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# *Mandate Interpretation and* **Multinational Collaboration** in the UN mission in Mali

Chiara Ruffa  
Professor  
Centre for International Studies (CERI)  
Sciences Po  
chiara.ruffa@sciencespo.fr

Sebastian Rietjens  
Professor & Director of the War Studies  
Research Centre  
Netherlands Defence Academy  
s.j.h.rietjens@fgga.leidenuniv.nl

**THIS RESEARCH BRIEF** explores how peacekeepers from different nationalities interact with one another and translate an ambiguous mandate into action. It draws on a case study of the UN mission in Mali (MINUSMA), focusing in particular on the reciprocal understanding between peacekeepers from the Global North and the Global South. It argues that there are three main ways in which peacekeepers make meaning of their mandate and interact with other peacekeepers:

The research brief argues that while bridge-building should be encouraged in UN peacekeeping, ‘othering’ behaviour is detrimental to peacekeeping performance because it leads to reinforced racialised hierarchies and cooperation challenges. More broadly, managing diversity well is a crucial success factor in peacekeeping operations, and this is more likely to succeed when Blue Helmets display a bridge-building mindset.

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## Policy recommendations

1. The UN should actively promote bridge-building between units from different national contexts in peacekeeping mission to promote cohesion and increase understanding of mission goals.
2. Higher levels of cultural diversity should be implemented to counter stereotypes that units from specific parts of the world are more or less “low tech” or only suited for foot patrols.
3. Specific pre-deployment training and socialization can also be used to counter such stereotypes.

# Introduction

IN THE PAST TWO decades, peace operations have become not only larger and more complex, but also more multinational.<sup>1</sup> Peacekeepers today come from a wealth of different countries. The way in which peacekeepers from different nationalities relate to one another within missions is a crucial factor in determining the success of mandate implementation and peacekeeping. In this brief, we examine unique data on the behaviour and the perceptions of military peacekeepers in the UN mission in Mali (MINUSMA) to document the processes through which peacekeepers from different nationalities interact with one another and translate an ambiguous mandate—one set by a United Nations Security Council Resolution—into action. We focus in particular on how peacekeepers from the Global North and the Global South understand each other.<sup>2</sup>

When deployed in a highly ambiguous context, peacekeepers do not simply obey orders. They also engage the surrounding context in a wider meaning-making process. In other words, they interpret the mandate and develop meaning-making strategies that start at the individual level and then spread among contingents and guide how they collectively interpret their mandates. Previous experiences matter, as do the cultural contexts of individual peacekeepers. Yet, irrespective of the peacekeepers' nationalities, previous experiences, and culture, we describe the process in which mandates are interpreted based on meaning-making emerging from the experience in the field to become widespread and well-established within the contingent itself. Understanding how these dynamics unfold is crucial for effective mandate implementation. This includes matters such as civilian protection, the establishment of a presence in certain areas, and efforts to address potential gaps among peacekeeping contingents, thus enhancing their successful cooperation. Becoming aware of these dynamics could significantly improve multilateral peacekeeping missions and help dismantle racialised hierarchies.

We focus on the United Nations Mission in Mali, MINUSMA, a multidimensional mission tasked with a

Protection of Civilian (PoC) mandate, that ended on December 31 2023. MINUSMA represented the frontier in terms of what peacekeeping operations entailed, as it was one of the most ambitious and most diverse ongoing peacekeeping missions to date, with 56 troop-contributing countries. MINUSMA was the only peacekeeping mission with an intelligence specialisation, but apart from that, MINUSMA was representative of other large UN peacekeeping missions today, such as the UN missions in the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Beyond those larger missions, our findings also hold relevance for other smaller missions, given that most UN peacekeeping missions are highly diverse.<sup>3</sup>

While African countries to date have deployed the bulk of troops, MINUSMA also symbolised “Europe’s return to peacekeeping”.<sup>4</sup> Within the sectors studied in this research brief (Sector West and Sector East), a plethora of Blue Helmets deployed in a genuine multilateral environment. In Sector West, Blue Helmet infantry troops from Burkina Faso, Ghana, Bangladesh, and Liberia carried out foot patrols on the ground, while highly specialised intelligence units from Sweden conducted intelligence work. In Sector East, Blue Helmet infantry troops from Niger, Bangladesh, and Senegal carried out foot patrols on the ground while units from the Netherlands carried out intelligence work. Focusing on these two sectors, this research brief sheds light on how peacekeepers from the Global North and peacekeepers from the aforementioned countries in the Global South interact with one another.

