ANALYTICAL ESSAY

From Confrontation to Cooperation: Describing Non-State Armed Group–UN Interactions in Peace Operations

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In various conflict contexts where the state is unable to maintain security and public order, non-state armed groups (NSAGs) and the United Nations (UN) conduct their activities alongside one another. While previous research has focused on hostile relations between the UN and NSAGs, less attention has been given to collaborative interactions. This paper aims to address this research gap by formulating a novel conceptual typology of NSAG–UN interactions in the context of a peace operation. The typological framework comprises two-dimensions: firstly, the thematic field of interaction including human rights, humanitarian needs and governance, security, and political processes and, secondly, the nature of interaction ranging from confrontation to cooperation. Based on the typology, interaction activities between the UN and NSAGs in two peacekeeping operations—the UN Operation in Côte d’Ivoire (UNOCI) and the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA)—are systematically documented and described. While both cases show confrontation in the security field, UNOCI also commonly cooperated with NSAGs on security-related issues; MINUSMA instead cooperated with NSAGs primarily regarding the political process. The analysis further proposes factors that may explain such variation, including institutional arrangements and NSAG characteristics. The conceptual framework presented in this paper is crucial in advancing knowledge about an empirical phenomenon that we know little about and that has important implications for different forms of “local” engagement in peace operations and the effectiveness of UN policies and practices.

Existen diversos contextos de conflicto en los que el Estado es incapaz de mantener la seguridad y el orden público. En estos casos, los grupos armados no estatales (GANE) y las Naciones Unidas (ONU) llevan a cabo sus actividades de manera paralela. Si bien las investigaciones anteriores se han centrado en las relaciones hostiles entre la ONU y los GANE, se ha prestado menos atención a las interacciones colaborativas. Este artículo tiene como objetivo abordar esta brecha de la investigación mediante la formulación de una tipología conceptual novedosa de las interacciones entre los GANE y la ONU en el contexto de una operación de paz. El marco tipológico comprende dos dimensiones: en primer lugar, el campo temático de la interacción, que incluye los derechos humanos, las necesidades humanitarias y la gobernanza, la seguridad y los procesos
políticos y, en segundo lugar, la naturaleza de la interacción, la cual abarca desde la confrontación hasta la cooperación. Partimos de la base de la tipología para documentar y describir, de manera sistemática, las actividades en materia de interacción entre la ONU y los GANE en dos operaciones de mantenimiento de la paz: la Operación de la ONU en Costa de Marfil (UNOCI, por sus siglas en francés) y la Misión Multidimensional Integrada de Estabilización de las Naciones Unidas en Mali (MINUSMA, por sus siglas en inglés). Si bien, en ambos casos se pueden observar enfrentamientos en el ámbito de la seguridad, la UNOCI también cooperó con los GANE en cuestiones relacionadas con la seguridad. Sin embargo, la MINUSMA cooperó con los GANE principalmente en lo que respecta al proceso político. En este análisis se proponen, además, factores que pueden explicar esa variación, incluyendo los arreglos institucionales y las características de los GANE. El marco de trabajo conceptual que presentamos en este artículo resulta crucial para avanzar en el conocimiento sobre un fenómeno empírico del que sabemos poco y que tiene implicaciones importantes para las diferentes formas de participación “local” dentro de las operaciones de paz y para la eficacia de las políticas y prácticas de la ONU.

Dans différents contextes conflictuels dans lesquels l’État est incapable d’assurer la sécurité et l’ordre public, les groupes armés non étatiques (GANE) et les Nations Unies (ONU) agissent côté à côté. Tandis que des travaux de recherche antérieurs se sont concentrés sur les relations hostiles entre l’ONU et les GANE, les interactions de collaboration n’ont reçu que peu d’attention. Cet article vise à combler cette lacune de la recherche en formulant une typologie conceptuelle inédite d’interactions GANE-ONU dans le cadre des opérations de maintien de la paix. Le cadre typologique comprend deux dimensions : d’abord, le domaine thématique de l’interaction, notamment les droits de l’homme, les besoins humanitaires et les processus de gouvernance, de sécurité et politiques ; ensuite, la nature des interactions, allant de la confrontation à la coopération. Selon la typologie, les interactions entre l’ONU et les GANE dans deux opérations de maintien de la paix—l’opération de l’ONU en Côte d’Ivoire (ONUCI) et la Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation au Mali (MINUSMA)—font l’objet d’une documentation et d’une description systématiques. Bien que les deux cas fassent apparaître une confrontation dans le domaine de la sécurité, l’ONUCI a aussi souvent coopéré avec les GANE sur des problématiques de sécurité, et la MINUSMA vis-à-vis du processus politique. L’analyse propose en outre que certains facteurs puissent expliquer ces variations, notamment les arrangements institutionnels et les caractéristiques des GANE. Le cadre conceptuel présenté dans cet article est essentiel pour faire progresser les connaissances sur un phénomène empirique méconnu, mais qui a des implications importantes pour les différentes formes d’engagements « locaux » dans le cadre des opérations de maintien de la paix et pour l’efficacité des politiques et pratiques de l’ONU.

