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The Impact of the Force Intervention Brigade’s Use of Offensive Force in Attaining Peace in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Lessons Learnt

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Abstract. The Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) was established in 2013 as the most uniquely armed brigade in the history UN peace operations to promote security in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Among others, the Force was mandated first, to use all necessary means to protect civilians, humanitarian personnel and human rights defenders and to support the Government of the DRC in stabilization and peace consolidation efforts. Second, to adhere to the core principles of peacekeeping operations – consent of the parties to the conflict, impartiality, and non-use of force. While the FIB registered tactical successes within a short time after its deployment, a myriad of challenges beset it subsequently, essentially generating serious questions on the impact FIB’s use of offensive force has had in contributing to the quest for the attainment of peace and promotion of security in the DRC. The main argument is that the FIB’s offensive use of force, while demonstrably suitable in the shorter term in addressing the threat posed by the Movement of March 23 (M23) rebel group against civilians and stability in eastern DRC, questions still remain on how such use of force can sustainably be balanced with the requirement for the UN force to adhere to the core principles of UN peacekeeping (i.e. consent of the parties to the conflict, impartiality, and non-use of force). As such, this article examines the conflicting realities, at the tactical or micro-level, between the execution of robust mandates and the maintenance of basic norms of peacekeeping norms. The findings show that, while offensive force can deter the violence and impunity meted by armed groups (AGs) in the shorter term, it rarely has the ability to secure lasting peace, partly due to the enduring political, social, and structural set up obtaining in the conflict area and beyond. The study concludes that, to achieve durable peace, military action of any magnitude must be firmly in support of the political process and dialogue, local community engagement, and post-conflict development.

Keywords. UN peace operations, peacekeeping, offensive force, legitimacy, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Force Intervention Brigade

Introduction

United Nations peace operations (UNPOs) in the post-Cold War era, of the late 1990s to the present, continue to experience substantial albeit complex transformation. The traditional realities of United Nations peacekeeping operations (UNPKOs) entailed that the United Nations (UN) would deploy forces into theatres of conflict often times to “separate” belligerent national armies where a ‘peace to keep’ situation already existed. Such deployments, usually authorised under Chapter VI of the UN Charter related to the peaceful settlement of disputes, were guided by the ‘holy trinity’ norms of peacekeeping, namely, consent of the parties to the conflict,

impartiality, and non-use of force except in self-defence. Conversely, contemporary UNPOs, although still evoking the core principles of UNPKOs, have become more complex, particularly in terms of their authorised use of offensive military force, usually under Chapter VII of the UN Charter related to the use of force beyond self-defence or peace enforcement. However, the proliferation of intra-state conflicts and the rise of complex threats often involving non-state actors have led to mandates under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, permitting offensive operations (Ibuge, 2026). The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) exemplifies this complex evolutionary tendency in UNPOs. Despite the country hosting the largest UN peace operation deployed since 1999 to date, namely, the United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO), resolving the conflict still appears illusive.

The persistent violence and humanitarian crises on-going in eastern DRC compelled the UN to establish and deploy the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) in 2013. Among others, the FIB was mandated to neutralise armed groups (AGs) designated as "negative forces" either unilaterally or jointly with the Armed Forces of the DRC (FARDC) (United Nations Security Council Resolution 2098, 2013). The FIB was composed of troops from three countries: Tanzania, South Africa and Malawi, all of which are member states of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and funded by the UN. By 2019, however, it was argued that the FIB had lost its deterrent effect and initiative (dos Santos Cruz, 2020).

According to dos Santos Cruz (ibid.), arguably, contributing factors to the decline of the FIB's operational capacities included the limited intelligence system in the United Nations, the prevalence of asymmetric *modus operandi* of armed groups in the FIB area of operational responsibility, and the impracticability of the FIB having to operate unilaterally following the UN's adoption of its Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP), effectively suspending joint operations with units and/or commanders of the Congolese Armed Forces (FARDC) accused of complicity in human rights violations. Other factors included, the prolonged absence of joint planning and operations with the FARDC, essentially resulting in undermining mutual trust and MONUSCO's increasing employment of the FIB as a conventional force, and other operational challenges related to the geographical profile of Beni territory. Partly based on these challenges, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), in December 2019, adopted Resolution 2502 (2019), which allowed MONUSCO to expand the FIB with additional personnel and assets, as determined by the Force Commander, to enhance the brigade's operational effectiveness (UNSC Resolution, 2502, 9-10).

Importantly, even as further down as 2019 since its deployment in the DRC, the FIB's robust mandate retained the emphasis for the brigade to ensure adherence to the core principles of consent, impartiality, and non-use of force except in self-defence or in the defence of MONUSCO's authorised mandate, obviously a significant departure from the era of traditional UN peacekeeping. Notably, the brigade's tactical success in defeating the Movement of March 23 (M23) rebel group in October 2013 was hailed by the UN and other peace stakeholders, but it was not durable as, eight years after the M23 defeat, the group re-emerged in November 2021. This time the M23 manifested a strength and force re-incarnation that enabled it to re-take the city of Goma in North Kivu Province and captured, in *blitzkrieg* fashion, South Kivu Province, while proceeding to overrun other southeastern provinces of the DRC all the way to the city of Uvira. The M23's re-emergence rendered obsolete the initial operational upper hand that the FIB had held in 2013. Hence, to-date, the longer-term effects of the FIB's offensive peace enforcement operations remain a subject of debate, raising questions about the brigade's effectiveness in attaining peace in the DRC.