# Setting the scene

**THE INTELLIGENCE** focus of the mission combined with the high levels of diversity led to frictions within MINUSMA. African forces contributed most troops on the ground, conducted patrols and sought to maintain security, and deployed permanently in the dangerous areas of the mission, such as in Kidal.<sup>5</sup> Many of these troops spoke several of the local languages, were highly aware of the context in which they were operating, but hardly ever used advanced information systems and lacked sophisticated technological systems to support their operations.

Meanwhile, European countries contributed key enabling forces such as ASIFU (All-Sources Information Fusion Unit), including ISR (Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance) units, as well as Special Forces and Apache helicopters whose primary task was to contribute to the intelligence generation process. These units possessed sophisticated technological systems and deployed intelligence professionals that were trained according to NATO regulations. Despite this, however, many of these European soldiers lacked awareness of the complexity of the conflict, the history of Mali, and ethnic sensitivities. They also rarely had mastered French or Arabic, let alone the local Malian languages that were spoken.

In terms of organisational structure, ASIFU as well as the Special Forces and the helicopters were positioned as separate organisational units under direct

hierarchical control of the Force Commander, rather than being integrated within the traditional UN intelligence structure. Several European countries favoured a strict separation of their capabilities from the other UN contributors' capabilities, allegedly to strengthen information security and counterintelligence. From a technological perspective, ICT systems were often not interoperable due to different standards, a lack of adequate security measures on UN systems, and a UN bureaucracy that hampered smooth integration of high-tech platforms.

In addition, from a procedural perspective, European intelligence capabilities did not align with their African counterparts. The intelligence procedures of European countries were largely based on NATO operations in Afghanistan and Iraq and were often strict and prescribed in handbooks and doctrines. On the contrary, African units were largely unfamiliar with Western-style intelligence gathering. Rather than processing the incoming information within intelligence branches, many African troop-contributing countries considered intelligence to be a matter for commanding officers only. In sum, until December 2017, the dedicated intelligence units (i.e., ASIFU, including its two ISR units but also the Special Forces and the helicopter unit) had great difficulty cooperating with the African peacekeepers dealing with territorial control in the same areas.

# Meaning-making strategies

**THE GREY ZONE BETWEEN** the mandate and the command structure left peacekeepers with room to manoeuvre, which they took advantage of in distinct ways. Meaning-making is an iterative process in which the soldier combines tactical experience with their understanding of the official mandated tasks. Drawing on around 120 interviews that we conducted with peacekeepers deployed in several locations across Mali during 2014–2017, we identified three meaning-making strategies: Voltaire's garden, build-

ing bridges, and othering. In the following sections we provide brief illustrations of these meaning-making strategies.

## ***Voltaire's garden***

When using this meaning-making strategy, peacekeepers were aware of the ambiguity and inconsistencies in the mission but focused on the narrow tasks and goals of their own contingent or unit. We therefore labelled this strategy 'Voltaire's garden', as



it resembled Candide's passion in tending to his own garden. This strategy led to difficulties in adaptation and eventually failure to implement certain orders.

