The Political Strategy of the UN Peacekeeping Mission in the Central African Republic

by Aditi Gorur
In 2013, the Central African Republic (CAR) was engulfed in a crisis when Séléka rebels took over the capital of Bangui. The fighting quickly took on a religious character as widespread violence broke out between predominantly Christian and Muslim armed groups and communities affiliated with them. The UN Security Council authorized the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in CAR (MINUSCA) the following year, amid grave concerns of ethnic cleansing and genocide. The mission worked hard alongside other international partners to halt the violence and bring the parties to resolve their differences through a political process. In 2019, more than four years after MINUSCA began operating, all 14 major armed groups signed a peace agreement with the CAR Government.

This study traces MINUSCA’s political strategy as these developments unfolded—how it was developed, what factors shaped it, and how it changed over time. It draws on a desk review of reports of the Secretary-General, Security Council resolutions, Mission Concepts, and expert analysis. It also draws on interviews conducted with MINUSCA personnel in person in Bangui in July 2019 as well as interviews conducted with key informants remotely between May and July 2020.

The study begins with a brief background on the conflict in CAR and the events leading to the deployment of MINUSCA. It then analyses how the Security Council approached the development of MINUSCA’s political mandate, focusing on three key points in time: when the mission was first deployed to respond to the crisis in CAR in 2014, the stalling of the peace process and the development of a written political strategy in 2017, and the events that led to the signing of a peace agreement in 2019. These moments were selected as having prompted or marked significant change for the mission’s political strategy. The study then analyses how mission leaders in the field developed a political strategy for MINUSCA, looking at the same three moments. It analyses the types of objectives they sought to achieve, the processes they used to formulate their strategies, and how their strategies were supported by the UN Secretariat (including the Integrated Operational Teams or IOTs at the UN Department of Peace Operations that support missions from New York) and the Security Council. Finally, the study offers a brief summary of some key findings about political strategy that can be drawn from this examination of MINUSCA.
The roots of conflict in CAR are centuries-old. CAR was a hub of the slave trade industry in the 19th century. During French colonial rule from the late 19th century onward, the country was parcelled out to private companies rather than governed, labour was exploited and wealth extracted to an extreme degree and foreign diseases were introduced that ravaged communities.1 Even after CAR gained its independence in 1960, France continued to exert an anti-democratic influence in the country—for example, by supporting the 1965 coup of Jean-Bédel Bokassa, who went on to reign as “[o]ne of Africa’s most brutal dictators.”2

In the decades since its independence, CAR has experienced high levels of instability and insecurity. It has had persistent problems with political coups, mutinies by its armed forces, rebellions by armed groups and failed disarmament efforts, political marginalization of Muslims, pastoralists, women, and other groups, and intercommunal violence. It has also experienced severe poverty (currently ranking 188th out of 189 countries on the UN Development Programme [UNDP] Human Development Index)3 and gender inequality (currently ranking 159th out of 162 countries on the UNDP Gender Inequality Index).4 It was thus no surprise to the international community when the latest crisis developed in CAR in 2013 that led to the deployment of MINUSCA.

MINUSCA is the latest of several UN peace operations deployed to CAR. These include the UN Mission in the Central African Republic (MINURCA), a peacekeeping mission authorized in 1998 in response to instability triggered by conflict between the Central African armed forces and the civilian Government;5 the UN Peacebuilding Support Office in the Central African Republic (BONUCA), a special political mission that replaced MINURCA in 2000;6 the UN Mission in the Central African Republic and Chad (MINURCAT), a peacekeeping mission based in Chad and authorized in 2007 in response to violence against civilians, political instability and a humanitarian crisis in the Central African Republic and Chad;7 and the UN Integrated Peacebuilding Office in the Central African Republic (BINUCA), a special political mission authorized in 2010 to replace BONUCA in response to rising violence in the country.8

Despite the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Libreville in June 2008, and the subsequent inclusive political dialogue held in Bangui in December 2008, recurring clashes and political tension persisted in CAR. In March 2013, Séléka rebels took over the capital of Bangui and President François Bozizé fled to Cameroon. The rebels accused Bozizé of failing to honour an agreement to integrate them into the national armed forces. The Security Council issued a press statement expressing “their intention to monitor closely the situation and, if required, to consider further steps.”9

The African Union developed plans to transition its Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) Peace Consolidation Mission in the Central African Republic (MICOPAX) to a peacekeeping mission, which became known as the African-led International Support Mission in the Central African Republic (MISCA). In December 2013, the Security Council authorized MISCA to support the protection of civilians, stabilization, the restoration of State authority, and Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR).10 In the same resolution, the Council “[t]ook] note of the position of the African Union (AU) and ECCAS that MISCA may require eventual transformation into a United Nations peacekeeping operation”11 and welcomed planning for that possibility, and further authorized French forces (dubbed Operation Sangaris) to take “all necessary measures to support MISCA in the discharge of its mandate.”12
In April 2014, the Security Council authorized MINUSCA to take over from MISCA by September of that year. MINUSCA’s mandate included the protection of civilians, support to the political transition process, facilitation of humanitarian assistance, promotion of human rights, support for justice and the rule of law and support for DDR. The most unusual aspect of the mission’s mandate was the authorization of “urgent temporary measures” to maintain law and order and fight impunity. Member States added language during negotiations to emphasize that these measures were to be adopted on an exceptional basis, and China and Russia requested and received an official request from the CAR Government for the mission to be granted this authority.
This section analyses how MINUSCA’s political mandate was approached within the Security Council. It focuses on three key moments for the mission’s political efforts: the initial deployment of the mission in 2014, the stalling of the national process and the mission’s adoption of a written political strategy in 2017, and the political process that culminated in the signing of a peace agreement in 2019. The section traces the discussions within the Council over MINUSCA’s political mandate as these developments unfolded.

