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Global Fragmentation and Collective Security Instruments: Weakening the Liberal International Order From Within

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Abstract

Collective instruments, such as UN peacekeeping or mediation, are a lens through which we can examine broader normative fault lines in the international order. They hold both practical and symbolic value. In the post-Cold War moment, these instruments started reflecting liberal values. They became concerned with balancing the rights of individuals and state sovereignty. These advances around "human protection" are now in question, with contestation perceived as emerging from non-Western powers. I contribute to the debates on the "pragmatic turn" within collective responses but contend that while the focus in current debates about the normative shift has become global fragmentation, the momentum for the de-prioritization of human protection within collective instruments comes from within the liberal order itself. Human protection is now a broadly shared and firmly entrenched norm, but to shield the norm from abuse, the collective international community progressively restricted any use of force to advance the norm within the instrument of UN peacekeeping. The co-optation of UN peacekeeping into counter-terrorism efforts and the introduction of stabilization mandates undermined the principled nature and moral authority of the instrument of peacekeeping itself. This, in turn, compromised the implementation of human protection. This development is now accelerated and exposed due to global fragmentation, influencing not just peacekeeping but also other adjacent activities, such as mediation.

Keywords

human protection; impartiality; liberal international order; mediation; moral authority; peacekeeping; peacemaking; UN

1. Introduction

Western policymakers regularly discuss the need to uphold a "rules-based international order" (Thomson, 2019). With any political order being rules-based (Barnett, 2021), the formulation itself is a tautology. References to a rules-based order tend to imply support for what can be better described as the liberal international order (LIO). The LIO is a contested concept and I use it here as a shorthand for a set of rules and institutions that were normatively established in the aftermath of World War II and then augmented in practice at the end of the Cold War (Lake et al., 2021). Some scholars explicitly differentiate between a Cold War order and one practiced after the end of the Cold War (Mearsheimer, 2019). Others contend that the order merely got remoulded during a unipolar moment while retaining the same institutional and normative underpinnings (Acharya, 2018; Lake et al., 2021; Slaughter & LaForge, 2021). There is no definitive catalogue of the values underpinning the LIO, but different lists tend to coalesce around open markets, individual rights, equality of sovereign states, and cooperation through rule-bound multilateralism. The LIO and its values are now perceived as in decline (Acharya, 2018; Flockhart, 2016; Lake et al., 2021; Sørensen, 2017). Policy and academic debates on the decline of the LIO often revolve around the practices of individual states, especially the great powers. They draw on the balance of power and revival of geopolitical discussions, where China and Russia contest the norms of the prevailing order (Bettiza & Lewis, 2020). These challenges have reached a new level with the Russian war on Ukraine, where the breach of rules was so egregious it has been referred to as *Zeitenwende*, a major historical turning point that has profound implications on all aspects of the order (Flockhart & Korosteleva, 2022). China, meanwhile, is viewed as gradually eroding the LIO and articulating a new vision of international order: one that is significantly more state-centric, thus undermining individual rights, a core value in the LIO (Foot, 2020; Fung, 2019). Other emerging powers are joining this challenge. While the popular dichotomies of "the West vs. the rest" or "liberal vs. illiberal" persist, scholars have done much to nuance the positions of "non-Western" powers, arguing that they should not be treated as a block (Jütersonke et al., 2021; Peter & Rice, 2022). Others have shown that, for many non-Western actors, contestation of the LIO is not motivated by the order's values, but by how the order was implemented by the US and its allies. Issues have included the selectiveness of cases where state oppression against civilians seemingly matters (e.g., a blind spot to the Palestinian question), abuses of the rules-based order (e.g., the invasion of Iraq in 2003), and a failure to deliver on promised transformations (e.g., the Afghanistan state-building project; Parmar, 2018; on Afghanistan see Younus, 2024).