The organisational differentiation between ASIFU and the main force triggered this interpretation. From 2014 to 2017, MINUSMA's Force Commander and his sector chiefs realised that they lacked adequate current intelligence on crucial safety and security issues, such as threats along MINUSMA's main supply routes and the whereabouts of armed groups. According to many of the respondents, this was largely due to the ineffectiveness of the regular UN intelligence capabilities. To improve the situation, the Force Commander asked ASIFU to fill this gap, although ASIFU's original task was to provide comprehensive intelligence in the mid- and long-term (typically three to six months). Despite the Force Commander's request, ASIFU decided to maintain its original focus. ASIFU explained it by saying that the Dutch Defence staff in The Hague, who was largely responsible for the organisational design in which ASIFU was detached from the main force, did not want to change ASIFU's focus. This led ASIFU to continue with their original work, displaying a 'Voltaire's garden' interpretation of the mandate. Such interpretation entailed a series of reflections on how, as deployed soldiers, they had to stick to a stricter interpretation of their mission and goals because of the earlier lessons they had learned from Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the military force needed a unit with a predictive capability that was able to adopt a comprehensive view instead of focusing on the enemy alone.<sup>7</sup> In addition, many ASIFU officers as well as the Dutch Defence Staff foresaw many hurdles if the highly innovative intelligence capacity would have to be integrated with the main force's capacities. Even though they perceived the situation to be absurd, many of the commanding officers continued following orders. This meaning-making strategy had detrimental consequences. Because ASIFU and the Dutch and Swedish ISR units continued to interpret their mandate very strictly, frictions emerged with the African troops and with MINUSMA headquarters, who found that this approach undermined successful mandate implementation. For instance, the predictive 'quarterly outlook' analyses produced by ASIFU were heavily criticised across all mission levels and

by the Force Commander. Despite their high-tech equipment and educated personnel, ASIFU faced great difficulties in adequately addressing the different challenges inherent to the Malian context. In an effort to unravel the operational environment, one respondent remarked how MINUSMA headquarters, with the best of intentions, had created an Intelligence Collection Plan that was very difficult to work with. This was mainly because the plan was broad and comprehensive. This lack of focus compounded the collection of intelligence information as well as data processing and analysis. While many ASIFU analysts reportedly were aware the shortcomings of their intelligence products, they continued producing them. Eventually, ASIFU was integrated within MINUSMA's regular intelligence units in December 2017.

Overall, Voltaire's garden interpretations lead to strict interpretation of the mandate but do not allow for adaptation, thereby indirectly undermining the successful implementation of the mandate.

### ***Building bridges***

The second meaning-making strategy is the 'building bridges' strategy. This entails handling the situation mainly through informal interaction with other contingents, sometimes even going against the mandate. We observed such bridge-building behaviour across all command structure levels. First, this strategy guided ASIFU troops in their wish to assist African troops and provide under-the-table short-term intelligence. However, African troops did not perceive it as assistance but instead as an often-unwarranted intrusion. Among several others, a Swedish officer was aware of the unclear command structure. The officer stated in an interview that he was aware of the situation: "we were conducting intelligence operations [at a location] where the commander was from Burkina Faso and had absolutely no authority over us".<sup>8</sup> Both the Burkinabé and Swedish commander told us that there was space for discussion and interaction and that they did all they could to build bridges.<sup>9</sup> In addition, a Swedish and a Chadian commander interviewed for the study stressed their perception that they were all on the same UN team.<sup>10</sup>

Another Swedish officer displayed a bridge-building approach in inviting the Force Commander to his

base in Timbuktu, thus seeking to create trust and enable information exchanges. This behaviour—not foreseen by any code or mandate—enhanced mandate implementation. Another officer from the Netherlands reflected differently on what he understood as the issue of information sharing with non-Western contingents: he thought that there were deep cultural differences between peacekeepers from the Global North and from the Global South, but also how one had to overcome these differences to achieve the core goals of the mission. This Blue Helmet from the Global North found it crucial to build relationships to progress in the mission.

In sum, the bridge-building strategy was deployed widely among MINUSMA units. Soldiers dealt with ambiguity by activating several informal connections with other troops or units. This strategy led to a more creative interpretation of the mandate and helped soldiers identify pragmatic solutions to problems.