Firefighting (2014)

Security Council discussions on the response to the crisis in CAR were particularly driven by the interests of France and the United States. France had a long-standing interest in CAR as a former colony and has served as the pen-holder on MINUSCA’s mandate from the outset. The US had relatively little investment in CAR at the time, but quickly placed great emphasis on the moral imperative to prevent mass atrocities in CAR, in part due to the influence of Samantha Power, who was then serving as US Ambassador to the UN.\(^\text{16}\)

By early 2014, there was general agreement within the Security Council about the need for a UN peacekeeping mission to take over from MISCA, but disagreement about when and how that should happen.\(^\text{17}\) Security Council Report’s analysis in January 2014 suggested that “Russia, the US and the African Council members believe [MISCA] and the other international forces should be given time to fulfil their mandates and
restore security in the CAR, while close attention should be paid to ensuring the success of the transitional political process. On the other hand, France pushed for a UN peacekeeping mission to replace MISCA “to be able to address both the security threats and reforms and assistance needed in the political, institutional and humanitarian spheres.” France was keen to see a UN peacekeeping mission in place soon as it wanted to limit the duration of its own military deployment, particularly as it also had another military operation underway in Mali. It saw a multidimensional UN peacekeeping mission as more capable of maintaining the gains of the French Sangaris intervention than an AU mission.

In February 2014, the chair of the AU sent a letter to the UN Secretary-General suggesting that MISCA could be replaced by a UN peacekeeping missions after it achieved its initial stabilization goals, which it hoped to do within six to nine months. In March 2014, the Secretary-General issued a report offering recommendations on the transformation of MISCA into a UN peacekeeping mission. At this time, some Member States were concerned whether a UN peacekeeping mission was a robust enough measure to address the challenges in CAR, as well as about the budgetary implications of authorizing the mission. Nevertheless, the mission was authorized in April 2014.

The political context into which the mission was deployed was one characterized by extreme instability. In April 2013, in the wake of the Séléka coup, a National Transitional Council was appointed to oversee CAR’s governance until elections could be held. In the months before the mission deployed, ECCAS and France lost faith in the effectiveness of President Michel Djotodia and Prime Minister Nicolas Tiangaye, due to their inability to control the rising violence in the country, and pressured them into resigning in January 2014. Violence in the preceding months had also “further decimated the already scarce national capacities.” The National Transitional Council selected Catherine Samba-Panza, who was then serving as the mayor of Bangui, to replace Djotodia as President. Samba-Panza formed a new transitional Government, which “provoked dissatisfaction among ex-Séléka and anti-balaka leaders and led to a subsequent spike in violence in Bangui.” As the March 2014 report of the Secretary-General noted, CAR had by that point “experienced three internal conflicts in 10 years and its third Transitional Government in one year.”

However, the more pressing concern for the Council at the time was the high risk of mass atrocities in the country in the context of violence perpetrated on the basis of religious identity by the ex-Séléka, anti-balaka and civilians. The UN Secretary-General’s Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide said in January 2014 that there was “a high risk both of crimes against humanity and of genocide,” and told the Council again in March that “crimes against humanity are being committed and ... the risk of genocide remains high.” The report of the Secretary-General published in March 2014, just prior to the mission’s authorization, warned of “a serious protection crisis, with civilians being targeted by all armed groups and by civilians on the basis of their religious affiliation.” There also were serious concerns that the ex-Séléka could impose a “de facto partition” separating the country along religious majority lines. As a result, the mission’s initial focus was much more on managing the security situation and preventing mass atrocities than on politics. There was relatively little clarity on what the mission’s political approach should be when the Council authorized MINUSCA.

MINUSCA’s initial political mandate focused on supporting CAR’s transitional authorities to manage the transition and hold elections; supporting efforts to address the root causes of the conflict; supporting national- and local-level mediation and reconciliation processes and supporting the “rapid” extension of State authority. In practice, support to the transition through the facilitation of elections was the most urgent political objective from the Council’s perspective. The report of the Secretary-General issued in March 2014 noted the many serious obstacles to the holding of elections in CAR. It also cautioned that elections should not necessarily be held as soon as logistically possible: “Determining the appropriate timing for holding elections in the Central African Republic will not only be a matter of putting into place the necessary technical capacities and legal arrangements
and of providing a secure environment. It will also depend on establishing the right political environment, one in which elections will help to strengthen society and advance stability rather than be a source of conflict and social instability. Nevertheless, the Security Council had a strong interest in elections being organized soon, mainly because the Council saw the lack of legitimate governance in the country as a major conflict driver, and thus saw electing a legitimate government as an urgent necessity to control the violence and insecurity.

Adoption of Political Strategy (2017)

MINUSCA’s early efforts yielded significant political achievements. In May 2015, with support from MINUSCA, the transitional Government organized the Bangui Forum, an inclusive national political dialogue whose objective was to define a new social contract for the Central African people by exploring sustainable solutions to the conflict. In December 2015, presidential and legislative elections were held, with second round elections and run-offs held in February and March 2016. These elections were an impressive feat given the huge logistical and political challenges involved, as well as serious security challenges that had caused several delays. In April 2016, the Security Council authorized a technical rollover of the mission’s mandate, extending it by three months instead of the usual one year to give MINUSCA additional time to discuss its future role with the new Government, led by President Faustin-Archange Touadéra, who had assumed office the previous month.

The Bangui Forum, the political and DDR agreements that arose from it, and the elections constituted important political advancement, but progress afterward on the political front seemed to stall. Little progress was made on DDR, security sector reform (SSR), political representation and other priorities. Armed groups began to splinter; many armed group leaders had little control over their forces. Fighters who saw little prospect for the political process to yield good outcomes for them began to focus on seeking self-enrichment instead.

In its July 2016 resolution renewing MINUSCA’s mandate, the Security Council introduced language stating that “MINUSCA’s strategic objective is to support the creation of conditions conducive to the sustainable reduction of the presence of, and threat posed by, armed groups through a comprehensive approach and a proactive and robust posture.” In this same resolution, it identified four “immediate priority tasks,” none of which included support to political processes (though it did list “Support for the reconciliation and stabilization political processes, the extension of State authority and the preservation of territorial integrity” later as the first of the mission’s “core priority tasks”). These mandate decisions indicate that the Security Council continued to put a more urgent focus on the security situation in CAR and less immediate emphasis on the political aspects of the mission’s mandate.