Research Problem and Objective

Although the FIB's use of mandated offensive operations in the DRC has been acknowledged to have resulted in initial tactical victory (Prakash, 2023), leading to a brief period of limited stabilisation in eastern DRC, the legitimacy of these outcomes have remained contested within both academic and policy circles. As such, a growing body of literature indicates that, despite notable short-term battlefield successes, interventions like that of the FIB are often less likely to succeed in establishing lasting peace as new previously dormant or splinter armed groups are likely to rapidly fill the resultant security vacuum, once dominant groups are either degraded or neutralized (Krampe, van der Lijn, & van Baalen, 2023; Stearns & Vogel, 2023). Furthermore, research indicates that, the legitimacy of robust mandates related to the use of offensive force seems to be frequently challenged at the local level, whereby perceptions of partiality, fears of reprisals, and mistrust regarding the relationship between UN peace operators on the one hand and their counterpart state actors on the other may end up undermining the local community's support for the UN mission's interventions and mandate (Baaz & Stern, 2022; Baaz & Verweijen, 2022).

Nonetheless, despite substantial theoretical and policy analyses, a significant research gap still remains concerning the micro-level lived experiences of those most directly affected by the UN's (in this case the FIB's) operations, particularly the frontline peacekeepers from the troop-contributing countries, the local communities in their areas of operational responsibility, and grassroots stakeholders (Autesserre, 2023; Williams & Bellamy, 2021). In addition, much of the existing scholarship related to the offensive use of force relies on secondary data, institutional reports, or high-level interviews, thus resulting in a predominance of top-down perspectives and an incomplete picture in enabling comprehensive understanding in terms of how offensive mandates are executed, negotiated, and even experienced in practice (Karlsrud, 2015; Richmond and Pogodda, 2024). Consequently, the nuanced realities, contestations, and adaptive strategies of local actors are often either marginalized or excluded from mainstream analyses. By emphasising these micro-level experiences, the study provides a more contextually grounded and nuanced assessment of the effectiveness and legitimacy of offensive peace operations mandates in complex conflict environments.

Theoretical Framework

Assessing the application of offensive force in peace operations necessitates a multidisciplinary approach. The ambit of Liberal Institutionalism suggests that international organisations, such as the UN, shape the global order by managing conflicts and upholding collective security. Within this framework, the legitimacy of UN interventions, particularly those involving offensive military action, hinges on adherence to recognized norms and accepted multilateral procedures. Any deviation from these principles may compromise the legitimacy that allows the UN to function as a neutral actor (Monteleone and Oksamytna, 2026, Ibuge, 2026). Constructivist Theory complements this perspective by highlighting that legitimacy is not absolute but is negotiated through social interactions and perceptions among peacekeepers, local communities, armed actors, and international observers and actors. In this context, the success or failure of robust mandates on the use of force depends not only on formal authorisation but also on how interventions are perceived by those directly affected (Reeder, 2025).

The normative dilemma identified by Ibuge (2026) is particularly pertinent: as UN mandates become more robust, they risk departing from the core peacekeeping principles that have traditionally undergirded international legitimacy. This tension is central to assessing the

FIB's effectiveness and the broader evolution of UN peace operations. In addition, the Protection of Civilians (PoC) normative framework further grounds the ethical imperative for robust action by recognising civilians as the primary targets of violence in modern conflicts. This doctrine justifies the use of offensive force to fulfill the UN's responsibility to protect vulnerable populations, although it raises questions about proportionality, collateral damage, and unintended consequences (UN Protection of Civilians Policy, 2023). Additional perspectives, such as principled pragmatism and securitisation theory, underscore the need for adaptability in conflict response, while cautioning against compromises to foundational values (Reeder, 2025). The Critical Peacekeeping and Local Ownership approaches further assert that sustainable peace requires the collaboration and agency of local actors, cautioning against externally imposed solutions (Reeder, 2025). By integrating these frameworks, this study evaluates the effectiveness and legitimacy of the use of offensive force in peace operations, considering the institutional, social, ethical, and local dimensions.

The Impact of the Use of Offensive Force in the DRC

The FIB's deployment in the DRC marked a pivotal shift in the UN's operational paradigm. A number of scholars (Karlsrud & Smith, 2023; Krampe, van der Lijn, & van Baalen, 2023) have argued that robust interventions have achieved tactical successes, including the defeat of armed groups and reopening of humanitarian corridors, but these gains have often ended up remaining ephemeral. For example, while the FIB dislodged the M23 from the DRC in 2013, security vacuums frequently emerged after the withdrawal of FIB forces, as the brigade's jointly collaborative force, the FARDC, was unable to take over and dominate the vacated spaces. This allowed new or reconstituted AGs to proliferate and resuscitate insecurity (Krampe et al., 2023; Stearns & Vogel, 2023).

In addition, local perceptions further complicate the assessment of the effectiveness of the offensive use of force as, while some communities initially welcomed the FIB's protection through its offensive posture, subsequent skepticism or fears of reprisals later emerged from the same communities in the aftermath of intense military operations. Baaz and Stern (2022) appear also to have come to similar conclusions. Furthermore, over time, the UN/MONUSCO came to the determination that conducting joint offensive operations with some units of the Congolese Armed Forces (FARDC) already implicated of complicity in human rights abuses led to perceptions not only of MONUSCO/FIB's partiality, but also undermined the trust in the UN peace mission as a whole (Baaz & Verweijen, 2022). In response to this serious challenge, MONUSCO developed and adopted the Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP), in order to shield its force from being involved in joint operations with UN blacklisted units and/or commanders of the FARDC. While this was an important step in safeguarding the integrity of the UN and reclaiming the mission's and its force's impartiality, it also contributed to the UN losing consent from the host government, essentially exacerbating mistrust with its host peace operations partners.