**Keywords:** non-state armed groups, UN interventions, peacekeeping, non-state governance

**Palabras clave:** grupos armados no estatales, intervenciones de la ONU, mantenimiento de la paz

**Mots clés:** groupes armés non étatiques, interventions de l’ONU, maintien de la paix
Introduction

Peace operations are considered to be the most impactful and largest activity that the United Nations (UN) engages in to maintain international peace and security (see e.g., Hyde 2020). UN peace operations¹ are deployed to conflict settings where the state is unable to maintain security and public order. After the Cold War, the UN has primarily focused on internal conflicts. In the same contexts, non-state armed groups (NSAGs) such as rebel and militia groups, the key actors of contemporary civil wars and post-conflict societies, also play important roles. They may violently confront different types of local or international actors and attack civilians but also apply non-violent wartime strategies. NSAGs often engage in diplomatic activities and develop structures and practices of governance shaping the social, political, and economic life of civilians during civil wars (Weinstein 2006; Mampilly 2011; Arjona et al. 2015; Arjona 2016; Huang 2016a; Stewart 2018).

Although UN interventions have been found to contribute to peace (Doyle and Sambanis 2006; Fortna 2008; Beardsley 2012; Hegre et al. 2018; Fjelde et al. 2019), we know little about how peace operations work and how to enhance their success (Autesserre 2017; Howard 2019). Engagement with local actors has been suggested to be fundamental for interventions’ effectiveness (Pouligny 2006; Whalans 2013) and the UN’s efforts in civil war contexts overlap with NSAGs’ non-violent and violent wartime strategies. However, the role of NSAGs as key actors in international peacebuilding and peacekeeping efforts has been largely ignored. To understand and engender peacebuilding success, we need to know more about interactions—violent and non-violent—between the UN and NSAGs. This argument is supported by the UN’s policy agenda. For several years, the Security Council has identified promoting the responsibility of NSAGs as a priority on which further action is required when it comes to the protection of civilians (United Nations 2004a). The UN goes as far as to highlight how the “effectiveness of United Nations field operations are increasingly contingent on UN staff’s capacity to analyze and strategically engage non-state armed groups” (McQuinn and Oliva 2014, 1). Engagement with NSAGs is also of importance for the principles of UN peace operations. Failure to establish and maintain relations with conflict parties may undermine the peacekeeping operation (PKO)’s credibility and legitimacy and have detrimental consequences for its presence, access, and effectiveness.

This article provides knowledge about NSAG–UN interactions and contributes to our understanding of the premises of peace operations’ success in the following ways. First, this article formulates a novel typology on NSAG–UN interactions in the context of a PKO. This article proposes that the concept of NSAG–UN interactions is best understood by examining the thematic fields within which both NSAGs and the UN operate and by considering the nature of the interactions. These two features form the two dimensions of my typological framework. The vertical dimension of the typology—the thematic field of interactions—consists of four categories: human rights, humanitarian needs and governance, security, and political processes. The horizontal dimension of the typology—the nature of the interaction between the UN and NSAGs—is captured by a scale including public confrontation, coordination, and cooperation applied by previous research (Coning and Friis 2011; Ruffa and Vennesson 2014). The typology is descriptive in nature, which is an essential first step in identifying and classifying interactions.

Second, a systematic documentation and description of interactions between NSAGs and the UN in two substantially different UN mission contexts based on the typology is provided. To illustrate the comprehensiveness, relevance, and empirical applicability of the typological framework the two cases chosen are the UN Mission in Côte d’Ivoire (UNOCI) 2004–2005 and the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) 2013–2014. UN Secretary-General

¹In this article, the terms peacekeeping and peace operations are used interchangeably.
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(UNSG) progress reports from these two cases are used as empirical material for the systematic documentation of interactions. Based on the documentation, a thorough descriptive analysis is conducted. This provides a first application for the typology thereby probing its empirical relevance. Documentation and description of the interactions in Côte d’Ivoire and Mali illustrate how my typology captures the wide range of UN–NSAG interactions across mission contexts.

