Malian soldiers fight against Islamist rebels during clashes that erupted in the city of Gao on 21 February 2013. An apparent car bomb exploded near a camp housing French troops as Malian and foreign forces struggled to secure Mali's volatile north. (Photo by Frederic LaFargue, Agence France-Presse)

Information Sharing and the Effectiveness of Peacekeeping Operations in Mali

Christopher Sims, PhD

Information shapes the conduct of civil conflict. Its source, composition, curation, sharing, and use dictate comprehension of the operational environment and inform all levels of military planning and execution. How we understand and act upon the economic, political, and social contexts of our environment are all affected by the information available to us. Factors that enable or impair this process therefore exercise significant influence over the management of violence and the success or failure of security activity.

The challenges of information sharing were particularly pronounced for the international community's Mali intervention after the 2012 rebellion, during which armed separatists and Islamist groups ejected government forces in the north of the country. A military coup followed. French-led military action beginning in early 2013 prevented further encroachment southward by antigovernment forces and a United Nations (UN) stabilization mission was inserted into this febrile and fragile security environment later in the year. After a decade-long presence, a deteriorating security situation, and further coups in 2020 and 2021, the French military force left amid deepening government mistrust of its activities and intentions, and the UN mission ceased operations and withdrew its personnel in 2023 after the Malian authorities requested its departure.

Such a troubling trajectory invites scrutiny. This article addresses some of those international security assistance efforts by examining the issue of information sharing in and among organizations with a focus on the UN mission. Understanding why the outcome for a well-resourced mission was so poor requires assembling perspectives from internal stakeholders; semistructured interviews conducted with previously deployed American and European personnel give insights into the challenging character of the deployment, with implications for future stabilization operations. This article first examines the internal information-sharing challenges of the UN mission, then places the deployment within the context of the ecosystem of international actors present in Mali, and concludes with policy implications arising from the research.

MINUSMA's Information Maze

Central among the constellation of organizations operating in the country after the 2012 rebellion was the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). It was created in 2013 to stabilize and support the reestablishment of state authority and the implementation of a political roadmap as well as provisioning for broad security sector assistance, protection of civilians, and support for humanitarian action. Possessing both force (military and police) and civilian pillars in the mission, crosscutting mandate priorities required coordination between military and other mission components, with the constant challenge to balance force and diplomacy.[1]

Stabilization for MINUSMA was an umbrella term for a raft of efforts plagued by strategic incoherence. Political scientist Bruno Charbonneau observed that while stabilization was at the heart of the mission in Mali, the mandate "suggests rather than defines" what it means in practice; the broad interpretation gave rise to the widespread notion of Mali as a "special mission" distinct from straightforward challenges and had arisen in response to a "complex" situation.[2] When the language that frames the operational environment is equivocal, as was the case in Mali, it complicates information sharing because there is no common understanding, no unified goal to harmonize collaboration and coordination. This lack of consensus fostered mistrust across MINUSMA both internal to the organization and with international stabilization partners.

A stabilization advisor described how this uncertainty handicapped efforts, because "mandates are really important in determining how people think, and what they think they can do."[3] A mandate encumbers operations with the freight of strategic aspiration and can create a Christmas tree effect in which numerous legislative add-ons, many inevitably only tangentially related to the original purpose, metaphorically resemble the decorations of a Christmas tree.[4] As the various military forces inserted into the country, "the presence of multiple parallel forces with various mandates, means, and objectives and without a clear political process or common strategic goal to guide them has at times created a 'security traffic jam.'"[5]

Christopher Sims, PhD, is a visiting research fellow at the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the United States National Defense University and holds a fellowship with the department of War Studies at King's College London.