Moreover, as Bove and Ruggeri (2022) demonstrated, military force alone is insufficient for sustainable peace, since offensive operations may reduce lethality in the short term but do not consistently prevent the recurrence of violence or the imperative of addressing underlying political, economic, and social drivers of the conflict in the longer term. The literature thus recommends integrating offensive force with comprehensive peacebuilding strategies, including political dialogue, governance reform, defence and security reforms, and local community engagement (Richmond & Pogodda, 2024). Unintended consequences, such as civilian displacement and retaliatory violence, also underscore the necessity of incorporating

local perspectives and robust accountability mechanisms into operational planning (Autesserre, 2023; Day, Hunt, & Tadesse, 2023). To this end, some scholars have called for clear mandates, enhanced local consultations, and systematic follow-up with stabilisation and development interventions (Karlsrud, 2023).

Overall, while the FIB's use of offensive force was able to contribute to immediate security improvements, the sustainability of these achievements remained limited by persistent structural and contextual challenges. To this end, a general synthesis of literature leads to the view that, the offensive use of military force in peace operations must be complemented by holistic, locally grounded peacebuilding strategies, so as to achieve lasting peace. Despite this, however, a gap still exists with regard to what really happens to micro-level actors at the local setting, as a consequence of implementing the offensive use of force mandates.

Methodology

This study employs an explanatory research design to systematically assess the extent to which the use of offensive force by the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) has contributed to peace among multiple conflicting parties in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The explanatory approach enables an in-depth exploration of the causal mechanisms and contextual factors that shape the outcomes of offensive operations within United Nations peacekeeping missions. The research design integrates qualitative, constructivist methods to generate detailed insights into the complexities of offensive forces in UN peace operations. Rooted in interpretivist epistemology, this study prioritises understanding the perspectives and lived experiences of participants within their socio-political realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Charmaz, 2014). Data collection was structured around focus group discussions with African FIB personnel and non-African MONUSCO officers, alongside in-depth interviews with senior peacekeepers, local government officials, NGO representatives, religious leaders, and Congolese citizens in the conflict-affected communities of Goma. This multi-perspective qualitative enquiry enables a nuanced understanding of operational realities, strategic decision-making processes, and the lived experiences of those directly impacted by the conflict (Patton, 2015).

To complement the primary data, a systematic documentary review was undertaken, encompassing recent UN Department of Peace Operations (DOP) reports, MONUSCO mission documents, academic literature, and relevant media coverage of the DRC conflict, specifically on MONUSCO and the FIB. The analysis employed thematic coding to identify recurring patterns and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). To enhance the explanatory rigor and trustworthiness of the findings, triangulation was implemented across data sources and methods, in line with the best practices in qualitative research for minimising bias and ensuring analytical robustness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Flick, 2018). Through this comprehensive approach, this study provides a robust explanation of how and to what extent the FIB's offensive mandate has influenced peace dynamics, capturing the diverse experiences and perspectives of key stakeholders in the eastern DRC.

Findings

This study addressed the problem of whether the offensive use of force within the FIB framework has effectively contributed to peace among conflicting parties in eastern DRC, with a number of both positive and negative outcomes being manifested at the local setting.

Through Focus Group Discussion (FGD), for instance, Participant #1 noted that, "The FIB's offensive mandate allowed for a decisive response to persistent threats, particularly the

defeat of the M23, which shifted the security landscape in key urban areas,” while Participant #2, also stated that, *“The intervention not only disrupted armed groups but also facilitated humanitarian access and the return of displaced populations.”*

Consistently, participants indicated that offensive operations have at times been effective in reducing local violence. For instance, the 2013 FIB operation against the M23 rebel movement stands as a landmark case where offensive force was credited with ending M23’s occupation of Goma (Stearns, 2013). In alignment with this, Participant #1 remarked, *“Offensive operations sometimes reduce violence locally; peace is rarely lasting,”* thereby emphasizing the recurrent cycle of conflict and the limitations of force as a sustainable solution.

According to Participant #4, *“The visible readiness and willingness of the international community to use force served as a deterrent to other factions considering further violence,”* an account of MONUSCO/FIB successes that were illustrated through multiple accounts by FGD participants. Participant #7, a former FIB battalion commander, for instance stated, *“The reduction in large-scale armed confrontations and the restoration of calm in certain sectors are directly attributable to our offensive interventions.”*

Despite the gains just noted, FGD participants also highlighted enduring limitations on the use of force. As Participant #5 reflected, *“While we neutralized some high-profile groups and disrupted illicit activities, the root causes of conflict, such as governance deficits and resource competition, remained unaddressed.”* Participant #6 also emphasized, *“Many armed groups simply fragmented or relocated, and new militias emerged to fill the void, which limited the sustainability of our achievements.”*

All FGD participants agreed that military force alone is insufficient for sustained peace. Participant #3 articulated, *“Robust follow-up measures governance reform, economic development, and community reconciliation are crucial to consolidate security gains”;* while Participant #4 concluded, *“The FIB’s experience teaches us that offensive force can disrupt cycles of violence, but lasting peace requires comprehensive, long-term engagement with local and international partners.”* In this regard, complementing the use of military force with governance, structural and institutional reforms remain critical and, when done, these efforts must as much as possible address the communities’ needs and realities.

Similarly, Participant #2’s perspective corroborates these findings as she observed that *“in some areas, civilians felt safer after FIB interventions, but trust eroded quickly when violence resumed”* (Participant #2, FGD, 2024). Her account echoes the aftermath of the FIB’s operations in Beni, whereby, despite successful operations against the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) rebel group in 2014–2015, renewed violence and civilian mistrust persisted due to reprisal attacks and perceived partiality of the FIB (MONUSCO, 2015).