In this article, I examine how these challenges to a rules-based order embodying liberal values have been unfolding within instruments of collective security and what they mean for "human protection." Collective instruments are a lens through which we can examine broader normative fault lines in the international order. These instruments hold both practical and symbolic value, especially when powerful states break or creatively interpret the rules of the order through unilateral action (Hurd, 2002). In the post-Cold War moment, collective instruments were substantially reshaped to reflect liberal values (Paris, 2010; Turner & Wählisch, 2021). They became concerned with balancing the rights of individuals and state sovereignty, with innovations such as Responsibility to Protect (R2P), protection of civilians (POC), criminal responsibility through international courts, inclusive mediation, the Women, Peace, and Security agenda, and liberal peacebuilding. All these are intended to advance civil and political rights or, at minimum, protect civilians from the worst abuses enacted by the state. These advances around human protection are now in question. Much of the contestation is seen to be emerging from non-Western powers, especially Russia and China,

who wield veto powers on the UN Security Council (UNSC). Scholars have studied their voting records in the UNSC (Badache et al., 2022) and examined how China has sought strategic appointments within global institutions to pursue a more state-centric agenda (Foot, 2020; Fung & Lam, 2021). Experts now widely maintain that this shifting power dynamic and the advent of a multipolar world order have already had profound normative ramifications, deprioritizing human protection in collective instruments as part of their "pragmatic turn" (de Coning, 2021; Dunton et al., 2023; Hellmüller, 2022; Paris, 2023).

I contribute to the debates on the "pragmatic turn" within collective responses but contend that while the focus in current debates about the normative shift in collective instruments has become "global fragmentation," the momentum for the de-prioritization of human protection within collective instruments comes from within the LIO itself. I draw on earlier debates about the growing disconnect "between doctrine and practice" in UN peacekeeping (Peter, 2015) and the tensions within what Paddon Rhoads (2016, p. 2) describes as "assertive liberal internationalism." The article combines these earlier critiques of illiberal developments within collective instruments with current debates about global fragmentation. Empirically, I show that human protection as a liberal value is now a broadly shared and firmly entrenched norm. But the norm is also prone to abuse. To shield the norm from abuse and ensure its principled implementation, the collective international community has restricted any use of force to advance the norm within the instrument of UN peacekeeping. However, the co-optation of UN peacekeeping into the counter-terrorism efforts and introduction of stabilization mandates—as adapted from Western experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan—over the last decade has undermined the principled nature of the instrument of peacekeeping itself. This, in turn, compromised the implementation of human protection. This development is now accelerated and exposed due to global fragmentation, as host governments have options between third-party peace and security providers. This is impacting not just peacekeeping but also related activities, such as mediation.

The article proceeds by outlining the role of collective mechanisms and how these could have been realigned with liberal values after the end of the Cold War. It argues that the authority of these instruments rests in their ability to be perceived as transcending particularistic interests. For UN peacekeeping, that principled nature rests on its doctrine, especially the principle of impartiality. I then demonstrate that human protection, as a norm, enjoys broad support within the order, but that any use of force to protect civilians has progressively become collectivized within UN peacekeeping. This was done to protect the norm from abuse and ensure its impartial implementation. Finally, I show how this development has been undermined through UN stabilization missions, as these compromise the principled nature of peacekeeping by undermining its impartiality.

2. Collective Instruments as a Core of a Rules-Based Order

Since the adoption of the Charter of the United Nations (1945), collective approaches have been the core of a rules-based international order, prohibiting the use of force as an instrument of national policy. Their first layer comes from a clear hierarchy dictating the supremacy of the UNSC on all peace and security matters or collective security. The Charter of the United Nations (1945, Art. 2(4)) is predicated upon the prohibition of the threat or use of force, with the only permissible use of force by individual states being self-defence (Art. 51). Russia broke this prohibition when invading Ukraine, as any use of force not meeting the criteria of self-defence is exclusively within the domain of the UNSC. In addition to sitting at the apex of international peace and security, the UNSC also has the right to "determine the existence of any threat to the peace, breach