Despite the Council’s focus and the mission’s efforts on security, by late 2016, many armed groups reneged from their ceasefire agreements and began engaging in violent competition over resource-rich areas, including lucrative areas for illegal taxation, mining, and cattle migration. This competition, combined with the departures of French Sangaris forces and US and Ugandan counter-Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) forces, led to a surge in violence (see Figures 1 and 2 in the next section). This violence continued despite the July 2017 signing of a roadmap by CAR authorities, the AU, ECCAS, and the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region in Libreville for the African Initiative for Peace and Reconciliation in the CAR (African Initiative). In August 2017, Under-Secretary-General (USG) for Humanitarian Affairs Stephen O’Brien said that there were “early warning signs of a genocide” in CAR, a statement which alarmed Council members and reinvigorated their emphasis on the protection of civilians.

The Council struggled to find solutions to this stalemate. In its November 2017 resolution renewing MINUSCA’s mandate, the Council increased MINUSCA’s troop ceiling by 900 troops, despite generally strong pressure from the US Government to cut the UN peacekeeping budget. Although the resolution welcomed the African Initiative, and called for coordination between MINUSCA and the African Initiative’s
Panel of Facilitators, it did not define any role for MINUSCA in the implementation of the African Initiative. The ongoing violence in CAR that was unlikely to be addressed by the African Initiative, combined with the mission’s lack of influence in the African Initiative, prompted the mission to find other ways to use its Good Offices. As the next section of this case study will explore, the mission responded by developing its first written strategy, based on a systematic analysis of sources of violence.

**Signing of APPR (2019)**

In 2018, as part of the Action for Peacekeeping initiative, the Secretary-General commissioned Juan Gabriel Valdés to conduct an independent strategic review of MINUSCA. The Valdés report recommended that the mission shift its approach from containment to transformation of the conflict environment. The report identified a strengthened African Initiative process as one of the key means of achieving this transformation. To that end, the Valdés report recommended (among other things) that MINUSCA should play a stronger role in the African Initiative and promote a more inclusive and comprehensive process. The Valdés report was well-received by the Council and its recommendations influenced the Council’s thinking on MINUSCA.

In its December 2018 resolution renewing MINUSCA’s mandate, the Security Council reaffirmed that “the African Initiative and its roadmap constitute the only framework for a comprehensive political solution in the CAR” and welcomed “the call for MINUSCA to play a greater political role in the African Initiative and the decision to include the [Special Representative to the Secretary General (SRSG)] as a full member of the Panel of Facilitators.”

Yet even as the Council took steps to support the African Initiative and elevate MINUSCA’s political influence within it, Russia began supporting a parallel process based in Khartoum. In August 2018, it organized a two-day meeting in Khartoum involving five of the 14 major armed groups—at the same time that the AU was organizing a meeting of the same 14 armed groups in Bouar. The Khartoum meeting attracted the top leadership of the most high-profile armed groups, though not from all 14 groups nor the Government, making it unclear which process was more likely to succeed. Russia’s motivation in promoting the Khartoum process appeared to be to demonstrate to the world its political influence in CAR by brokering its own peace process, rather than to achieve any specific political outcome.

Russia had significant weight in these talks since it had gained very significant influence over the previous year within CAR and with the Touadéra Government, as part of a broader Russian strategy to secure strong political influence in Africa and “turn the region into a strategic hub.” The Security Council had imposed an arms embargo on CAR since 2013, and in December 2017, Russia secured an exemption allowing it to supply “AK47s, sniper rifles, machineguns and grenade launchers” to the CAR armed forces—a measure long sought-after by the CAR Government and denied by France due to risks that the weapons would be used to harm civilians. Russia also supplied dozens of security contractors to “train local soldiers and secure mining projects.” Since then, Russia had developed a close relationship with the CAR Government. In May 2018, the Central African and Russian presidents met in person. Russian nationals took up positions in Bangui, providing security and political support to the Toudéra Government, including as one of the president’s national security advisors. In September 2018, the Russian national security advisor “explained the merits of the [Khartoum process] to some 20 CAR Members of Parliament, signalling that the president approved of Russia’s initiative.”

Russia pushed to have the Khartoum process recognized in MINUSCA’s 2018 mandate renewal and for the resolution to link the Khartoum process with the African Initiative, but the other Council members resisted. This resistance was because the other Council members (including the African members) saw the Khartoum process as weakening the African Initiative. The other Council members were concerned that the African Initiative was just beginning to make progress and that any parallel processes might erode it. These disagreements were thus more over form than the actual substance of the talks.
In November 2018, the Council authorized a one-month technical rollover of the MINUSCA mandate; although this delay was widely believed to have been caused by tensions over the Khartoum process, it was in fact done to give the US Executive Branch more time to consult with the Legislative Branch about new provisions related to MINUSCA's support for the redeployment of the Central African armed forces.\textsuperscript{57}

During this contentious month, tensions over the Khartoum process mounted. Russia and China abstained from the December 2018 resolution to extend MINUSCA’s mandate, in part over the failure to embrace the Khartoum process. Yet, momentum on the ground shifted toward Khartoum. Seeing this shift, the AU and regional powers decided to put their support behind the Khartoum process; it was agreed that they would officially incorporate the Khartoum process into the framework of the African Initiative.\textsuperscript{58} This helped to maintain the credibility of the AU and UN and to resolve the challenge that MINUSCA was explicitly authorized to support the African Initiative rather than the Khartoum process.\textsuperscript{59} The Russian initiative was thus successful at spurring political movement where the African Initiative had stalled, though ultimately the substance of the peace agreement that resulted was based on the AU-led process.