Participant #2 noted that persistent logistical challenges and occasional mistrust from local communities. *“Resource constraints and negative perceptions among civilians sometimes undermined our efforts, highlighting the limits of military solutions alone,”* he argued. Participant #2 also noted persistent logistical challenges and occasional mistrust from local communities. *“Resource constraints and negative perceptions among civilians sometimes undermined our efforts, highlighting the limits of military solutions alone,”* he observed. Essentially, this eroded MONUSCO/FIB support from both the local communities and the DRC government.

Moreover, there was a recount of how bypassing the requirement for local consent led to accusations of occupation and heightened risk: *“The FIB’s offensive actions gave us a window to provide assistance to the civilian population, but there were lingering concerns from some people within the same population that the UN force’s presence amidst them was likely*

to attract further reprisals from the AGs after their departure from our localities.” (Participant #2, FGD, 2024).

Participant #3 also highlighted the problematic perception of FIB offensive actions among some of the local communities, stating, “Local communities sometimes perceive FIB actions as foreign military occupation, not protection” (Participant #3, FGD, 2024). He described a tense encounter with villagers who believed the FIB was biased towards the government: “They saw us as occupiers because some of our troops visibly favored the local government, some of whose troops had been accused of being involved in human abuses, essentially compromising our impartiality, by appearing to side with their perceived state-sponsored troops whose actions resembled those of the very armed groups we were there to protect the civilians from, thereby also making us seem as foreign troop collaborators of a repressive governmental machinery and potential targets” (Participant #3, FGD, 2024). This aligns with observations during the FIB’s joint operations with FARDC in 2016, where Human Rights Watch (2017) reported civilian complaints of being caught between warring sides and experiencing abuses by both state and non-state actors.

Additionally, Participant #4 reported that offensive action has, at times, directly precipitated dangerous retaliatory situations and civilian displacement. He explained, “Offensive action led to retaliation and civilian displacement” (Participant #4, FGD, 2024). His account is consistent with the pattern seen during MONUSCO’s anti-ADF operations in Beni in 2016, where rebel reprisals led to mass displacement and further humanitarian challenges (UN OCHA, 2016). He noted, “One lapse in adhering to the rule of non-use of force unless absolutely necessary resulted into a dangerous firefight that could have been avoided” (Participant #4, FGD, 2024).

Further supporting these insights, Participant #5 critiqued the FIB’s operational approach, emphasizing, “Coordination with political/diplomatic or non-UN humanitarian actors is minimal; operations are mostly military-centric and steeped in secrecy to avert possible leakage of information and compromise, but also potentially difficult to operate in the remote areas of the DRC” (Participant #5, FGD, 2024). He described how failure to consult local authorities led to us entering an ambush: “We advanced without alerting any governmental or humanitarian actors we knew in the area on our movements. This reality directly led us to enter an AG ambush, which our scouting troops had missed and other actors we knew may have alerted us, resulting into several wounded among our troops” (Participant #5, FGD, 2024). While this dynamic is not a unique occurrence during the conduct of offensive or even routine military operations, due to the need to ensure operational security prior to the planning and eventual conduct of military operations, it highlights the difficulties of seeking to use military operational prerogatives in order to achieve a potentially civilian-engagement-related peace outcome.

Participant #6 acknowledged the dual nature of offensive actions, stating, “Offensive actions sometimes open the way for political negotiations, but also risk escalating conflict” (Participant #6, FGD, 2024). In this regard, the UN is compelled to align with some actors that appear to be supportive to its deployment, particularly those belonging to or aligned with the government, while others designated as spoilers are likely to resist and regard the UN force as one of its enemies. Similar scenarios seem to have occurred in the UN Mission in Sierra Leone in the early 2000s, where peacekeeping forces’ attempts to empower some local actors against others occasionally backfired and contributed to prolonging local insecurity (Bellamy & Williams, 2010).

Participant #7 described the unintended consequences of offensive operations, including “increased mistrust, new power vacuums, and humanitarian challenges” (Participant #7, FGD, 2024). She recounted escorting humanitarian workers after an operation only to become trapped during a power struggle: “The use of force by the UN, without proper post-operations engagement and overseeing the restitution of an effective local government in the area, put all of us remaining in the “liberated areas”, including civilians, at risk after the peacekeepers had left” (Participant #7, FGD, 2024). This is reminiscent of the aftermath following FIB operations in North Kivu, where new security vacuums emerging after the conduct of military operations have at times enabled emergent armed groups to exploit the resulting power vacuum, thereby sustaining instability (Vinci, 2019).

Similarly, Participant #8 emphasized the diversity of local perceptions of the FIB’s offensive operational stance, stating, “Perceptions of the FIB vary widely. While some communities see the use of force mandates as necessary, others see the same as aggravating conflict” (Participant #8, FGD, 2024). He provided an example where local leaders were initially receptive to the force’s presence and operations; later cultural insensitivity by some of the force’s members sometimes had the potential to trigger civil discontent. “Some colleagues disrespected some local customary practices, particularly centered on some traditional leadership roles and culinary practices, which almost triggered a violent backlash against our team’s presence” (Participant #8, FGD, 2024). This highlights the importance of cultural awareness, as noted in the failure of some UN missions in South Sudan, where misunderstandings with local chiefs led to operational setbacks (Deng, 2017).