An integrated team serving with the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) investigates armed attacks during a visit to the Mopti region of Mali on 21 and 22 February 2019. Preliminary information indicated that at least eighteen people were killed by shooting and burning, a large number of houses and granaries were deliberately burned down, and some animals were stolen or killed. The team, composed of human rights officers and a forensic team of the United Nations Police, visited the settlements of Koulogon Peulh, Minima Maoude (a village that was entirely burned down), and Libe Peulh, escorted by peacekeepers from the MINUSMA Bangladeshi contingent. (Photo by Marco Dormino, MINUSMA)

Within MINUSMA, the effect was pronounced. The lack of civilian direction in the mission led military forces to conduct their own operations according to their own identified priorities. This created a coherence issue concerning the management of MINUSMA. The ineffective force-mission synthesis resulted in a series of tactical, tangible military events with no overarching coherent strategy to solve local problems that were presented to operators on the ground.[6] With no observable progress, popular Malian frustration with the host government and the international organizations that supported it worsened over time.[7] International intentions could not be communicated to the country effectively because of the conflicting mandates that personnel were operating under.

There was pervasive mistrust between mission and force personnel in MINUSMA. In part, this was cultural. Military agencies deploy with command-and-control structures and hierarchies that may not tessellate well with civilian organizations. There was also a perceived reluctance of civilian components such as political affairs and stabilization affairs within MINUSMA to cooperate closely with force components. While the source of the reluctance was unclear, it may have been a result of normal bureaucratic stovepiping of efforts; the result was the creation of an us-versus-them mentality between force and mission.[8] In part, it was structural. In UN integrated missions, a civilian leads the mission with two deputies; one is a political leader and the other manages work related to project implementation. The military force commander and the chief of police are separate and lead their pillars. Information sharing and communication were constrained by these separations.

Square Pegs for Round Holes

Geography and culture complicated analysis. Northern Mali was a tapestry of nuanced security

dynamics where localized insurgency was interwoven with transnational extremist organizations and economic and social drivers of violence overlapped. With such complexity, erroneous analyses could distort and disrupt effective planning. Alliances in the north were largely based on local dynamics such as family and clan ties and common histories; yet, within the forward UN mission bases in the country, there was a paucity of understanding of these relationships.

Analysis was stymied by the labeling of armed groups that placed them in "black boxes" that were not dynamic enough to understand behaviors and events. The focus on "terrorist armed groups" reinforced a way of thinking in the military that saw MINUSMA, first and foremost, as primarily a military operation bordering on a counterterrorism operation. Consequentially, the analytical community was "constantly surprised by developments" and "prisoners of our ideas."[9]

The spectrum of the intelligence process afforded widespread opportunity for misinterpretation between and inside organizations. The complexity of Malian security dynamics is explicit in the 2019 UN peacekeeping intelligence policy that codified an intelligence framework for UN missions.[10] The policy identified the requirement for a "peacekeeping-intelligence cycle, as distinct from other information and reporting" and its activities

> will be fully autonomous from and independent in all aspects of any national intelligence system or other operations and will maintain their exclusively international character. Missions may liaise with non-mission entities for the purposes of receiving intelligence and may share specific peacekeeping-intelligence with non-mission entities.[11]

Instructive in existing deficiencies, the policy identifies the need for a process-driven approach in which intelligence would be generated from leadership requirements.[12]

Efficient sharing within MINUSMA was also handicapped by its multinational character. A newly created force intelligence unit, the All Source Intelligence Fusion Unit (ASIFU), employed a Dutch system. There was no interoperability between this system and the UN's standard Situational Awareness Geospatial Enterprise database.[13] In addition, when the Dutch contingent departed, the incoming German personnel had not been trained on the Dutch system, and it was not in official use by the German armed forces. The result was that in the middle of the Dutch drawdown, a huge wealth of information was sitting in this database, and the incoming rotations could not add on this. It was kept in use as it was, but the incoming collation officers in Bamako were unable to fill it.[14] The result exacerbated the sense of mistrust between the civilian and force sides of the UN mission as well as the technical inability to share information.