of the peace, or act of aggression" (Charter of the United Nations, 1945, Art. 39). While this is regulated by strict voting rules (Art. 27), the UNSC holds broad discretionary powers, allowing the Council to add new issues to matters it considers a threat to peace. In the post-Cold War era, this allowed the UNSC to include new threats among those necessitating a collective response. Two of these areas, newly accepted under the UNSC remit of threats to peace and security, are threats to civilians by state, and non-state threats against state authority (Tams, 2009). These two issues are interlinked and part of the same norm cluster (Gallagher et al., 2022). Both pertain to the internal constitution and relations within the state, balancing the rights of individuals with state sovereignty.

The second layer of collective security is equally important for principled multilateralism and relates to distinctions between different instruments for peace and security. These instruments are developed from Chapter VI (peaceful and consensual resolution of disputes) and Chapter VII (enforcement action) of the Charter of the United Nations (1945). They relate to measures taken by external actors in support of peace. There is a clear distinction between military and non-military policy frameworks. If peacekeeping and peace enforcement entail military measures—with or without the consent of relevant parties, respectively—peacemaking and peacebuilding capture their non-military counterparts (UN, 1995). UN peacekeeping holds a particular symbolic value among these instruments. It represents the non-existent "Chapter Six and a half" of the Charter of the United Nations, involving a military component that is deployed with the consent of the parties. Demarcated from enforcement action, UN peacekeeping has its doctrine guided by three principles: consent, impartiality, and non-use of force, except in self-defence and defence of the mandate (UN, 2008).

The legitimacy of UN peacekeeping rests on this doctrine, which is designed to transcend particularistic interests and symbolize action undertaken by the international community. UN peacekeeping is not the most effective military force and its ability to be perceived as a useful tool and induce deference relies on its moral authority (Barnett & Finnemore, 2005; Levine, 2013). Perceived impartiality has always been integral to this authority and has been described as its "oxygen" (Tharoor, 1995, p. 58; cf. Laurence, 2019; Levine, 2013; Paddon Rhoads, 2016). Dag Hammarskjöld, the second UN Secretary-General, asserted that "a United Nations operation must be separate and distinct from activities by national authorities" (UN, 1958, p. 165) and "cannot be permitted in any sense to be a party to internal conflicts" (UN, 1958, p. 166). During the Cold War, impartiality became near-synonymous with neutrality and peacekeepers primarily reported on violations but did not actively bring parties to account for their transgressions. In the aftermath of the Cold War, as the UNSC increasingly started deploying missions to deal with peace settlements relating to civil wars, the principle of impartiality became increasingly difficult to maintain (de Coning et al., 2017). Peacekeepers were asked to undertake more expansive post-conflict tasks—from election monitoring, disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration to reforms of the judiciary and other state institutions—with peacekeeping merging with peacebuilding (Paris, 2010). The UN Capstone doctrine provided a new understanding of impartiality, which was not to "be confused with neutrality or inactivity" (UN, 2008, p. 33). Peacekeepers were tasked to "be impartial in their dealings with the parties to the conflict, but not neutral in the execution of their mandate" (UN, 2008, p. 33). While scholars often pointed out that the content of mandates had a liberal bias (Chandler, 2010; Lidén, 2009), impartiality became understood as active protection of the mandate with "even-handedness towards the parties." This principled nature of impartiality, as I demonstrate below, could be maintained even when the UN developed POC mandates, as peacekeepers were supposed to defend civilians against all threats equally, regardless of their origin. The application of

such even-handedness changed with the introduction of stabilization mandates, which mandated UN peacekeepers to engage in counter-terrorist activities protecting state authority. This brought peacekeeping closer to enforcement action and, as I discuss in Section 4, undermined the instrument of peacekeeping itself.