### ***Othering***

The third and final meaning-making strategy, ‘othering’, entails reinforcing differences and reproducing racialised hierarchies, and, in some cases, expresses itself as outright racism. It entails distancing a group—usually a national contingent—from the rest of the mission and reinforcing stereotypes, making it more difficult to overcome incoherence. Othering is probably practiced by everyone, but our data focuses predominantly on peacekeepers from the North. Many of our respondents from the Global North referred to the importance of trust in the intelligence domain. Western peacekeepers often did not fully trust their African counterparts and therefore did not share all available intelligence. Several interviews with Western officers even distinguished between “skiing nations” from Western European countries and “barefoot soldiers”, from poorly equipped African contingents. What we observed goes beyond reinforcing differences and is really about racism.

Similarly, we found widespread prejudices pertaining to a perceived inability of African peacekeepers to handle intelligence information. A Western respondent of the Force Commander’s intelligence staff generalised the “African approach” as being highly inefficient, convoluted, and not based on the intel-

ligence methods adopted by the peacekeepers from the Global North. Another officer argued that Western and African nations have different perceptions of risk, which resulted in different threat assessments. Sometimes othering turned into paternalism; for example, when Western peacekeepers prescribed how their African counterparts had to write intelligence reports and process information.

The othering approach was reinforced by the use of different information systems. Most respondents ironically labelled MINUSMA’s general information system as “UN classified,” meaning that the system was unsafe and had no classification at all. To mitigate these challenges, several European countries employed a Dutch information system called TITAN. While this system was able to adequately deal with sensitive data, TITAN information could not be shared with other mission units but only with persons from NATO countries with the appropriate level of clearance.

Apart from the divide between Western and African countries, we also observed the mechanism of othering occurring between units of different Western countries. ASIFU, a multinational unit that was composed of soldiers from approximately ten European countries, illustrates this well. While the Dutch ISR Company shared its single source intelligence reports to its direct higher command—ASIFU HQ—its Swedish counterpart refused to do it. The Swedes perceived this as a national caveat and the Dutch commander of ASIFU HQ was simply not able to enforce this upon his Swedish subordinate commander of the ISR Taskforce. As a result, ASIFU HQ only received the processed reports from the Swedes and could not collate the raw data in ASIFU’s database.

# Policy recommendations

**OUR ANALYSIS PROVIDES** two main take-aways for policymakers. First, mission composition matters; i.e., how and within which functions peacekeeping troops are deployed is important. In this specific case, high-quality European units were deployed in intelligence positions but ultimately did not have many ‘boots on the ground’. The risk of this deployment pattern is that rather than turning diversity into a success factor, separate groups are created that ultimately hamper mission performance. Second, peacekeeping units deployed ‘make do’ and develop their own specific ways of addressing specific issues, using meaning-making strategies termed in this Research Brief as ‘building bridges’, ‘othering’, and ‘Voltaire’s garden’. Even though military peacekeepers are part of hierarchical military organisations, they interpret their mandates in distinct ways.

Our findings matter because these meaning-making strategies have an impact on whether UN peacekeeping missions are successful. The UN should minimise the use of the Voltaire’s garden strategy by training peacekeepers to be more adaptive and socially flexible, in addition to increasing their understanding of

the overall mission, goals, and context. More importantly, the UN should also counter othering strategies and facilitate bridge-building. This could for example be done through structural changes aimed at dismantling racialised hierarchies and building trust. For instance, the UN could ensure higher levels of cultural diversity in each Area of Responsibility and develop specific pre-deployment training and socialisation. Of equal importance is to cross-cut cleavages—for instance by dismantling the idea that Global South peacekeepers are low-tech—to undermine racialised hierarchies. This would be one way of avoiding meaning-making patterns in which ‘specialised’ is associated with Global North Blue Helmets while ‘foot patrol’ is associated with Blue Helmets from the Global South. A better understanding of multilateralism on the ground could improve the ability of peacekeepers to implement their mandate, keep the peace, and protect civilians.