Third, this article presents factors that may explain variation that the typology and related empirical analysis bring forth. I argue that institutional arrangements and NSAG characteristics explain variation in interactions in the cases of Côte d’Ivoire, Mali, and beyond. Analysis on these explanatory factors highlights the insights that the typology provides for both future theorization and empirical work. Last, this article presents the implications of the findings for both research and policies and suggests avenues for future research. I apply a broad definition of NSAGs including reporting on rebels, militias, and “terrorists” to capture the range of interactions prevalent in the context of peace operations.

The contribution of this article is threefold. First, this article is the first to systematically describe and structure coercive and non-coercive interactions between the UN and NSAGs in peace operations. Studies on relations between the UN and NSAGs are generally missing and, when it comes to previous research on the UN and its peace operations, interactions with NSAGs have either been ignored or the focus has mainly been on confrontational or violent forms of engagement. The typology brings forth a multitude of variation beyond interactions that take place within security-focused activities and are confrontational in nature. The analysis further exemplifies that illustrating new forms of variance in the interactions through the typology enables formulating and further testing precise and novel explanatory claims (see Collier et al. 2012). Future research is needed to develop explanatory theories, but this article presents some of the factors that may explain variation in interactions within and across mission contexts. The typology and related analysis provide novel insights into the ways that the UN operates and, thus, enables examining how various forms of engagement with different actors matter for the UN’s possibilities to reach its objectives. Previous theorizing on how the UN protects civilians or implements its peacekeeping mandates has centered around aggregate mechanisms such as deterrence and enforcement (Fortna 2008). These theories are based on the assumption that peacekeeper presence implies a willingness to defend civilians through the use of force and thus imposes costs on armed actors. In reality, peacekeeping missions seldom employ military coercion (Matanock and Lichtenheld 2022), extremely rarely use force to protect civilians under attack (United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services 2014; Bode and Karlsrud 2019) and the core idea of peacekeeping is to keep the peace without resorting to violence. The typology enables us to think beyond specific tasks that are translated into mandate implementation and, instead, consider associations between the UN’s actions within different policy areas, varying violent and non-violent local tactics, and the success of the missions.

Second, the typology and analysis presented in this article may guide future data collection efforts. Theoretically guided and systematically structured data is needed for explaining both the drivers and the implications of varying contacts between international interveners and different types of violent non-state actors. This paper only provides an example of how the typology can be used when analyzing empirical material such as UN reports and when theorizing about the insights that the typology provides. With additional data, future research could explore trends in how the UN interacts with NSAGs, systematically test explanatory frameworks that may generate variation in the typology, and examine consequences of UN–NSAG interactions for peacekeeping effectiveness or broader outcomes such as sustainable

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5See p.12 for more detailed definition.
peace and various local experiences of security. The typology provides a framework for these efforts.

Third, the documentation, description, and theorization of NSAG–UN interactions provide important empirical knowledge on NSAGs in the context of peace operations. This knowledge contributes to unpacking “the local” in peacekeeping and peacebuilding research and understanding external relations of NSAGs. The “local” has received a multitude of scholarly and policy attention but the role of NSAGs in these processes is largely unexplored. This article contributes to existing work on interactions between different stakeholders in peacekeeping (Dorussen and Gizelis 2013; Ruggeri et al. 2013; Gordon and Young 2017; Whalan 2017; Newby 2018) by focusing on NSAGs, analyzing the spectrum of interactions between the UN and NSAGs and highlighting differences across NSAGs. The NSAGs literature, on the other hand, has examined high-level diplomatic efforts by rebels and compliance with international norms (Coggins 2015; Jo 2015; Huang 2016b) but, to the knowledge of the author, no study has comprehensively addressed relations with the UN. This article brings together literature on rebel governance, peacekeeping and relations between different actors in conflict-contexts. It is a necessary step in understanding the range of relations between NSAGs and international actors. Moreover, the results highlight the need to move the focus of the research agenda on NSAGs and international actors from confrontation to cooperation.