Lessons Learnt

Based on these findings, a number of lessons learnt arose through the FGD. Participant #9, for instance, asserted the vital importance of follow-up and community engagement: “The need for better follow-up and community engagement after operations” is evident (Participant #9, FGD, 2024). He described a mission where insufficient communication left his unit surrounded by disgruntled locals: “In one mission, the lack of clear communication and follow-up meant we were surrounded by locals who felt betrayed, an oversight that could have turned deadly if not for last-minute mediation” (Participant #9, FGD, 2024). Similar lessons emerged from the 2014 UN mission in Central African Republic, where early gains were lost due to insufficient post-operation engagement (ICG, 2015).

Finally, Participant #10 advocated for a more inclusive and locally informed approach by suggesting, “FIB’s mandate could improve by integrating more local input and enhancing civil-military coordination” (Participant #10, FGD, 2024). He described a near-crisis precipitated by a colleague’s failure to consult village elders, resulting in widespread resentment: “A colleague’s failure to consult village elders before an offensive led to widespread resentment, placing our entire patrol in jeopardy” (Participant #10, FGD, 2024). Comparable challenges were evident in UNAMID’s early years, where the lack of local consultations often impeded mission acceptance and effectiveness (De Waal, 2014).

Collectively, as evidenced by the testimonies of Participants #1 through #10 and corroborated by real-world operational cases, a recurring tension emerges between the short-term tactical benefits of offensive operations and the long-term strategic imperative for sustainable peace. While some participants observed that the use of offensive force can initially reduce violence, many emphasized that such outcomes are temporary and susceptible to reversal, particularly when the core peacekeeping principles are inconsistent with the real, on-ground realities concerning peace and security.

The data further indicate that, when not coupled with robust civil-military coordination and community involvement, offensive actions can alienate local populations, foster mistrust, and inadvertently create conditions conducive to renewed conflict. As illustrated by both participant testimony and external cases, the lack of follow-up and insufficient attention to cultural sensitivities often undermines both the legitimacy and effectiveness of peacekeeping interventions.

For example, the interplay among government forces, UN peacekeepers, and negative forces in the DRC demonstrates that military successes are frequently offset by difficulties in maintaining impartiality, protecting civilians, and ensuring lasting peace. As seen in the FIB's operations against M23 and the ADF, initial tactical victories often gave way to renewed violence or civilian backlash when principles of impartiality and engagement were neglected. Comparable dynamics have been observed in other conflict zones, including Darfur and South Sudan, where the reliance on force without inclusive engagement has proven insufficient for durable peace (Deng, 2017; De Waal, 2014).

In summary, findings from this focus group discussion (FGD), demonstrate that the contribution of offensive force to peacekeeping in the DRC is both complex and fraught with operational and ethical challenges. Sustainable peace requires not only decisive action but also better clarity on a re-constructed model of understanding of what the core principles of UN peacekeeping portend in the contemporary milieu of UN peace operations. This universal understanding, coupled with the UN ensuring comprehensive engagement with local communities and actors on the ground, could then be buttressed with consistent civil-military coordination. The narratives of the ten UN personnel during the FGD, complemented by real-world examples, collectively suggest that, while the offensive use of force may be necessary under certain circumstances in the short term, it is never sufficient on its own to the broader achievement of lasting peace.

Key Informant Interviews

The use of key informants was an additional important element for external evaluation of the FIB's operational effectiveness through the use of force. In this regard, Speaker #1 expressed the view that, "The FIB's initial deterrence and tactical successes were significant; however, over time, operational realities, including the evolving threat landscape and limited intelligence, diminished its effectiveness." He further observed, "Expectations for civilian protection often exceeded operational capacity, given the ADF's asymmetric tactics and the multiplicity of armed actors. "He advocated for improved early warning systems and "the establishment of joint operations centers to clarify responsibilities and enhance accountability." Speaker #1 stressed, "The sustainability of security gains depends on effective joint planning and the integration of local actors.

Speaker #2, from an organizational and policy perspective, stressed the need for mobility, adaptability, and the deployment of advanced intelligence tools. "The lack of adequate armored vehicles and medical support, combined with insufficient intelligence, hindered our ability to sustain offensive and protection operations," he reported. He also recommended, "*expanding the use of contracted drones and integrating special forces will increase operational impact.*"

Speaker #2 highlighted the need to "institutionalize community engagement and communication strategies to build trust and ensure the protection of civilians remains central."

The findings suggest that the FIB's offensive operations have delivered measurable, if limited, success in restoring peace and stability in eastern DRC. Tactical achievements, such as

the neutralization of key threats and the facilitation of humanitarian access, demonstrate the potential value of robust mandates. However, the sustainability of these outcomes are wanton to remain constrained, if the following, among others, are not adequately addressed, namely, incomplete integration of root-cause interventions (governance, resource management, reconciliation), as well as persistent resource and intelligence gaps create negative or ambivalent local perceptions, which can erode public trust.

As Speaker #1 succinctly stated, “Military force can create space for peace, but only political solutions and inclusive development can fill it.” The evidence thus affirms the necessity of combining robust enforcement with comprehensive, community-centered peacebuilding strategies. The impact of the use of offensive force to achieve peace in the DRC remains a complex and often controversial phenomenon. Drawing on findings from respondents both during focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with Speakers there have been both limited successes and persistent challenges faced by peace operations in the country.

Speaker #3, for instance argued that, while offensive interventions have occasionally succeeded in achieving some notable short-term outcomes in the conflict cycles in the DRC, such as the MONUSCO/FIB and FARDC recapture of territories like Bunagana, Rutshuru, and Goma during their joint offensive against the M23 in 2013, the long-term and more strategic outcomes have remained elusive. In addition, these instances of tactical operational success have neither led to sustained peace nor real eradication of the targeted armed groups (AGs), which are otherwise sometimes referred to as spoilers or negative forces.