3. Human Protection and UN Peacekeeping as Its Last Collective Bastion

The normative underpinnings of human protection as a component of the LIO predate the end of the Cold War. They are primarily seen in civil and political rights within international human rights documents. However, it was not until the end of bipolarity that human protection began to be operationalized as something that allows and even necessitates a response by international actors. The argument that individuals, not states, should be the primary referents of security policies is not uniquely Western or liberal, with non-Western scholars and policymakers often driving the argument for the expansion of security beyond that of states. The concept of human security was introduced to the international vocabulary by former Pakistani Finance Minister Mahbub ul Haq and Indian economist Amartya Sen (UNDP, 1994). Their holistic concept, which included economic, environmental, and other social threats to individuals, was critiqued by many Western governments, who wanted to focus international action on insecurities resulting from violent conflict (Axworthy, 1997). While it is oversimplistic to portray these debates as "the West vs. the rest" (Acharya, 2001), during the peak of the LIO most progress in operationalizing international protection of individuals was made in relation to insecurities resulting from armed conflict. Most of the instruments developed have been non-coercive, but these new understandings allowed for the possibility of the use of force to protect humans from state and non-state threats. This occurred primarily through the UNSC's recognition that civil wars could represent a threat to international peace and security. While imperfectly practiced, such an understanding—as demonstrated below—is now broadly entrenched in the international order and has been protected and re-articulated when states were perceived to be abusing it.

Throughout the 1990s, the UNSC progressively incorporated human protection into the mandates of UN peacekeeping missions. In Somalia, peacekeepers were deployed primarily to protect humanitarian personnel. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, they were asked to create safe zones for civilians. However, these policies were seen as failures, especially after armed peacekeepers, with no clear mandate to engage, passively witnessed the genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica (Malone & Thakur, 2001). In 1999, the UNSC adopted two seminal resolutions: Resolution 1265 on the POC through UN peacemaking, peacebuilding, and peacekeeping (UN, 1999a) and Resolution 1270, which authorized the UN peacekeeping mission in Sierra Leone with the first explicit mandate to protect civilians (UN, 1999b). Since 1999, the UNSC has mandated all multidimensional peacekeeping missions under Chapter VII, indicating that force could be used to protect civilians (Howard & Dayal, 2018). All these resolutions relate to situations where the UNSC acts with host state consent.

More divisive are situations where such consent is absent. In 1999, the looming genocide against the Albanian population in Kosovo presented this issue, with many actors unwilling to authorize enforcement action under Chapter VII. The nuances of these developments are well covered elsewhere (e.g., Hehir, 2008). Here, the point is that after NATO members took unilateral action to protect Kosovo Albanians, the question of proper authorization increased in urgency. While most actors wanted to mitigate human insecurities, without a rulebook on who could act and when, the rule-based order prohibiting the unilateral use of force could be fatally undermined. The debate on powerful actors abusing human protection—at the time termed

humanitarian intervention—to further their own interests is not unique to the great powers. Indeed, the newly established African Union Constitutive Act (2000) first developed both the concept of "non-indifference"—the African equivalent to R2P—and rules regulating its proper authorization. The non-indifference norm has been unevenly implemented in the African Union (AU) context and member states have been reluctant to authorize force without the consent of the government (Williams, 2007). While the AU, much like the UNSC, prefers working with governments and deploying peace support missions, human protection without the consent of parties first became institutionalized and regulated outside of a Western or global context. Globally, the question of proper authorization was the primary contention in R2P's adoption. By the mid-2000s, opposition to the principle that the international community had a responsibility to respond to atrocities—when governments were either unwilling or unable to do so—began to subside, with early objectors, such as China, beginning to accept the norm (Foot, 2020). The R2P proposal, developed by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), recommended that any enforcement action should go through the UNSC. If the Council was blocked—as in the Kosovo case—the UN General Assembly (UNGA) or regional organizations could also authorize force, seeking subsequent approval from the UNSC (ICISS, 2001, pp. 47–56). With some seeing the possibility for abuse of regional mechanisms and the UNGA, the final compromise resolution restricted authorization of the use of force to the UNSC (UN, 2005, Art. 139).