Information management was deleteriously impacted by a practical disconnect between intelligence centers in the UN mission. A Joint Mission Analysis Centre placed at the headquarters level provided strategic intelligence to the mission whilst the ASIFU collected, analyzed, and disseminated operational and tactical level information as part of the military component and was later integrated into the force commander's intelligence staff.[15] What these multiple systems meant in practice however was competition rather than collaboration and synthesis. As Sebastiaan Rietjens and Erik de Waard noted of that arrangement, data and analyses are not widely shared, and there was overlap and territorial encroachment between intelligence units.[16]

Much of the information focus within the civilian component of the mission was on high-level political processes, whereas the "actual difference can be made out on the ground in the sectors."[17] Even for the force focused on operational- and tactical-level information, in practice, it often defaulted to tactical-level collection and analysis because of the reality of the mission-protection paradox; forces were just trying to prevent the next attack on the mission. While the civilian component gathered strategic-level information, the necessity for daily tactical analysis generated and perpetuated a perception from the force side that civilian pillar intelligence was too focused on "ethereal concepts," such as trying to get the government to do its job when it could not, and failing to consider the most important elements of mission intelligence.[18] The freight of aspirational objectives within the mandate weighed heavily on the focus of the Joint Mission Analysis Centre. The contrasts in focus between force and mission also contributed to tensions between the pillars, and while there was an intention that force intelligence would knit with strategic mission intelligence, the gap between the two served to exacerbate professional tensions.

The focus on ethereal concepts was compounded by inadequate granularity of information. Seen from the strategic level of the mission, information materials provided to the leadership were "on too basic a level, and were therefore of no use" to military commanders.[19] In general, the analytical community had "too shallow an understanding of the

high turnover was that leadership would default to focus on personnel issues and therefore lose sight of strategic objectives. The issue is not unique to security assistance in Mali and continues to disrupt the effectiveness of deployments.[22]

Civilian rapport building with military personnel within MINUSMA was also inhibited by the short

> " The often-contrasting personalities and the transient, fragile nature of the knowledge generated in the mission was like building sandcastles; it was time-consuming, unstable, and needed to be constructed anew after each incoming tide of personnel. "

conflict" in Mali.[20] The absence of mission coherence also impeded relevant, actionable information from making its way to force command; "it was the wrong focus," and the providers of intelligence "didn't understand" what the information would be needed for, in "terms of decision-making, so the directive part at the beginning was absolutely crucial, to get it right."[21] Getting it right was a complex undertaking, inhibited by the geography of the country, organizational resources, and cultural obstacles.

Personalities also mattered. Communication style, receptivity, rapport, and perspective all influenced communication dynamics. It came down to human relationships over and again. Those relationships ebbed and flowed. There was difficulty in building institutional memory with multiple nationalities present, as the often-contrasting personalities and the transient, fragile nature of the knowledge generated in the mission was like building sandcastles; it was time-consuming, unstable, and needed to be constructed anew after each incoming tide of personnel.

In addition, it was necessary to create a process that survives the turnover of people. In practice, institutional knowledge retention was inadequate for the scale and scope of the mission. High levels of staff attrition create obvious and pronounced effects. There is a loss of skills and experience, disruption to operations during transitions, deleterious impacts on morale, and challenges for leadership to manage the associated ripple effects. The inevitable result of

European nations' force rotations, normally six months, which were "not serious" as they lacked the time on the ground to make sense of the operational environment and form robust relationships within the UN mission and with international partners.[23] These abbreviated military deployments seen from the civilian side of the mission paint a dispiriting picture:

> The military want to engage with everybody. But the civilian side they get a bit tired, let alone the locals, of having a new military point of contact to talk to every six months who are really ambitious and think they are going to have a big impact, but from the civilian side they had to make a calculation about how much time to invest in that interaction. So, you have institutionally inbuilt incompetence in the military system.[24]