Peacekeepers’ interpretation of the mandate	Definition	Observable implications for collaboration with other peacekeeping troops deployed	Expected influence on mandate implementation
Voltaire’s garden	Strict focus on tasks and terms of mission but with some awareness that there is ambiguity	Peacekeepers focus strictly on the terms of the mission but there is awareness that it is a reaction to ambiguity	Lack of adaptation Narrow mandate interpretation
Building bridges	Trying to deal with ambiguity by solving problems through informal interaction with other contingents, by valuing differences	Peacekeepers go out to interact with other countries’ or units’ peacekeepers because they consider it important even if it is not part of the mandate	Enhanced cooperation Perhaps bypassing command and control
Othering	Coping with ambiguity by blaming others and by reinforcing existing differences	Peacekeepers avoid interacting with other countries’ or units’ peacekeepers; They talk badly about them and employ stereotypes	Lack of coordinated effort among troops Lower mandate implementation

**Table 1:** Summary of the three meaning-making mechanisms and their implications.

# Endnotes

This brief draws heavily on this scholarly article:

Chiara Ruffa and Sebastiaan Rietjens, "Meaning Making in Peacekeeping Missions: Mandate Interpretation and Multinational Collaboration in the UN Mission in Mali," *European Journal of International Relations* 29, no. 1 (2023): 53–78, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661221104757>.

- <sup>1</sup> Vincenzo Bove, Chiara Ruffa, and Andrea Ruggeri, *Composing Peace: Mission Composition in UN Peacekeeping*, 1e ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).
- <sup>2</sup> We are aware that 'Global South' and 'Global North' are not unproblematic terms. We use Global South as shorthand for the regions of Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania. We use Global North as shorthand for North America and Europe.
- <sup>3</sup> Bove, Ruffa, and Ruggeri, *Composing Peace*, 1.
- <sup>4</sup> Joachim A. Koops and Giulia Tercovich, "A European Return to United Nations Peacekeeping? Opportunities, Challenges and Ways Ahead," *International Peacekeeping* 23, no. 5 (2016): 597–609, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2016.1236430>.
- <sup>5</sup> Peter Albrecht, Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde, and Rikke Haugegaard, "African Peacekeepers in Mali" (Danish Institute for International Studies: Copenhagen, DK, 2017).
- <sup>6</sup> Michael T. Flynn, Matt Pottinger, and Paul D. Batchelor, "Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan" (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2010).
- <sup>7</sup> Sebastiaan Rietjens and Chiara Ruffa, "Understanding Coherence in UN Peacekeeping: A Conceptual Framework," *International Peacekeeping* 26, no. 4 (August 8, 2019): 383–407, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2019.1596742>.
- <sup>8</sup> Authors' interview.
- <sup>9</sup> Authors' interview.
- <sup>10</sup> Authors' interview.

## Author biography

**Chiara Ruffa** is a full professor in political science (specializing in International Relations) at the Centre for International Studies (CERI) at Sciences Po. Her research is about multilateralism on the ground, peacekeeping operations, norms, cultures and civil-military relations. She has also written about methods, in particular about case studies, reflexivity and what causality means in qualitative research. Her work has been published in a number of international journals. She is the author of *Military Cultures in Peace and Stability Operations*, published with the University of Pennsylvania Press in 2018 and of *Composing Peace and Mission Composition in UN Peacekeeping* with Vincenzo Bove and Andrea Ruggeri, Oxford University Press, April 2019. She is an editorial board member of *Security Studies* and *Armed Forces and Society*.

**Sebastiaan Rietjens** is a full professor of Intelligence & Security as well the director of the War Studies Research Centre at the Netherlands Defence Academy. He also holds a special chair of Intelligence in War and Conflict at Leiden University. Bas has done extensive fieldwork in military exercises and operations (Afghanistan (ISAF)), Mali (MINUSMA), Poland and the Baltic States (NATO), Greece (FRONTEX)) and has published accordingly in international books and journals. His main research focus is on intelligence during military operations, peacekeeping intelligence, warning for hybrid threats and future developments that confront intelligence organizations. Bas is a frequent speaker at international conferences and research as well as military institutes and a member of the editorial boards of *Armed Forces and Society* and the *International Journal of Intelligence & Counterintelligence*.

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