R2P was developed as a three-pillar approach: The first pillar outlined the responsibility of the state for protection; the second, the international responsibility to assist the state in its efforts; and the third, placing responsibility on the international community to respond if a state was unwilling to cooperate in protecting civilians. In practice, most outside interventions relating to human protection operate under the second pillar: assisting—not overruling—the host state. These policies encompass mediation, developmental assistance, and capacity building. The only third pillar R2P action—authorization by the UNSC without the consent of the host government—occurred in 2011, in response to atrocities perpetrated by the Gaddafi regime in Libya. With the UN lacking its own military, the operation was implemented by NATO, which started pursuing regime change. While implementing states argued that removing Gaddafi was the only way to protect civilians, most others considered this outside the mandate, again raising worries about powerful actors abusing human protection to advance their particularistic interests. Analyses of the use of R2P in Libya point to the regional instabilities caused by the intervention, its bearing on other cases such as Syria and Myanmar, and the impact on the R2P doctrine. After Libya, R2P was even described as "RIP" (Doyle, 2016; Gifkins, 2016; Thakur, 2013).

The "pure" third pillar of R2P lost its momentum, which it has little chance of regaining in an increasingly fragmented world, as all permanent members of the UNSC would need to agree on enforcement action. This, however, did not result in the end of human protection as a core value in the global order. Instead, states and other actors turned to R2P's "close cousin," POC (Paddon Rhoads & Welsh, 2019), to develop human protection elements within a less controversial instrument: UN peacekeeping. Because UN peacekeeping is collectively implemented and does not rely on outside actors (unlike reliance upon NATO in Libya), the instrument was seen as less prone to abuse. POC within peacekeeping predates the intervention in Libya, but its agenda has gained substantial momentum over the last decade, with authors arguing that the future of R2P and human protection now heavily depends on this contiguous normative agenda (Hunt, 2019). States have even enhanced UN peacekeeping POC with limited enforcement elements. UN peacekeeping, which operates according to the principle of consent, is legally understood as part of the second pillar

instruments of R2P (assistance to the state). However, similarly to Hammarskjöld's description of UN peacekeeping as belonging to "Chapter Six and a Half" of the Charter of the United Nations, UN peacekeeping POC can be conceived as belonging to the non-existent "Pillar Two and a Half" of R2P. While most peacekeeping activities are conducted in support of the host government, the Chapter VII mandate allows peacekeepers to employ force when the host government endangers its population. Such an approach to POC is based on an understanding of impartiality as "even-handedness towards the parties." It can be implemented in a principled manner without making distinctions between different sources of threats to civilians.

This understanding of impartiality can be seen in how POC has developed both in practice and policy since Libya. In 2013, after the outbreak of civil war in South Sudan, the UNSC overhauled the mandate of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) into a POC mission (UN, 2013b). Prior to this, the mission had been tasked with supporting the peace process implementation and helping the newly independent state develop its institutions. When the civil war broke out, South Sudan's situation became reminiscent of Rwanda two decades earlier, when a pre-existing mission had an inappropriate mandate for the situation on the ground. This time, however, the UNSC reacted. While UNMISS was deployed to South Sudan with the host government's consent, as the state became the perpetrator of violence against civilians, the mission was tasked not just to assist the government in developing protective measures, but also to physically protect civilians when the government was endangering them. This mandate was much more explicit than in previous missions, bringing peacekeeping closer to the third pillar of R2P. The mission has had mixed results, with its core protective mechanisms of "POC sites" heavily criticized (Munive, 2021). Implementation of human protection through UN peacekeeping was always going to be highly problematic, but what is important to note is not only a relatively swift and resolute action making human protection the core of the UNMISS mandate but also that some of the key implementing actors have come from states not typically associated with human protection. After the change of mandate, China more than doubled its peacekeeping troops in the mission and is now the biggest troop contributor of all permanent UNSC members (He, 2019).