Although MINUSCA’s political role had been strengthened in the African Initiative through its inclusion in the Panel of Facilitators, it continued to have little influence or role in the Khartoum process. In January 2019, USG Jean-Pierre Lacroix and AU Commissioner for Peace and Security Smail Chergui visited Bangui and urged the parties to the conflict to stay committed to the Khartoum process and reach a peace agreement. Later that month, the parties convened in Khartoum for AU-led negotiations, and in February the Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation (APPR) was signed in Bangui by the CAR Government and 14 armed groups.

In its November 2019 resolution renewing MINUSCA’s mandate, the Security Council welcomed the agreement and explicitly authorized the mission to support its implementation of the APPR.\textsuperscript{60} The Council did not, however, make the APPR the central focus of the mission’s political efforts in this resolution—the section of the mandate dealing with the APPR tasked the mission with “Good Offices and support to the peace process, including the implementation of the Peace Agreement, elections, national reconciliation, social cohesion and transitional justice at national and local levels.”\textsuperscript{61} This broader approach was urged by the Secretariat, particularly the IOT, partly to avoid the impression that MINUSCA (rather than the signatory parties) would become responsible for the implementation of a peace agreement, and partly to avoid the impression that the issues covered by the APPR were the most important ones for the mission to support.\textsuperscript{62} The Secretariat saw this approach as contrasting with the Council’s approach toward the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali, whose mandate was much more centrally focused on the peace agreement.\textsuperscript{63}
Despite strong support from the Security Council and relative unity within the Council on the mission's political strategy, MINUSCA has faced significant challenges in supporting a political resolution to the conflict in CAR. It was deployed at a time when violence and the risk of atrocities was high and there was no clear political process underway, let alone a signed peace agreement to support. The mission was able to help organize the Bangui Forum, an inclusive national dialogue that led to a series of political agreements, but these agreements stalled. When a new peace process began, in the form of the African Initiative, MINUSCA had a limited role and influence in the process.

Despite these challenges, MINUSCA worked creatively to support political solutions and, since 2017, has defined its political role using a comprehensive approach based on a systematic analysis of the sources of violence. The signing of the APPR in 2019 injected new energy into political reform efforts and has created a more cohesive framework for the mission's national and local efforts. However, the process was much less consultative and inclusive than the Bangui Forum and some of the agreement's provisions are considered unrealistic. This section analyses how MINUSCA has defined its political strategy during its deployment, focusing on the same three key moments analysed in the previous section.

The analysis in this section is informed by trends in violence as recorded by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). The data is based on figures published in “news reports,
publications by civil society and human rights organizations, and security updates from local and international organizations.\textsuperscript{64} The ACLED methodology skews toward more conservative fatality estimates and real fatalities are likely higher than what is captured in the ACLED database. The ACLED data shows very high fatalities in 2013 and 2014 during the peak of the CAR crisis, with a sharp decline in 2015 when the Bangui Forum and elections were held. Targeted violence against civilians began increasing in the second half of 2016, as the political agreements resulting from the Bangui Forum stalled, intercommunal violence grew, and armed groups' motivations to use violence changed. Fatalities rose very sharply from 2016 to 2017 but fell successively in 2018 and 2019, by which time they had fallen to nearly the same low point as 2015. Reported violence against civilians appears to have remained low from mid-2019 through May 2020.

\textbf{Fig. 1: Civilian Fatalities from Direct Targeting by Month in CAR}

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\caption{Civilian Fatalities from Direct Targeting by Month in CAR}
\end{figure}

Data taken from ACLED. These figures include “all events in which civilians were the direct or only target of violence” recorded in the ACLED database (https://acleddata.com/curated-data-files).

\textbf{Firefighting (2014)}

The mission’s main focus in the months after its deployment was not to achieve any specific political objective, but to protect civilians and prevent mass atrocities in order to create the space for a political process to take shape.\textsuperscript{65} The message the mission was receiving from the Security Council was to focus on absorbing and deploying as many troops as possible to manage the violence to the best of its capabilities.\textsuperscript{66} It was considered premature for the mission to try to hold discussions about a peace process while violence was so active and atrocities were ongoing.

MINUSCA’s SRSG, General Babacar Gaye, headed BINUCA prior to MINUSCA’s authorization, and thus was deeply engaged in MINUSCA’s political strategy development and outreach from the start. When MINUSCA was first authorized, several personnel from UN Headquarters
were deployed to Bangui to serve in temporary positions as part of the mission’s start-up team.\textsuperscript{67} These personnel had been involved in analysis and planning before the mission had been authorized and also influenced the mission’s strategy.\textsuperscript{68} The mission thus had the benefit of a leader and personnel with expertise in Central African politics. Yet, with intense violence still ongoing, resources and attention were stretched thin in the mission’s early deployment. Although a Mission Concept was developed, there was no other document in the mission describing its political strategy.\textsuperscript{69}

As the violence started to decrease in the second half of 2014, the mission had more space for its political engagement, which coalesced around two related initiatives: a national dialogue and elections. First, the mission aimed support an inclusive national dialogue that would allow many different stakeholders to express their views, even though a peace process had not yet taken shape. This strategy was developed by SRSG Gaye in consultation with the International Contact Group and key stakeholders in CAR and the region. The mission anticipated a three-stage process in which there would be first a cessation of hostilities, then a series of public consultations, and then a forum for discussion.\textsuperscript{70}

In July 2014, an international mediation team brokered a meeting in Brazzaville with representatives of the transitional authorities, the ex-Séléka, the anti-balaka, and international stakeholders, where participants agreed on the need for a “forum on national reconciliation to be held in Bangui ... to forge a national-level consensus on key issues such as disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, security sector reform, including the reconstitution of the Central African armed forces, the rule of law, and political and economic governance.”\textsuperscript{71} The armed group participants also agreed to a cessation of hostilities.\textsuperscript{72}
In January 2015, CAR authorities organized popular consultations in 64 locations across CAR and within refugee and diaspora communities in the region. MINUSCA played a “vital role” in enabling these consultations by providing political, technical, logistical and security support. The Forum was held in May 2015. MINUSCA’s efforts in service of the Bangui Forum included “substantial political and logistical support,” broadcasting the discussions live across CAR through its radio station and serving in the follow-up committee established afterwards. The Forum resulted in the signing of the Republican Pact for Peace, National Reconciliation and Reconstruction, a political agreement addressing the themes of peace and security, governance, justice and reconciliation, and economic and social development. It also resulted in the signing of an agreement on DDR principles by nine of the 10 recognized armed groups. These documents created a framework for the mission’s political engagement on some of the most critical drivers of violence in CAR, even in the absence of a more comprehensive peace process.