Military involvement in a region is typically episodic and ephemeral, and civilian presence is often longer term, such that "there is a real issue in terms of information exchange with the militaries that they are in such a learning process and often don't speak the local language: In terms of the rotation what we always have with all these interventions is that we have a real gap between resourcing and ambition."[25] In the end, it was as much a political as a technical military deployment because "it was not really the force that was required there. It was the force that was necessary to send."[26]

National Sensitivities

Mali is more than twice the size of France. Navigating the geography has created logistics and sustainment issues in security assistance, with a base in Gao, in northeast Mali, home to the French military operation Barkhane and primus inter pares among the UN's mission field offices in the country. The Gao base was approximately one thousand kilometers from the capital Bamako, and the regional insecurity prevented the build-up of civilian personnel there.

Additionally, effective synchronization of efforts in Gao was complicated by a discordant organizational structure. For example, the German Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Task Force received commands directly from the force headquarters in Bamako.[27] This created a parallel structure to the general-purpose sector forces in Gao that were under the command of the commander of sector forces. The presence of a Gao sector head of mission meant there were in practice three equal heads of mission: the head of mission, the head of sector forces, and the commander of the mobile task force.

The mobile task force deployed in early 2021 to increase military reach in Gao, and the head of sector forces there separately reported to force headquarters in Bamako. The civilian sector head of mission in Gao reported to MINUSMA mission headquarters, not the force headquarters, resulting in "two entirely separate chains of authority reporting up into the head of the mission" and this created a convoluted structure that generated different information streams, ultimately, "we will tangle with the question of how well you do civil-military integrations in operations forever. Wherever you draw a boundary, you create friction."[28]

The mission-protection paradox also meant that whilst there was a well-defined process where the force supported civilian-identified priority tasks, in practice, the process was severely compromised because the mobile task force often defaulted to support sector activity. That was not their remit, given the restrictions that MINUSMA had in Gao in terms of troops and resources.[29]

Within MINUSMA, the array of different nations involved generated national caveats, either declared or undeclared, with the potential to completely undermine a mission or the intent of a mission and could enormously impact information sharing. National caveats are controls enacted by a participating nation on the activities of its military personnel deployed in a multinational operation. This often manifests as information-sharing restrictions with particular operational partners that inevitably limits flexibility, common understanding, and coordination in the field.

Therefore, different nations' abilities and appetite to do different things was a complicating element of the mission. Each force had its own lines that it was not willing to cross, or its national government would not want it to cross. But no nation spoke about what those lines were, which was an enormous information-sharing obstacle for a force commander.[30]

In Gao, there was a sizeable Chinese contingent in MINUSMA, and some other national contingents were not at ease sharing information given preexisting national security tensions. In addition to that bureaucratic impediment there was a cultural impediment present in the MINUSMA force, with an implicit sense of us-versus-them in some European contingents exacerbated by separate annex bases in Gao such as Camp Castor.[31]

At the individual level, national sensitivities created security prohibitions around technology such that lives were

> slightly at danger by restricting what things we could use, such as tablets, phones, because of a fear of a national counterintelligence threat, when that weirdly increases the risk to life. If I cannot use my phone to log where I have been because there is a fear of someone hacking it, I could drive over the same place twice, increasing risk to life. Sharing that data does not represent a security risk.[32]

Language hurdles exacerbated interoperability constraints. For example, there was no expectation that the mobile task force reports would make their way to sector forces, very few of whom spoke English. There were therefore legitimate and enduring concerns that the information generated by NATO forces was not used to its fullest effect. And the best use of the information would have been for the civilian pillar to decide what it was going to do and get the force to support that, rather than the intelligence driving the force to conduct activity.[33]

Intelligence collection capabilities that could bubble up through the mission were also uneven due to capacity.