Over the last decade, the UN also developed and revised policies to institutionalize and operationalize POC within peacekeeping (UN Department of Peace Operations, 2023). Many of these policy developments were responses to operational failures, including within UNMISS. Today, more than 95% of peacekeepers are mandated to protect civilians (UN Peacekeeping, n.d.). Unlike the broad R2P framework, which is an overarching political commitment to protection, POC is more technical and circumscribes the use of force. It is tactical and operational guidance to respond to threats to civilian safety in the context of armed conflicts (Hunt, 2019, p. 636). Although a far cry from how many liberal actors were imagining humanitarian intervention in the 1990s, peacekeeping POC presents another attempt to safeguard the norm of human protection and, at the same time, ensure that this is not subject to abuse by powerful actors. In that, UN peacekeeping has become the last bastion in ensuring collective implementation of human protection. This development was undermined by the introduction of stabilization mandates.

4. Stabilization Missions: Undermining the Principled Nature of UN Peacekeeping

Stabilization tasks entered UN peacekeeping mandates in much the same way as POC did, via UNSC debates on what roles outside actors can play in what was previously considered internal matters of states. Non-state threats to state authority, as an issue that should be considered a threat to peace and security and thus

necessitate a collective response, entered UNSC discussion through debates on whether the right to self-defence should apply to threats emanating from non-state actors. After 9/11, the UNSC accepted the US and the UK's claim to self-defence when they removed the Taliban government, as the regime was unwilling to deal with non-state threats emanating from its territory (Tams, 2009, pp. 378–379). The 2003 Iraq intervention complicated the debates due to multiple justifications, which included not just self-defence but a claim that previous UNSC resolutions authorized a peace enforcement action (Gray, 2002). Regardless of their legality, these were interventions conducted without the consent of host governments. But once the Taliban and Saddam Hussein's regimes were removed, the threat posed by non-state actors did not disappear. However, the newly elected governments were more amenable to international assistance. This international assistance, conducted with the consent of host governments, was extended to states unable to deal with non-state threats against state authority. This was primarily achieved through bilateral and coalition measures in the form of stabilization missions. These missions have been described as failures of liberal actors and a downfall of the LIO, especially after the Taliban regained power in 2021 (see Younus, 2024).

UN collective instruments have been auxiliary in efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq were established quickly at the request of the new Afghani and Iraqi governments in 2002 and 2003, respectively, and are both special political missions (SPMs). SPMs are Chapter VI collective instruments. They incorporate peacemaking and peacebuilding tasks, thus performing a similar function as the UN peacekeeping but without the military component. The majority of UNAMA tasks involve daily mediation and humanitarian assistance. As these tasks were perceived as impartial, the mission continued operating in Afghanistan even after the Taliban returned to power. This ensures some collective monitoring of human protection remains in place even under the worst of circumstances.

In contrast to Afghanistan and Iraq, where the military component remained outside the scope of collective instruments, approaches to non-state threats to state authority in Africa over the last decade started incorporating a military stabilization component within UN peacekeeping missions. The UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the UN Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) all have stabilization in their name and their mandate. They all operate alongside UNSC-authorized regional or unilateral military assistance to these countries, whilst containing a military component themselves. The reason for collectivizing the military response was likely cost-sharing with UN stabilization mandates championed by Western states, who carried the brunt of the cost in Afghanistan and Iraq, where the military stabilization component remained outside UN missions (Guichaoua, 2020).

Within UN debates, the introduction of stabilization mandates into UN peacekeeping was treated as the next logical step in ensuring human protection, as host governments were seen as unable to counter threats to their authority or their populations (Gallagher et al., 2022). UN peacekeepers were supposed to assist them in this task. But the switch away from defensive POC and towards offensive action to eliminate these threats was a qualitative one and moved UN peacekeeping closer to peace enforcement. These missions' mandates mirrored lessons from operations in Afghanistan and Iraq (Karlsrud, 2015, p. 44), making the UN one of the combatants, in a similar way to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. This was reflected in their capabilities: MONUSCO was enhanced with a Force Intervention Brigade (FIB),

tasked with neutralizing a defined list of armed groups in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and MINUSMA incorporated a large European contribution, which introduced sophisticated intelligence capabilities and counter-insurgency methods (Koops & Tercovich, 2016). Local governments were initially receptive to such support. UN peacekeepers were asked to assist them in not just securing military victories against their opponents, but also extending their political authority in contested areas.