Second, the mission aimed to facilitate the holding of presidential and legislative elections. MINUSCA chaired a One United Nations Elections Task Force and worked with the UN Development Programme to develop a “multi-disciplinary operational plan and concept of operations to support the Transitional Authorities on the electoral process.” MINUSCA’s logistical and technical support for elections preparations included supporting the establishment of National Electoral Authority offices, reinforcing these offices’ capacity, and supporting the establishment of a “national database of women for potential leadership roles.” On a more substantive level, MINUSCA worked to “promote a political and security environment conducive to the holding of the elections, including support for the development and dissemination of the code of good conduct, training for political party election monitors and information sessions for presidential candidates ... MINUSCA also held informal meetings with presidential and legislative candidates throughout the country ... to impress on them the importance of issue-based campaigns responding to the aspirations of Central Africans, including with regard to the implementation of the recommendations of the Bangui Forum on National Reconciliation.”

Throughout the process, there were serious concerns about whether the elections were being held too soon and whether the outcome would be seen as legitimate. In particular, the exclusion of refugees could have very significantly threatened prospects for inclusive governance and peace in CAR, because estimates suggested that 80 per cent of CAR’s Muslim population had been forced to flee the country by the end of 2014. In June 2015, the transitional Parliament tried to pass a law preventing refugees from voting in the upcoming presidential elections, which would have significantly reduced the Muslim share of the vote and seriously undermined the legitimacy of those elections, but this decision was overturned by the judiciary. In December 2015, CAR held a constitutional referendum, and between December 2015 and March 2016, it held presidential and legislative elections. MINUSCA undertook significant efforts to provide security for the elections. Although there were security challenges during the referendum, the elections were peaceful. Central African refugees voted in Cameroon, Chad and the Republic of Congo, but were not permitted to register to vote in the Democratic Republic of Congo by that country’s Government.

The Council had taken an extraordinary step in authorizing the urgent temporary measures mandate, in part because it saw impunity and the absence of rule of law as a critical driver of violence in CAR. In this sense, the Council saw the urgent temporary measures as constituting an important part of the mission’s political impact, especially in a context where there was no meaningful peace process underway prior to the mission’s deployment for it to support. However, the mission did not make as much use of the urgent temporary measures mandate in its first year of deployment as the Council may have expected. The mission first had to agree with the national authorities on processes for arresting, detaining and handing over suspected criminals to the State. By the beginning of April 2015, the mission reported that it had arrested 283 suspects and transferred them to
State custody, but noted that only 24 had been accused of serious crimes and observed that “overcrowding of the Bangui Central Prison and the severe lack of operating correction facilities outside of Bangui” had limited their efforts. The State’s very weak capacity to issue warrants, conduct investigations and try cases also limited MINUSCA’s ability to conduct arrests; despite the unusual mandate, there was little that MINUSCA could do on its own to create the rule of law in a way that would significantly alter the conflict dynamics. The urgent temporary measures may thus be seen as an area of divergence between the Council’s expectations and the mission’s delivery with respect to its political approach—though not one that caused serious concern within the Council, since elections remained the political priority at the Council.

Adoption of Political Strategy (2017)

The mission had prioritized support for elections to be held in its initial political efforts, with the belief that a peace agreement would be difficult to achieve with only a transitional administration in place. Yet immediately after the elections, the mission found it faced a new political challenge. The newly elected Government, which had received the blessing of the population, was not keen to make concessions to armed group leaders who had not received this legitimation, and armed groups were reluctant to adhere to their DDR commitments. A political stalemate emerged. Various regional actors initiated a range of political processes to try to break the stalemate, among which the African Initiative gained the backing of the UN and AU. But the African Initiative was moving slowly, and MINUSCA’s influence over the process was limited, in part because it was not among the actors included in its Panel of Facilitators (though it was mandated in 2017 to act “in partnership” and “in cooperation” with it). In September 2017, President Touadéra negotiated the appointment of several former armed group leaders into government positions—yet this concession had little impact on armed group fighters on the ground, many of whom were by this point driven more by economic motivations than political ones.

This period was overseen by a new SRSG. In August 2015, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon had requested Babacar Gaye’s resignation in response to public criticism that the mission had done too little to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse by UN peacekeepers. Gaye was replaced by SRSG Parfait Onanga-Anyanga, whose approach placed “nationally-led inclusive dialogue at its core.” The Mission Concept developed under Onanga-Anyanga identified three strategic priorities for the mission: security, protection, and human rights; sustainably reducing the threat of armed groups; and peacebuilding.

Since the mission had limited opportunity to engage at the national level via the African Initiative, much of its political focus was on achieving these strategic priorities through a wide range of political engagements with national and subnational actors. The mission placed a heavy focus on local-level mediation, reconciliation, and peacebuilding, including by supporting local peace committees to manage disputes within communities, or between communities and armed groups. It supported the deployment of State authorities (such as local administrators, magistrates and police) to different parts of the country. It supported livelihoods programmes to ensure that former combatants could support themselves without rejoining armed groups. It also intervened militarily to stop armed groups from attacking civilians or expanding their areas of control. But these various local responses were disjointed and reactive. There was not a strong link between the work of the mission’s civilian and uniformed components, and some critics raised concerns to the Secretariat that the mission was driven too much by military rather than political objectives. This contributed, for example, to challenges the mission faced in supporting the extension of State authority; many authorities deployed into areas affected by violence were unable to work effectively or even left their posts and returned to Bangui.

