available to make things work. This can reinforce the tendency to fall into lock-step with the strategic logic of missions that sees a strong state as the path of least resistance to eventual exit.

It is imperative that realistic expectations for UN peacekeeping missions are established before deployment.<sup>98</sup> On the one hand, this may mean that stabilization missions cannot hope to meet early peacebuilding goals beyond basic reinforcement of government authority. On the other hand, it may mean that stabilization missions as currently conceived are incompatible with the more ambitious and holistic understandings of peacebuilding enshrined in the UN's own policy documents.

## **Conclusion**

In this article we have argued that stabilization logics have encroached on the terrain traditionally occupied by the ideas and activities of early-stage peacebuilding. To what extent therefore, is the identification of this problematic relationship significant in terms of how we understand peacekeeping? We answer this by stating that the relationship between peacekeeping operations and stabilization is characterised by the notion of phases. Stabilization can be a phase within the lifecycle of operations, or a broader phase in the history of intervention by the UN. One may seem less important than the other, however they both throw up substantial challenges to how UN peacekeeping is understood in policy and academic literature as a device of international conflict resolution, and both indicate varying degrees of 'liddism' as outlined above in this article. We will now look at each 'phase' in turn.

To address the first point, our article finds that in UN policy and guidance, stabilization and stability are perceived as steps in conflict management and de-escalation, where the arrival of a UN mission means a reduction of direct violence, the implementation of a ceasefire, and associated 'stabilization'

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<sup>96</sup> Solhjell and Rosland 2017.

<sup>97</sup> See, for example: Hirschmann 2012.

<sup>98</sup> On this disconnect between expectations and capabilities, see: Hill 1993.



of a volatile area. These approaches assume that by implementing stability through a range of technocratic fixes, interventions will sufficiently progress, and by default, peacebuilding can proceed and have traction. However, our research finds that the increasing use of the terminology, funding and resources guided by strategies of military domination against ‘spoilers’ and reliance on a propped-up host government to fill the gap pushes the lid down on local conflict dynamics, and effectively mitigates against broader, more inclusive sets of peacebuilding commitments as time goes on. This is at odds with the UN’s ‘sustaining peace’ vision for the future of engagement in matters of peace and security.

To address the second point, the uploading of stabilization may represent a broader shift in how peacekeeping operations are conceptualised and carried out. Welcoming UNSCR 2423 renewing the mandate of MINUSMA, Permanent Representative of France to the United Nations, Francois Delettre stated that

*only a balanced approach, combining security response and development and governance efforts, can create the conditions for sustainable stabilization*<sup>99</sup>.

That a permanent member of the Security Council speaks about ‘sustainable stabilization’ raises noteworthy questions about the role of stabilization in how UN operations are conceptualized, designed, executed, and evaluated.<sup>100</sup> Whereas the peacebuilding literature speaks about increasing complexity within peacebuilding practice<sup>101</sup>, what we may be witnessing is the UN stepping back from deep approaches to peacebuilding based on local inclusivity. Stabilization missions, which are focussed on a strong host government, supported by external military and civilian capacities, may now be the limit of the UN’s imagination when engaging in its most testing interventions. As John Karlsrud argues, modern UN operations have become less intrusive and are characterised as having ‘more limited goals, a shorter-term outlook and more reactive approach to security incidents’. This in the view of Karlsrud, is ‘to the detriment of implementing a long-term people-centric strategy to address the root causes of security challenges’<sup>102</sup>. Therefore, significant questions arise regarding the UN’s capacity to actively assist communities to build inclusive models of peace. Far from removing the status quo, the

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<sup>99</sup> Statement by Francois Delettre, Permanent Representative of France to the United Nations, New York, 28 June 2018.

<sup>100</sup> While the authors acknowledge the influence of powerful member states in the Security Council on the rate of uptake of stabilization in UN peace operations, a deeper engagement with national preferences of particular states is beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>101</sup> de Coning 2018.

<sup>102</sup> Karlsrud 2018, 3.

UN may be setting its sights on reinscribing one that does not tolerate direct violence but is far more limited than what its own policy and guidance asks.

It is possible that in the near future the UNSC will call upon UN peacekeeping to help stabilize situations in places such as Libya and Yemen – where peace agreements may be fragile or absent, and asymmetric threats high. As de Coning explains, this is ‘not because they are a preferred option, but as an option of last resort.’<sup>103</sup> Indeed, if key member states perceive that the UN does not engage effectively with stabilization as part of its conflict management toolkit, the organization may face another ‘crisis of relevance’ in dealing with threats to international peace and security.<sup>104</sup> Much will depend therefore on how the current batch of stabilization missions perform and how their experiences influence thinking at headquarters. This sort of organizational learning however is not a strength of the UN peace operations bureaucracy.<sup>105</sup> With this in mind, the UN faces a significant challenge. On the one hand it continues to deploy operations with stabilization mandates in the absence of clear and coherent guidance. On the other hand, it continues to develop an elaborate peacebuilding guidance architecture that is not sufficiently reflected in its largest field operations. If this continues, the UN is on a trajectory that may undermine the effectiveness of its own peacekeeping operations. The politics of stabilization pose impediments to local forms of peacebuilding, at odds with the ‘sustaining peace’ agenda, and risks jeopardising the celebrated conflict resolution potential of UN peacekeeping.

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<sup>103</sup> de Coning 2015.

<sup>104</sup> Guéhenno 2015, 289-309.

<sup>105</sup> Hirschmann 2012; Hunt 2014.

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