Stabilization mandates in UN peacekeeping have been a subject of much debate and both scholars (Curran & Hunt, 2020; Karlsrud, 2015; Peter, 2015) and states (UN, 2013a) cautioned against their potential negative externalities when they were established. These have now been realized, undermining the instrument of peacekeeping and human protection. These negative externalities have been amplified because of the global fragmentation, where "the West" is no longer the only credible security provider alongside a UN mission (see Jacobsen & Larsen, 2024).

UN stabilization missions have not been able to deliver on the promise of human protection. UN peacekeepers were never going to be the most effective fighting force: They are comprised of soldiers from multiple states, with different military cultures, and a unified command is therefore a permanent challenge. Early on, peacekeepers delivered a few tactical wins. The MONUSCO, FIB, and the DRC military successful pushback against the M23 militia, which had been endangering population centres in the Eastern DRC for years, was hailed a major success (Vogel, 2013). However, the missions were unable to eliminate the broader threats, with M23 returning to the region by 2017. Similar to ISAF's inability to eliminate the Taliban, these missions were not able to eliminate non-state armed groups militarily. However, the robust nature and an offensive mandate of UN peacekeeping raised expectations of protection, with all these missions meeting resistance from the local population when these expectations were not met. MONUSCO has been particularly badly affected, with July 2022 protests occurring in several cities and leading to multiple deaths among protestors and UN peacekeepers ("Protestors demand," 2022). Faced with an increasingly hostile local population, who saw the missions as ineffective in delivering on their mandate, UN peacekeepers' ability to engage in other protection tasks, such as monitoring of abuses, became compromised.

In addition to not delivering human protection, UN stabilization missions also heavily damaged the symbol of the UN as an impartial force. By using the instrument of peacekeeping for enforcement measures against non-state actors and labelling these actors as the ones to neutralize, the missions abandoned the principle of impartiality, understood as "even-handedness towards the parties." This, in turn, meant that UN peacekeeping missions lost their moral authority and their ability to act as honest brokers and convene negotiations (Haspeslagh, 2021). In response to the UNSC decision to deploy an intervention brigade in the DRC, M23—who was listed as one of the groups to be neutralized—left the Kampala talks between the armed group and the DRC government ("UN envoy tells Security Council," 2013). Similarly, in Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR), the day-to-day local-level mediation and brokering of ceasefires, one of the core tasks of UN missions (Bell & Wise, 2022), became increasingly difficult as the mission was seen as siding with the government authorities. But it was not just the targeted armed groups who accused the UN missions of partiality. As time moved on, the unwillingness of UN peacekeepers to support host governments unconditionally in their military efforts against all non-state actors turned host authorities against them too. The Malian minister of foreign affairs, in a UNSC debate, accused the mission of being selective in its choices on when and who to engage, thus not helping its fight against terrorism. The mission was accused of "fuelling inter-community tensions" (UN, 2023). Similarly in the DRC, after MONUSCO

attempted to broker local agreements with armed groups, the government accused the mission of collaborating with M23 and forcing it to negotiate with terrorists (Kniknie, 2022).