In late 2017, SRSG Onanga-Anyanga tasked recently appointed Deputy SRSG Kenny Gluck to initiate consultations on the development of a comprehensive mission political strategy. Based on initial consultations with the mission’s senior leadership, drafts developed by his office were shared with heads of sections and field offices during a short period of consultation.
The SRSG presented the final product in a senior leadership retreat, after which it was endorsed by the SRSG and distributed to the mission. Based on the political strategy, the mission leadership developed a strategic objectives matrix for each field office. This translated the political strategy into practical objectives for each field office, which were reviewed every month or two months, depending on developments on the ground. These reviews were undertaken by the two Deputy SRSGs, heads of field offices, and senior military, police, and civilian components from mission headquarters and the relevant field office, to determine their relevance and feasibility as well as the required resources.

The mission's new political strategy was based on the recognition that national political agreements had very limited ability to change patterns of violence outside Bangui, due to the proliferation of locally-driven conflicts, the heavy involvement of armed groups in economic predation, and the lack of effective command and control in most armed groups. This required the mission to develop a strategy which integrated support to the African Initiative and efforts to address these fragmented and diverse patterns of violence.

The strategy was founded on a perpetrator analysis: who was perpetrating violence in CAR, what was motivating them, and what was the strength of their chain of command. Based on this analysis, the mission developed approaches to influence each of these actors, broken down into four components in the political strategy: local dialogue initiatives, military or police actions, programmatic tools such as community violence reduction, and State-building support. As such, the political strategy was closely linked to the mission's protection of civilians (PoC) objectives. The strategy also included an analysis of the presence, capacity and inclusiveness of the State in different parts of the country, to inform analysis of the drivers of violence and decision-making about effective responses. This helped link the mission's efforts to support the extension of State authority more closely with its broader political objectives. Another notable aspect of the strategy is that it capitalized on the mission's comparative advantage—there was little movement possible through the African Initiative, but the mission did have a strong influence at the field level through its widespread presence there.

This multidimensional approach helped reduce violence in former hotspots like Bria and Bangassou. Fatalities, which had risen sharply from 2016 to 2017, declined significantly in 2018 (see Fig. 2 above); although it is not possible in the scope of this study to establish causality, it is likely that the mission's change in strategy contributed to this improvement. The State-building support component of the strategy presented serious challenges that made it difficult to maintain some of the gains the mission was making. Despite the efforts of MINUSCA, the European Union Training Mission and a host of bilateral actors to strengthen the Central African security sector, it remained too weak to maintain security in many areas where MINUSCA had intervened to reduce violence. Components of the strategy relying on MINUSCA's own military or police operations also proved challenging due to the mission's limited assets and resources distributed over a huge terrain.

The Secretariat strongly supported the 2017 strategy, though some were concerned that it had not been developed in consultation with them. The message the mission received from influential Council members (particularly from the embassies of France, Russia and the US in Bangui) in response to these initiatives was that they were reassured to see the mission applying a strategy rather than reacting to crises as they arose. However, Security Council members also repeatedly asked the mission how it was linking its local efforts to the African Initiative, and some in the mission perceived concern from New York that their efforts at the local level were seen as undermining the African Initiative. The mission found this expectation challenging, since there was so little movement happening in the African Initiative and AU and regional interlocutors were not necessarily capable of engaging with the local-level issues on which MINUSCA was working. The Council's concern over the disconnect between the mission's local-level work and the national-level process was ultimately resolved when the mission was asked to support the implementation of the APPR, which included local mechanisms in its framework.

One important driver of violence in CAR over which the mission had limited political influence was related to the question of Central African identity. Conflicts over who counted as Central
African (including anger on the part of Muslim Central Africans whose Central African identity and voice in Central African politics had been denied for decades) lay at the heart of the crisis that erupted in 2013. The Touadéra Government made gestures toward greater inclusiveness, including the appointment of some Muslims to the cabinet, inclusive rhetoric during the Bangui Forum and increased recruitment of Muslims into the Central African armed forces. But these efforts were very limited given the scope of the problem and, in some cases, misguided (for example, the Muslims appointed to the cabinet were all former armed group leaders instead of coming from diverse backgrounds). Minority groups were threatened by bigoted messages from political and religious leaders, faced hurdles in receiving national identity cards, and continued to experience serious social and political marginalization.

MINUSCA’s political strategy established inclusive governance as one of its objectives and made efforts to promote greater representation of Muslims in the security sector, accountability for security sector abuses against Muslims, the right of return for Muslim internally displaced persons, the rights of Muslim Central Africans to free movement and property rights and more. But the mission had limited impact on this issue for several reasons: by definition, the issue had to be owned by the national Government for meaningful progress to happen, there was strong resistance from some segments of the population and the mission was frequently accused of failing to remain impartial in the conflict, and the issue was a deeply-rooted one that was difficult to influence in the span of a few years.

Signing of APPR (2019)

The Security Council mandated MINUSCA specifically to support the African Initiative in its December 2018 resolution. This was in contrast to previous resolutions that had mandated MINUSCA more generally to use its Good Offices to support political processes and efforts to address the root causes of conflict. But there was little movement within the African Initiative framework, and the mission was unable to generate faster progress. As the Khartoum process gained momentum, the mission suddenly found itself supporting that process instead. The mission’s shift in focus to the APPR was driven largely from UN Headquarters, including through the visit of USG Lacroix and Commissioner Chergui to Bangui (for which the mission was given little notice). One MINUSCA representative described the mission as having been “sidelined” in the negotiations that led to the signing of the APPR; the SRSG was mindful of the AU’s leading role in the process and did not want to undermine that. Although an earlier draft of the peace agreement produced by the CAR Government had included the mission as a signatory, the document developed in Khartoum did not; this too reinforced the mission’s lack of influence over the contents of the agreement. At the same time, the APPR included several provisions that MINUSCA would inevitably be called upon to support since no other actor operating in CAR could support them on their own, such as the creation of mixed security units.