In fact, there have been repetitive instances where the so-called “spoilers”, such as the M23 in both 2013 and 2023, managed to seize significant territories in eastern DRC even when UN forces were present in those areas. Speaker #3 argues in this regard that this reality underscores the limitations of inherent in seeking to achieve peace solely hinged on the military approach (In-depth interview, 2024).

Local perceptions on the long and drawn-out presence of the UN peacekeeping mission in the DRC also seemed to remain predominantly skeptical. Many Congolese citizens interviewed characterized MONUSCO’s long stay in the country and assistance as “building castles in the air,” reflecting a widespread belief regarding the futility and ineffectiveness of the UN’s military-offensive led interventions. Thus, it was argued that, despite the presumably dominant presence of MONUSCO forces on the ground in eastern DRC, women and children continue to face cycles of human rights abuses, not just from the AG terrorizing them, but also from the FARDC, and at times from some of the UN’s own peacekeeping personnel.

In this regard, particularly in the case of the UN, where allegations of misconduct have occurred, they have further diminished citizenry trust within the affected communities (Speaker #3, In-depth interview, 2024). Previous research indicates that such perceptions can substantially undermine the legitimacy and effectiveness of peacekeeping missions (Smith, 2020).

The sustainability of peace in the DRC is further complicated by the inherently skewed structural dynamics of UN intervention, whereby given the fact that no form of mission or mandate authorisation can occur unless the Permanent Five (P5) members of the UN Security Council (UNSC), namely, USA, UK, France, Russia and China either unanimously or passively agree without anyone of the P5 invoking the veto.

Thus, where an intervention is likely to conflict with the interests of anyone among the P5, the concerned UNSC member state could at best call for additional negotiations on the draft resolution authorising the proposed UN intervention and, failing to agree, may resort to invoking the veto prerogative. This notion is also reflected in the practical application of the

core peacekeeping principles within the context of the form and intent of the approved use of force for the UN intervention.

Speaker #3, for instance, points out that the core principles of UN peacekeeping, while ostensibly invoked to protect civilians and promote stability in the conflict environment, may also inadvertently allow armed groups to regroup and rearm. This cycle is sometimes facilitated by external actors who benefit economically from ongoing instability, particularly given the DRC's vast mineral wealth. Prior research suggests that resource-driven conflict can be perpetuated when peacekeeping frameworks fail to address underlying economic incentives (Johnson & Lee, 2021).

Speaker #3 also highlights the disconnect between military force and diplomatic or political initiatives. These strategies are frequently pursued independently rather than in coordination, leading to unintended negative outcomes. For instance, military operations have contributed to civilian displacement, property destruction, and heightened resentment toward the UN, thereby complicating efforts to establish lasting peace (Speaker #3, In-depth interview, 2024). Anderson (2019) contends that a comprehensive approach integrating military, diplomatic, and developmental strategies is necessary to disrupt the cycle of conflict in the DRC and comparable settings.

The interview with Speaker #3 reveals the complex challenges of employing offensive military force to achieve peace. The evidence indicates that, without authentic incorporation of local perspectives, diplomatic engagement, and structural reforms at national, regional and even international levels (particularly in the context of the UN), peacekeeping interventions may perpetuate rather than resolve the underlying causes of conflict in the DRC.

Stakeholders' Perceptions on Contribution of Offensive Force to Achieving Peace

The impact of the Force Intervention Brigade's (FIB) offensive mandate on peace in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) remains complex and contested, as evidenced by the perspectives of local and international actors as well as faith leaders. The findings reveal a nuanced picture in which short-term security gains often fail to translate into lasting peace, and offensive operations may inadvertently generate new forms of instability.

Respondent #1, a local NGO worker based in Bukavu, contended that while the use of offensive force occasionally contributes to a temporary reduction in violence, this effect is seldom sustained. This observation is consistent with previous research highlighting the recurrent resurgence or emergence of armed groups following military interventions (Autesserre, 2014; Stearns & Vogel, 2015). The Respondent cited the FIB's defeat of M23 in 2013 as initially generating a sense of stability in Goma; however, it was further noted that subsequent power vacuums were quickly filled by other armed actors, thereby undermining the durability of these gains. This Respondent #1 further maintained that civil society remains largely skeptical, often perceiving the FIB as escalating conflict rather than fulfilling its mandate to protect civilians.

Retaliatory attacks against local populations, displacement, and persistent mistrust were identified as primary challenges. The Respondent #1 thus advocated for a more holistic approach, asserting that military action alone cannot resolve the region's deep-rooted conflicts and that sustainable peace requires robust political dialogue and a focus on addressing root causes.

Respondent #1 further suggested that, although some offensive operations have opened space for peace talks, such outcomes are inconsistent. Heavy-handed tactics were reported to

have resulted in civilian casualties and new grievances, underlining the need for improved accountability, community consultation, and integration with peace-building initiatives.

Similarly, Respondent #2, representing an international NGO in Goma, observed that offensive operations by the FIB often generate only short-term gains, with security improvements proving unsustainable over time. According to this Respondent, humanitarian access may improve briefly following military interventions as was the case after operations in Rutshuru yet new waves of displacement frequently ensue, and the security environment remains precarious. Respondent #2 further argued that communities are far from unified in their perceptions of the FIB: while some feel protected, others report heightened vulnerability and mistrust toward both MONUSCO and the broader UN presence.

Furthermore, the Respondent #2 highlighted that diplomatic and social efforts are frequently subordinated to military priorities, ultimately constraining the potential for meaningful peacebuilding. The cyclical nature of violence was also emphasised, as each FIB offensive was seen to precipitate new escalations rather than resolve underlying tensions. In this regard, the Respondent called for the inclusion of civil society actors in mandate reviews and post-operation assessments, contending that such participation is critical for ensuring operations are responsive to local realities and do not inadvertently exacerbate conflict dynamics.