Finally, and perhaps the most consequential for human protection, stabilization components of UN peacekeeping missions came into an untenable clash with other parts of the human protection mandate, especially the monitoring of abuses by the state. While governments wanted UN peacekeepers to help them neutralize non-state threats, these same governments were using measures that UN peacekeepers were there to monitor and prevent. Enforcement, and monitoring and prevention, as two components of their mandate were increasingly in conflict with each other. MONUSCO, MINUSMA, and MINUSCA have all received a high number of so-called "denials of request," with the host governments refusing UN peacekeepers access to sites where government forces could be implicated in civilian abuses. The monitoring role has become increasingly hard to fulfil due to the diversification of outside security assistance that governments can now rely on. In Mali, France had been the preferred partner of authorities alongside MINUSMA until early 2021. While restrictions on freedom of movement by MINUSMA existed during this period, the mission had shed light on numerous civilian abuses, by both French and Malian forces (Jezequel et al., 2022). However, following the May 2021 coup and the subsequent failure to organize democratic elections, the French started disengaging from Mali. In turn, Mali started seeking other partners and invited the Russian Wagner Group to help its security efforts (Drozdiak, 2022). They have been operating in the country since. This substantially restricted MINUSMA's ability to monitor abuses, with Mali refusing to grant access to sites where its joint operations with the Wagner Group likely involved mass human rights abuses (Jezequel et al., 2022). MINUSMA has now been asked to withdraw, with the UN deployment set to end on 31 December 2023 (Lewis & Mcallister, 2023). Unlike Afghanistan, where the SPM UNAMA managed to stay above the fray retaining the veneer of impartiality, Mali might find itself without any UN monitors. By incorporating military stabilization components within UN peacekeeping, human protection, even if imperfectly practiced, became undermined.

5. Conclusions

Human protection is now a firmly established norm within the global order. We can see this from repeated attempts to continue developing and implementing policies around it, intensified when powerful actors were seen to be overstepping their bounds. These attempts were often driven not by liberal states, but by other actors, showing the broad purchase of the norm. It is also a norm that is incredibly difficult to implement in a principled manner, especially when it involves the use of force. Concerns about powerful states using human protection as an excuse to further their particularistic interest are at the crux of this debate. In addition to skepticism of Western states around Kosovo and Libya, Chinese participation in peacekeeping has also been met with suspicion, due to its oil interests in South Sudan (Lanteigne, 2018). Because the human protection norm is well established but highly susceptible to abuse, the implementation became progressively more regulated and circumscribed. Following the concerns with R2P implementation in Libya, UN peacekeeping remained the only viable instrument through which human protection with the potential for (limited) use of force against offending governments could be exercised collectively. The normative future of the LIO therefore heavily rests on the continued existence of this instrument.

The incorporation of offensive stabilization mandates into UN peacekeeping was envisaged as a logical next step in human protection. The goal was for UN missions to help host governments deal with non-state threats

to their authority. But like the Western failed efforts in Afghanistan, UN peacekeepers failed in this task in Mali and the DRC. However, this was not just a practical failure but also one that damaged the symbol of peacekeeping. By merging peacekeeping with peace enforcement and then not delivering on the enforcement component, collective instruments opened themselves up to criticism by host governments. The symbol of an impartial actor was tarnished. As witnessed in both Mali and the DRC, host governments, which have been endangering civilians, have also been able to delegitimize UN operations, thus preventing them from performing their core peacekeeping tasks—monitoring and prevention, both required for human protection. Global fragmentation is facilitating the resistance against UN missions, as host governments can maintain that they are swapping one partial actor with another. But at least the second partial actor is supporting them in their fight against non-state threats; Mali today is a case in point.

Collective instruments have been the cornerstone of a post-World War II rules-based order. They have always been implemented imperfectly. Human protection is no different, especially when considering that UN peacekeeping forces are pooled from different troop-contributing countries, each with its own protection culture. But collective instruments hold not only a practical but also a symbolic value. They are used to address legitimacy gaps within the order itself. To maintain their value and protect the rules-based system, they need to be seen as impartial. UN stabilization mandates have undermined that. To protect a rules-based order, and with it the core of the LIO, their impartiality needs to be reaffirmed. The UN is not starting with a blank slate, but if the past eight decades are anything to go by, after an ebb, the majority of states will continue reaching for collective instruments to maintain the order and the values within.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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