The APPR was the first peace agreement reached, out of the numerous political processes initiated by various actors, that secured the signatures of all 14 major armed groups in CAR and had the support of the CAR authorities (both the Executive and Legislative Branches) as well as the relevant regional powers. Yet there were also good reasons to be pessimistic about its implementation, including attacks by signatory armed groups in the weeks and months following the signing of the APPR and the fact that several prominent armed group leaders did not attend the signing ceremony. Its DDR provisions were largely based on the same DDR framework that emerged from the Bangui Forum and on which progress had been very slow.

The mission was at first concerned about the legal implications of supporting the implementation of the APPR when it was explicitly mandated to support the African Initiative (whose link to the Khartoum process was tenuous). It sought advice from the Secretariat, which in turn consulted with the Council. The Council was not keen to reopen negotiations on a new mandate that explicitly tasked the mission with support to the APPR, especially after such contentious negotiations a few months earlier. The French Mission to the UN informally communicated to the mission that it should take advantage of its Good Offices mandate to support the implementation of the APPR and that the Council would support
it in that endeavour. A particular issue arose with respect to the mission’s role in chairing local mechanisms to monitor the implementation of the APPR. The mission was told by the embassies of the US, Russia and France in CAR that they saw this role for the mission as important to the successful implementation of the agreement, but received advice from the Office of Legal Affairs in the Secretariat that the mission could not play this role since it was not tasked with support to the APPR in its mandate.

In addition to standard agreements to disarm and resolve disputes peaceably, the APPR also contained more concessions to armed groups than previous government-backed agreements. For example, the agreement created mixed security units combining elements from armed groups and CAR defence forces. It also included a commitment by President Touadéra to increase armed group representation in the CAR Government.

Shortly after the APPR was signed, in early 2019, the mission’s political strategy was revised and renamed a comprehensive mission strategy. Although the previous political strategy had covered a similarly mission-wide scope, some in the mission had been concerned that the name “political strategy” gave the impression that different parts of the mission would follow different strategies—an impression that SRSG Onanga-Anyanga had worked to combat. The development of the comprehensive mission strategy was, like the previous political strategy, led by the mission—though this time there was a secondary process of consultation and approval at UN Headquarters in New York after SRSG Mankeur Ndiaye approved the strategy. The IOT provided strategic guidance to try to promote buy-in across the mission and the humanitarian country team.

The comprehensive mission strategy was written to accommodate provisions of the APPR, that MINUSCA would be expected to help implement. The new strategy removed support for the African Initiative and added in support for the APPR, but its other pillars remained largely the same. The APPR offered the mission an opportunity to implement one of the key recommendations from the Valdés report, namely to ensure that its local efforts were connected with the national-level process and the comprehensive mission strategy reflected that connected approach.

However, the mission moved away from a focus on this document, in large part because of changes in leadership styles. SRSG Mankeur Ndiaye succeeded Parfait Onanga-Anyanga in February 2019 and Deputy SRSG Lizbeth Cullity succeeded Kenny Gluck in January 2020. The new leadership had different approaches and preferred to focus on the APPR itself as their point of departure, rather than a document detailing the mission’s political strategy.

One positive outcome of the APPR was an improved relationship between MINUSCA and the AU. The mission’s relationship with the AU had been at times tense during the negotiations under the African Initiative and the Khartoum process. The reasons for this included that the mission’s relationship with the AU Special Envoy had sometimes (especially in earlier days) been weak, that the mission did not have a strong or clearly defined political role to play in the processes, and that some in the mission found
the AU’s efforts to facilitate the processes slow at times. However, once the APPR was signed, the mission and the AU found a renewed spirit of cooperation on the implementation of the agreement. A new AU Special Envoy arrived in Bangui, with whom the mission enjoyed a strong relationship. Mission leadership conducted joint visits to different parts of the country together with the AU Special Envoy and the Representative of ECCAS to encourage implementation of and adherence to the APPR.

Another positive outcome of the APPR was that it gave MINUSCA an opportunity to formally link its local-level political dialogues with the national-level process. After the signing of the APPR, the CAR Government announced the creation of mechanisms to monitor and support the implementation of the agreement. These included prefectural implementation committees, “comprising local authorities, women’s associations, civil society and armed group representatives to serve as dispute resolution, conflict prevention and de-escalation mechanisms and to evaluate the implementation of the Agreement,” and technical security committees, comprising Central African security forces and armed group members, to monitor and support the implementation of the APPR’s temporary security arrangements. The mission supported the CAR Government to set up these mechanisms, drawing on and linking them to the more informal structures MINUSCA had helped create through its earlier efforts to reduce violence at the local level. MINUSCA was thus finally able to address the Council’s concerns about the mission’s local efforts being disconnected from the national level.

Some mission personnel were concerned that the Security Council, the CAR Government, the armed group signatories and the CAR population may hold unrealistic views of what the APPR could achieve, and could blame MINUSCA if its implementation does not go smoothly. Several provisions of the agreement, notably the creation of mixed security units, were considered very unrealistic. Council members have informally attempted to reassure the mission that they understand the complexity of the situation, including how rushed the process was and how challenging some provisions will be to implement.

Violence against civilians has remained relatively low in CAR since mid-2019 (see Fig. 1). While it is impossible to attribute these low figures to any particular cause in the scope of this study, the mission’s adoption of a political strategy based on analysing sources of violence and the APPR may both have contributed to the reduction in violence. However, to the extent that the APPR has contributed, its weaknesses, including the lack of inclusivity in its process and the unrealistic nature of some of its provisions, make this relative peace a fragile one. Since the signing of the APPR, MINUSCA has made the agreement’s implementation its priority; if the agreement falls apart, the mission will have to rethink its strategy once again.
MINUSCA’s political strategy was slow to emerge and the mission struggled for some time to articulate a common political vision for the mission and unite all its components behind that vision. Yet, from the development of the 2017 strategy onward, through the signing of the APPR, to the present, the mission’s efforts appear to have paid off with a significant reduction of violence. This section highlights some key findings from the examination of MINUSCA’s political strategy.