Field units were typically from underresourced African countries, and these units often lacked intelligence officers. Force composition was also a broader issue that required careful consideration with primarily NATO countries in force headquarters and African countries' troops bearing the brunt of casualties in the field. As Peter Albrecht noted, "Intra-mission inequality encumbers collaboration and coordination between African and non-African units in MINUSMA. Most of the time, the units operate more or less separately, to the extent that MINUSMA risks becoming a two-tier mission."[34]

The Fragile Ecosystem of International Organizations

Information sharing between organizations is instrumental for effective collaboration, effective adaptation to changing priorities and contexts, and efficient resource allocation. Information also enriches awareness of the operational environment. In Mali, for example, the humanitarian community possessed valuable analysis on trends across different sectors such as food security and water scarcity that informs understanding of local contexts. The different local stakeholders with whom the humanitarian community engaged could provide important perspectives and granular detail on issues that could inform planning processes for multiple actors.

Yet in Mali, there was consistent friction between organizations because of perceived or actual misalignment of objectives and which continually impeded information sharing. While MINUSMA priorities included protection of civilians and the creation of an enabling environment for humanitarian assistance, there was resistance on the part of the humanitarian community who wanted nothing to do with the mission because it was perceived as an active party to the conflict by many stakeholders, including other parties to the conflict.[35]

Discomfort in the humanitarian community ranged from the pragmatic to the principled. A pragmatic example was its engagement with members of the population whose most recent traumas were often caused by uniformed men with guns. A principled example was that it was hard to be independent, neutral, and impartial while also supporting some of the mission mandates such as the return of the state and the use of all necessary means to achieve objectives.[36]

Yet humanitarian access was one of the mission's key mandates and only very loosely understood.

Communication was hampered by the view of those outside the mission that it was difficult to obtain useful information from MINUSMA. There was a perception that mission staff were rules-bound and uncomfortable about sharing information outside formal processes, but those processes were also integral to maintaining a degree of organizational coherence.[37]

The array of international organizations present in Mali were an interconnected ecosystem. The health of this ecosystem was clearly endangered by the constraints placed on information sharing, which eroded trust and inhibited collaboration. When relevant data were not exchanged, the strengths and resources of each organization could not be leveraged to create the partnerships that might generate much-needed consensus among those international actors on the ground in Mali. Without that consensus, attempting to tackle the multiple overlapping economic, political, and social issues in Mali remained a patchwork of often competing activities that took place against a disquieting backdrop of mistrust.

A critical misalignment sprang from the humanitarian community's neutrality. This meant in practice that it viewed many MINUSMA activities in conflict with its own mandate, leading to "on-going contestations."[38] This animosity between the mission and the humanitarian community in Mali highlights a common misconception in military organizations that impedes understanding of the operational environment; civil-military engagement can too often default in military thinking to conceptualizing the civilian actors erroneously as an aggregation of organizations that form a monolithic, unified whole.

There was also a mentality that the military component of the mission was the mission—in other words, the military tended to see MINUSMA in terms of a military response to a kinetic security problem rather than seeing itself as an enabler of a civilian-led effort. In Mali, the international military constituent part was small, relative to the size of the international civilian sector. And that broad civilian sector would differentiate itself between UN organizations and other donors, pursuing different objectives and with different funding cycles.[39]

While there was coordination between French forces and MINUSMA force headquarters facilitated by French officers in the mission, at the operational level, communications were primarily centered upon deconfliction rather than coordination, and

Civilian representatives from a MINUSMA team composed of human rights officers and a forensic team of the United Nations Police meet with civilian leaders and village residents from Minima Maoude, a village that was entirely burned down by insurgents, during a visit on 22 and 23 February 2019 to collect firsthand accounts from local residents affected by the violence. A critical component of information sharing to support coordinated peacekeeping efforts is direct contact with civilians affected by violent events. (Photo by Marco Dormino, MINUSMA)

information sharing was only functional in character.[40] Sensitivities around targeting at the operational level were pronounced and complicated. In the view of one MINUSMA intelligence official, there was an urgent requirement for information-sharing policy to be written that outlined the policies and process behind any exchange, "because one of the issues is aggregation of data. If you aggregate data to a point and you provide it, then the UN could be held responsible for providing targeting information to an external actor such as [the French military force] Barkhane."[41]