The views of Respondent #3, a religious leader from Butembo, provided an additional perspective on the limitations of offensive force in peace operations. This Respondent argued that peace achieved through fear or coercion is inherently unstable and stressed the necessity of reconciliation and restorative dialogue to complement any security gains. The Respondent observed that, although military action in Beni has at times facilitated church activities, these interventions have not guaranteed lasting safety for local populations. Rather, communities often experience a sense of being trapped between the violence of armed groups and the interventions of armed peacekeepers.

The Respondent further asserted that the use of force creates trauma and deepens social divisions, thereby undermining prospects for sustainable peace. Despite the important role that faith leaders can play in mediating local disputes and promoting reconciliation, the Respondent reported that such actors are seldom consulted by MONUSCO or the FIB. Force, the Respondent noted, has on occasion triggered revenge attacks against villages, highlighting the risks of unintended consequences. The Respondent concluded by advocating for greater engagement with local communities and leaders, and for a shift in the FIB's mandate towards supporting dialogue and inclusive peacebuilding.

Collectively, these findings suggest a series of critical insights. First, it is apparent that, while offensive military operations have contributed to some tactical successes, these have not reliably led to sustainable peace or civilian protection. Second, the recurrence of violence, fragmentation of armed groups, and emergence of new threats emphasize the need for a multidimensional approach that integrates military, political, and social efforts. Third, the absence of meaningful community engagement and the marginalisation of local actors including religious leaders and civil society organisations limit the legitimacy and effectiveness of peace operations. In line with APA academic conventions, these results indicate that mandates must be continually reassessed to ensure they are responsive to local context, prioritise accountability and participation, and address the root causes of conflict rather than solely its symptoms (de Coning et al., 2019; Karlsrud, 2015).

In conclusion, the research demonstrates that the contribution of offensive force to achieving peace in eastern DRC remains limited in the absence of comprehensive, inclusive, and locally driven peacebuilding strategies. For future peace operations to be effective, it is

essential that the FIB and MONUSCO integrate military interventions with sustained community engagement, political dialogue, and support for locally-led reconciliation processes.

Congolese Citizens' Voices on Contribution of Force to Achievement of Peace

The analysis of local perspectives reveals nuanced insights into how the Force Intervention Brigade's (FIB) offensive use of force has influenced the achievement of peace among conflict parties in eastern DRC. Respondents generally indicated that the FIB's offensive actions have contributed to a reduction in hostilities, increased protection for civilians, and opened opportunities for peace negotiations. Interviewee # 1 asserted that "FIB operations in our area forced some armed groups to retreat, making the community feel safer for the first time in years."

Similarly, Interviewee #2 remarked that "after the major push against rebel camps, daily life became more normal, and markets reopened, which signaled a return of stability." These accounts were echoed in local news coverage from *Actualite.cd* (2022), which highlighted a significant drop in civilian casualties and displacement following targeted FIB operations.

However, the sustainability and perception of peace remain contested within communities. Interviewee # 3 explained that "although the immediate threat was reduced, there was apprehension about possible reprisals from regrouped militias." Interviewee # 4 pointed out that "some people welcomed the FIB, but others worried that heavy fighting might provoke new waves of violence or displacement." This is supported by *Radio Okapi* reports, which frequently document community meetings expressing both relief and concern regarding ongoing military offensives.

A recurring theme among Respondents is the importance of coupling military action with post-conflict stabilization efforts. Interviewee # 5 noted, "Short-term peace is possible after an offensive, but unless the government and humanitarian actors help rebuild, armed groups may return... "military action gave us breathing space, but real peace needs more support for our communities."

Interviewee # 6 similarly emphasized,

We need more than soldiers, we need roads, schools, and safety for our children to feel that peace is real...in brief We see fewer attacks, but we want lasting peace, not just a pause in fighting.

Local editorials, such as in the *Kivu Times* (2021), have argued that FIB successes will only be meaningful if followed by visible improvements in governance and basic services.

Another significant finding relates to the interplay between offensive military actions and broader political processes. Interviewee # 7 observed that "the FIB's pressure sometimes brought armed group leaders to the table, making dialogue possible." In contrast, Interviewee # 8 highlighted, "There have been times when force disrupted negotiations, especially if civilians were inadvertently harmed." Local media have documented both successful ceasefires following military gains and instances where violence complicated peace efforts, such as the 2020 Minembwe episode.

Community perceptions of the FIB are shaped by both the outcomes of operations and the conduct of troops. Interviewee # 9 stated, "When the FIB works closely with local leaders and avoids civilian harm, trust grows and peace becomes more likely." He added, "the FIB's presence made us feel protected, but their approach must always respect civilians and work with local leaders." Conversely, Interviewee # 10 warned, "Heavy-handed tactics without consultation can erode support and fuel suspicion." Media analysis and citizen forums further

confirm that the FIB's legitimacy, and thus its ability to foster peace, is strongly linked to its responsiveness to local needs and concerns.

In summary, the findings indicate that while offensive force by the FIB has played a critical role in reducing hostilities and creating openings for peace, its long-term effectiveness depends on integrating military operations with sustained stabilization, community engagement, and inclusive political processes. The voices of local citizens and media underline both the achievements and limitations of the FIB mandate, calling for a more holistic approach to peacebuilding in the DRC.