1 A political role prior to a peace agreement

There was very little clarity on what the mission would achieve politically and how at the time when it was deployed and the mission’s initial focus was undoubtedly to halt mass atrocities in the short term. There were also multiple actors engaged politically in CAR in sometimes competing processes. Nevertheless, a political process emerged gradually, first leading to the Bangui Forum and its related political agreements, and later yielding in the APPR a peace agreement that offered a clear framework for MINUSCA’s role in implementation.

2 Focusing on violent actors, not parties to a peace process

Perhaps more importantly, MINUSCA worked to find political solutions through its local and national-level efforts aimed at addressing the drivers of violence in CAR. These efforts both complemented the African Initiative and Khartoum process and also targeted actors and issues that were unlikely to be adequately addressed by those processes. In developing its 2017 strategy, MINUSCA focused on an analysis of the perpetrators and drivers of violence—understanding what motivated them, what
factors were likely to influence them, and which of the mission’s capabilities might persuade them to stop using violence. As time has passed and conflict dynamics have evolved in CAR, many of the perpetrators of violence have changed—armed groups have fragmented, motivations of armed group members have changed and, in some cases, become less political—command and control structures have deteriorated, and intercommunal violence has grown. The mission recognized that a process that focused on the elite leaders of 14 armed groups, while very important, was unlikely to influence these varied actors to stop using violence—and without a cessation of violence, many of the mission’s and UN Country Team’s other objectives could not be advanced.

3 Uniting mission components behind a common political objective

Like most large multidimensional missions, MINUSCA has sometimes struggled to ensure that its various components, sections and offices are working in concert. It has in particular been criticized for a disconnect between the activities and objectives of its military and civilian components. The 2017 strategy was a significant step in addressing these problems, since it identified an overarching political objective and analysed how different mission components and capacities could be used individually and in combination to achieve that objective in different areas. Importantly, since the strategy involved strong efforts at the local level, it placed heads of field offices in prominent roles to execute the strategy, ensuring that they were leading and making use of all the components under their command and giving them a clearer sense of how their activities fed into a common mission strategy. This approach to political strategy could be seen as a good practice to tackle the problem of disjointed activities that other missions face.

4 Using comparative advantages

MINUSCA was not given prominent roles in the African Initiative or the Khartoum process, but found many useful ways to achieve political progress by drawing on its comparative advantages—its military capacities (especially compared to the Central African security forces), its technical capacities (including to strengthen the capacities of civil society and government actors), and its considerable presence across the country. These advantages enabled some of the mission’s early successes (including the Bangui Forum and the 2015-16 elections), and also guided the mission toward a more comprehensive approach in 2017. Since the signing of the APPR, the mission has drawn on its presence across the country and its relationships with local actors to support the monitoring and implementation of the agreement.

5 Strong host State consent but a weak State

MINUSCA has been fortunate to enjoy strong consent and cooperation from the Touadéra Government, but its political strategy has been shaped and limited by the very weak capacity of the CAR State. The State’s weak governance and the absence of the rule of law were identified as one of the main causes of the 2013 crisis and this was the rationale behind the mission’s extraordinary urgent temporary measures mandate as well as the heavy emphasis on the extension of State authority. Yet, even when the mission was mandated to partially substitute for the State by conducting arrests, the State’s weak capacity to support the mission with the rest of the criminal justice process limited the mission’s ability to exercise that power. Similarly, even though the mission crafted a multidimensional strategy in 2017, the strategy still relied in part on the State’s ability to deploy authorities into conflict-affected areas, which has continued to prove challenging.

6 Addressing “root causes”? 

Although some peacekeeping missions’ mandates (including MINUSCA’s) reference language about addressing the “root causes” of conflict, it is not clear whether this is something that can or should be expected of peacekeeping missions. These references to addressing root causes also cause confusion when considered alongside Member State expectations that peacekeeping missions will leave within a few years, since addressing
root causes of conflict is often a multigenerational endeavour. In MINUSCA’s case, the mission made relatively little impact on issues of Central African national identity and citizenship. While these are issues that must be owned by the national Government, some have argued that MINUSCA could have done more to put pressure and support behind the Government to tackle them. It remains an open question whether it is appropriate for peacekeeping missions to address the “root causes” of conflict—some might argue that missions’ political strategies should aim to address only the immediate drivers of violence and not their deeper root causes. But if missions are expected to address root cases, then it is worth considering why the Council explicitly mandates missions to address some root causes (such as the weakness or absence of State authority) and not others (such as the exclusionary conception of Central African identity).

7 Leveraging UN-AU partnerships

The AU-UN relationship in CAR has at times been tense, due to conflicts over political roles and personality clashes. The efforts by Russia, Sudan and others to promote a peace process that competed with the African Initiative exacerbated those tensions. However, the political process also benefited from UN-AU partnerships, collaboration, and unity of message that enhanced the legitimacy of the processes. These collaborations include joint AU-UN visits to CAR, notably the January 2019 visit of USG Lacroix and Commissioner Chergui. They also include the strong partnership between the AU and MINUSCA on the implementation of the APPR since its signing.

8 Benefiting from a united Security Council

The Council has been relatively united and engaged on MINUSCA. Russia (and to a lesser extent China) split from the rest of the Council over the question of whether to embrace the Khartoum process, and the disagreement even led to two of the Permanent Five abstaining from a mandate renewal resolution. There have been other disagreements as well, including concerns from the US over adding tasks to the mission’s mandate or increasing the troop ceiling because of its desire to reduce costs, and concerns from Russia over the appointment of SRSG Ndiaye whom they worried was too close to France. Yet, none of these have been disputes over substance. On the contrary, the Council seems to have been largely comfortable taking a hands-off approach to political matters in CAR and letting MINUSCA guide its own political strategy. The Council’s unity on MINUSCA’s political strategy has helped the mission send strong messages to the CAR Government, regional governments and armed groups.
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Made possible by support from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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