The complex dynamic between French forces and MINUSMA gives insight into the difficulties of parallel forces operating in Mali with different priorities. Communication, coordination, and deconfliction were constant requirements but were only effective to varying degrees. These problems are hallmarks of such deployments. Operations in volatile operational environments "blur" the "division of labor" between international security assistance forces "and their goals have sometimes come into conflict. This raises the question of whether they are partners or competitors."[42] Even within national operations, frictions arose from a blurring of the division of labor. For example, the military culture of overclassification was and remains a systemic problem, particularly in multinational missions and in settings where military forces must nest efforts within civilian-led processes.

The many moving parts of parallel international assistance efforts created enduring frictions that proved insurmountable in the lifetime of the UN mission in Mali. A decade after the northern insurgency had brought French forces and a UN mission to the country, escalating antipathy toward international involvement precipitated its departure, and a complicated, dispiriting chapter of Malian history was closed. As the security picture deteriorates, we inevitably ask discomfiting questions as to why the efforts and

Chinese soldier Chang Shifeng has been a peacekeeper for almost ten years, serving twice for the UN Mission in Darfur (known as UN-AMID before its closure in December 2020) before serving with the UN Mission in Mali. (Photo courtesy of MINUSMA)

resources brought to bear on the overlapping problems there failed in many objectives. While a small and often overlooked element of international security assistance force assistance, challenges associated with information sharing impeded operations in Mali. Beneath the shadow of strategic inconsistencies, the ripple effects of these challenges were felt throughout the deployment of the UN mission.

Conclusion

There are limits to the effects that information sharing can achieve in a complex operational environment. This article does not suppose that alleviating sharing constraints would automatically translate into common understanding and unity of purpose between a constellation of actors whose resourcing,

scope, and ambitions in Mali were diverse and, at times, conflicting. One can question the validity of peacekeeping operations in an environment where there was arguably little peace to keep. Yet, the overlapping issues of strategic incoherence, logistical challenges, conflicting cultures, and national sensitivities all created information-sharing hurdles. These issues must nevertheless be framed by the magnitude of the challenges confronting international security assistance forces in Mali.

The insights lead to policy implications. Firstly, civil-military conversations should be given high priority and primary relationships between stakeholders should be built quickly. Secondly, to retain and develop institutional knowledge in the face of persistent rotations, lengthened deployments should

be implemented high up in military hierarchies, with sector commanders, staff officers, and battalion commanders staying in post for more than twelve months. Thirdly, information-sharing channels between national actors should be coordinated through doctrine to circumvent national sensitivities. In addition, systematic embedding of officers between partners, particularly in intelligence sections, can mitigate many interoperability issues where heterogenous systems have been barriers and consequently improve information flows. Finally, understanding, acknowledging, and accounting for different perceptions of the security problems in an operational environment can assist in navigating between personalities across the civil-military divide. ■

The views expressed here are those of the author and are not an official policy or position of the National Defense University, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

Notes

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Victory Soon

Myrrh on the walls of the icon,
blood-soaked statuettes of Jesus,
a candle burns out, drops the piece of oin,
in the heart anxiety, as always, premonitions are heavy, precarious.

Prayers drive away evil every second,
let the executioners stop the
atrocities against the Ukrainian people,
The mockery in Bucha was a message to the world and an instructive lesson.
Rocket volleys will wake up the bell on the steeple.

Victory is here, wait a little longer,
On earth with weapons, the people are stronger.

—Vyacheslav Konoval
Resident of Kyiv

A church in the village of Novoekonomichne in the Donetsk region was destroyed by Russians in July 2024. (Photo by Serhii Korovainyi, Ukraine Ministry of Defence)

A Ukrainian soldier of the Territorial Defense Forces holds a fragment of a Russian Su-34 fighter jet shot down by Ukrainian troops 6 April 2022 in Chernihiv. (Photo by Serhii Nuzhnenko, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty)