

European Re-Engagement in UN Peacekeeping?

The small and medium European states need to face the unexpected challenges to be effectively involved in UN peacekeeping missions¹

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The [pledges made](#) by many European nations at the [World Leaders' Summit on Peacekeeping](#) in September 2015 and large number of European troops in United Nations peacekeeping mission in Mali (MINUSMA) both mark an important trend – the return of the European NATO armies to UN peacekeeping. With a few exceptions (UNIFIL in Lebanon and smaller units in Cyprus and the Golan Heights) European troops have been largely absent from UN operations since the termination of the missions in the former Yugoslavia. The recent withdrawal from Afghanistan and developments in European southern neighborhood have again made UN missions an attractive option for European nations both for security and capacity reasons. The European nations have decided to strengthen their presence in the Sahel region, through EU missions (particularly training and assistance missions) but also by responding to UN calls for greater contributions. This trend has culminated in the significant contributions of small and medium sized European armies to MINUSMA, which represents an important learning process for both the UN and European nations as well as paving the way for future operations.

Analysis: Greater Contribution, Greater Understanding of the Challenges Ahead

The current robust UN peacekeeping missions – with at least several thousand troops and police officers along with civilian experts deployed in the field – are increasingly being sent to highly volatile environments and are often expected to perform [combat operations](#). The need for high-capacity rapid reaction forces is thus one of the areas where European troops, experienced in dealing with asymmetric warfare, would be useful. Already in December 2013, the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) [formally identified](#) the need for enhanced capabilities in several specialized areas, which could be fruitfully provided by the European armies. These needs, [reiterated](#) in 2015, are: informational and situational awareness, command and control, logistics and enablers, specialized trainers, specialized police units and high-tech equipment. In the past two years, European countries also contributed to some innovations in MINUSMA, such the All Sources Information Fusion Unit (ASIFU, a joint analytical intelligence unit).

However, the renewed European engagement with the UN system has not been [without some friction](#) stemming from mismatch between expectations and institutional practices. Small and medium sized states have a lack of experience of the inner workings of DPKO and lack the capacity to deal with the UN peacekeeping system in general. Compared to the [negotiations over the UNIFIL](#), when the Italians and French were able to influence key aspects of the mission (e.g. its leadership structure) according to their interests, the European states' involvement in planning MINUSMA came too late to the debates about the mission's strategy and composition. Further challenges and delays stemmed from domestic politics, lengthy force generation processes and differences between NATO and UN structures of operational planning, including the challenge of cooperating and coordinating with other European states in this unfamiliar context.

1 This European Security Spotlight draws on research conducted within the project 'Analysis, Evaluation and Prospects of Czech Republic's Participation on Contemporary UN Peacekeeping Operations'.

The complex structure of the UN peacekeeping oversight proved challenging even during the deployment itself. European troop contributing countries struggled with the division of responsibilities between various UN departments for *inter alia* general political oversight, logistics, local contracting, or funding. On the operational level, various European contributors, with their high standards for force-protection and troop wellbeing, often stated that they expected more logistical and material backing from the UN. However, MINUSMA is the first field mission without US involvement in a long time for many of the European contributors. There is clear scope for learning lessons from challenges such as: logistics; appropriate standards of (and authority over) MEDEVAC; diverging practices (e.g communication or tactics) between European and non-NATO/EU forces; and intelligence work (especially concerning currently insufficient HUMINT).

Outlook: MINUSMA as a testing ground for future engagement

Despite these challenges, sustained European engagement in MINUSMA (and beyond in the UN peacekeeping) is both necessary and highly valuable. The mission currently [struggles to find its place](#) in the country amid the shaky peace deal and deteriorating security situation in the northern regions, which has already cost 68 blue helmets their lives, making MINUSMA among the most dangerous UN peacekeeping missions. European armies [can provide the equipment](#) (such as attack and transport helicopters, or surveillance drones) necessary for working in such a volatile environment more easily than other troop-contributing countries. Bearing in mind the important differences between the NATO and UN operations, European states can also bring in troops experienced in counterinsurgency operations. They can also contribute with operational and strategic innovations, specialized police forces and training and mentoring capabilities needed for the development of national security forces.

Various forms of the UN peacekeeping have been among the primary tools used by the international community for the stabilization of number of (not only) African conflicts in the last two decades. Wider engagement of European forces, police and civilian specialists would make them more effective. However, some lessons should be drawn from MINUSMA and participation of the European states in it. These concern primarily deeper cooperation with the DPKO and potentially also other departments responsible for the peacekeeping operations, better coordination among the European states themselves, potentially through the EU framework, and wider cooperation with non-European troops contributing countries.

Recommendations:

- ◆ **Small and middle European states** should build on their experience from MINUSMA and actively try to retain institutional memory with the UN peacekeeping operations. This could be done e.g. by strengthening their national staff at the UN or at the Permanent Representations with MINUSMA veterans or diplomats with experience from relevant negotiations and conducting institutional lessons-learned processes.
- ◆ **The European Union** should explore a wider role in facilitating coordination of its member states contributions to the UN peacekeeping missions, as already envisioned by [The 2012-2014 Action Plan](#), but also through other less formal means, e.g., enhancement of the EUMS coordinating role, which would preserve the bilateral basis of negotiations over specific contributions.
- ◆ **The UN DPKO** should seek ways how to learn from the innovative ASIFU format and how to potentially transfer it to other missions, while encouraging wider cooperation between various contributing countries in the area of informational and situational awareness.

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