Effectiveness and Ambiguity: The Empirical Outcomes of Offensive Force

The deployment of offensive force yielded notable tactical successes, most prominently the 2013 defeat of the M23. These operations created temporary windows of stability and humanitarian access, validating elements of Securitization theory: the framing of certain groups as existential threats justified robust action (Buzan et al., 1998; Gilmour, 2023). Yet, the sustainability of these gains was consistently questioned. Armed groups adapted, fragmented, or re-emerged in new forms, exposing limitations in purely military solutions (Krampe et al., 2023; Stearns et al., 2023). Voices from FIB, as well as from Congolese civilians and stakeholders, converged on the notion that offensive force alone could not address the root causes of conflict—such as governance deficits, local grievances, and regional interference (Richmond & Pogodda, 2024; Autesserre, 2023). Instead, military action often served as a “circuit breaker,” temporarily reducing violence but requiring rapid follow-up with political dialogue, governance reforms, and community engagement to avoid relapse (Day et al., 2023). Divergent narratives emerged regarding the perception of FIB operations: while some local communities welcomed the improved security, others saw the FIB as occupiers or as exacerbating cycles of violence and displacement, depending on the conduct of operations and subsequent engagement with local actors (Van Baalen & Höglund, 2022; Baaz & Stern, 2022).

The empirical record, as reflected in both interviews and literature, suggests that the effectiveness of offensive mandates is inherently contingent—dependent on mandate clarity, local legitimacy, and integration with broader peacebuilding and development agendas. The FIB's experience demonstrates the limits of militarized approaches and the necessity for holistic, context-sensitive interventions (Autesserre, 2023; United Nations, 2023). The UN's use of offensive force, exemplified by the FIB in the DRC, marks a significant shift from defensive peacekeeping to a more assertive, proactive approach. The FIB's operations produced tactical victories and temporarily stabilized conflict hotspots, enabling the reopening of markets and return of humanitarian actors. However, these gains were often short-lived, as defeated groups splintered and new factions emerged to fill the ensuing power vacuums. The alignment of FIB operations with the FARDC, which has a problematic human rights record, contributed to perceptions of partiality and eroded local trust. Despite early successes, enduring security remained elusive. Successive battlefield victories failed to translate into sustainable peace, as underlying drivers—political exclusion, resource competition, and regional rivalries remained unaddressed. The findings highlight that military force alone cannot resolve structural causes of conflict; rather, sustainable peace requires integrating offensive operations with political dialogue, community engagement, reconciliation, and post-conflict development.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal the persistent tension between robust military mandates and the foundational principles of UN peacekeeping—consent, impartiality, and

limited use of force (Karlsrud, 2015; Monteleone & Oksamytna, 2026). While the Force Intervention Brigade's (FIB) offensive operations in the eastern DRC yielded tactical victories, such as the defeat of the M23 and the reopening of humanitarian corridors, these gains were often ephemeral. Armed groups have adapted to military pressure by fragmenting or re-emerging, thereby demonstrating the limits of offensive force as a stand-alone strategy (Krampe et al., 2023; Stearns & Vogel, 2023).

Qualitative data drawn from focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and community perspectives highlight a crucial operational paradox. On the one hand, the FIB's robust mandate enabled decisive action and temporarily deterred violence, which some participants and local citizens recognised as bringing about short-term security and humanitarian relief. However, the absence of meaningful post-conflict engagement, coupled with limited attention to local legitimacy and community needs, often results in new cycles of violence, civilian displacement, and eroding trust in peacekeepers (Baaz & Stern, 2022; Van Baalen & Höglund, 2022).

Local perceptions proved highly variable, with some communities welcoming FIB interventions and others perceiving them as foreign occupation or exacerbating conflict dynamics. The alignment of the FIB with the FARDC, itself implicated in human rights abuses, further complicated perceptions of impartiality and legitimacy (Baaz & Verweijen, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2017). Recurrent themes included the need for civil-military coordination, cultural sensitivity, and the incorporation of local actors in conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes. The findings highlight that offensive force, although occasionally successful in disrupting immediate threats, inherently lacks the capacity to achieve sustainable peace. The FIB's experience shows that military interventions can function as a necessary "circuit breaker" during acute crises, creating space for humanitarian aid and opening windows for dialogue (Day, Hunt, & Tadesse, 2023). However, without robust follow-up measures, such as governance reform, economic development, and community reconciliation, the underlying drivers of conflict remain unaddressed, and violence is likely to recur (Bove & Ruggeri, 2022; Richmond & Pogodda, 2024). Moreover, empirical evidence illustrates that the legitimacy of UN interventions is negotiated at the local level. The study reveals that consent at the state level does not automatically translate into legitimacy among local communities, who often experience peacekeeping operations through the lens of lived realities, historical grievances and local power dynamics (Autesserre, 2023; Reeder, 2025). The narratives collected from Congolese citizens, local NGOs, and religious leaders consistently highlight the importance of post-conflict reconstruction, inclusive dialogue, and the visible presence of peace dividends, such as improved services and security.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that, while the FIB's offensive operations in the eastern DRC have delivered measurable tactical successes, their impact on achieving sustainable peace remains limited in the absence of comprehensive, inclusive, and locally driven peacebuilding strategies. The tension between robust mandates and foundational peacekeeping norms poses ongoing challenges to the legitimacy and effectiveness of UN interventions. Sustainable peace in the DRC and similar contexts can only be realised through a holistic approach that integrates offensive military action with political dialogue, community engagement, and development initiatives.

The research calls for the continual reassessment of peacekeeping mandates, prioritization of local perspectives, and systematic integration of civil-military cooperation,

accountability, and context-specific strategies. Only through such multidimensional and participatory frameworks can the UN hope to move beyond temporary “circuit breakers” and deliver lasting peace to conflict-affected societies.

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