The Fields of NSAG and UN Interactions

The end of the Cold War and the rise of internal armed conflicts precipitated a shift from “traditional” peacekeeping, which involved monitoring belligerents and maintaining buffer zones between them, to multidimensional operations. PKOs’ mandates have since then increasingly comprised disparate tasks—ranging from protecting civilians to organizing elections or fostering economic recovery—that military, police, and civilian personnel implement. There is no universally understood and applied conceptual framework that identifies the thematic areas that UN peace operations cover, but according to the UN itself peacekeepers “protect civilians, prevent conflicts, build Rule of Law and security institutions, promote human rights, empower women and deliver field support” (United Nations 2020). Although PKOs have been shown to struggle with implementing their often fragmented multidimensional mandated tasks, previous research illustrates that operations with multidimensional peacebuilding-focused mandates are more effective at preventing civil war recurrence than PKOs with more traditional, security-focused mandates (Doyle and Sambanis 2006; Blair et al. 2022).

As UN peace operations have become more multifaceted, so have the contexts in which the peacekeepers operate. Both the conflicts that the UN is currently engaged in and the international conflict management system constructed within and around the conflicts are increasingly complex, consisting of various often interdependent but competing local and international actors. In these environments, complex partnerships have become a more common feature of UN peace operations (Bellamy and Williams 2013), and “local ownership” a fundamental guiding principle in the context of UN peacekeeping (von Billerbeck 2016). Local ownership underlies the relations that the UN has with different local actors. Local ownership implies that in addition to the UN forming the local realities with their actions, the relationship is reciprocal; the local should, and does, also shape how the UN implements its tasks. For the local actors the policies of local ownership entail that interactions with the UN contribute to the development of post-conflict reality. Although the understanding of local ownership varies between local and international actors, what they share is the idea of acting within the same thematic field of peacebuilding and conflict management in a mutually formative manner (von Billerbeck 2016).
Although civilians, local NGOs, or traditional authorities are commonly considered the key actors for “local ownership” in the context of peacekeeping, also NSAGs often constitute and form the “local.” As a part of their wartime strategies, NSAGs deliberately target civilians (Hultman 2007; M Wood 2010), but NSAGs may also invest in providing civilian populations protection from violence and constructing public order (Weinstein 2006; Mampilly 2011; Arjona et al. 2015; Arjona 2016; Huang 2016a; Stewart 2018). For instance, rebels established police forces in more than 25 percent of the major civil wars that ended in 1950–2006 (Huang 2016a). Through various forms of service provision and institution building NSAGs create relations with civilians to, among others, increase their support among the civilian population (Weinstein 2006; Huang 2016a). However, different civilian actors may also form the ways in which NSAGs govern (Rubin 2020; van Baalen 2021) and rebels devolve governance tasks to civilians due to efficiency benefits (Breslawski 2021). The local ties between NSAGs and civilians sometimes endure after the conflict has ended (Martin et al. 2021), illustrating the intertwined relations between the two types of actors in conflict contexts. Thus, the abilities of the UN to understand the “local” as a whole, engage with the key actors of the conflicts they are involved in and implement their mandated tasks effectively are contingent on its capability to interact with NSAGs.

For these interactions to take place, the UN and an NSAG need to operate within the same thematic field. I argue that the activities of the UN and NSAGs overlap in four main fields in the context of peace operations: human rights, humanitarian needs and governance, security, and political processes. This is supported by previous research on both NSAG tactics and the tasks of the UN. Although previous research and the UN itself have categorized its activities in various different ways, I posit that the four categories presented above capture the core of the mandated tasks of the UN in mission contexts. Furthermore, prior research on governance by NSAGs has underlined the human rights compliance of NSAGs (Jo 2015; Stanton 2020), the prevalence of interactions between international humanitarian aid and armed non-state actors’ institutions (Jackson 2014; Macleod et al. 2016), the intrinsic significance of security matters for armed groups as well as the importance of diplomacy and political affairs for rebel actors (Coggins 2015; Huang 2016b; Cunningham et al. 2021). Thus, I argue that the four categories also capture the areas within which NSAGs operate. Due to the convergence of NSAGs’ and the UN’s activities within these areas, they form the categories of the vertical dimension of this typology. These four fields unarguably overlap and, within the context of peace operations, all aim to contribute to the reduction of violence and enhance peace in the aggregate. However, the separation of these fields is based on the objectives of the interactions, not their immediate outputs or overarching aims.

The Nature of NSAG–UN Interactions

In addition to shared policy areas, what describes interactions between international actors and NSAGs is the interactions’ nature. It captures the form of involvement emerging in the dyadic interaction event when the actors function within a shared thematic field. To understand the relations between different interdependent but competing local and international actors engaged in international peace and stability operations, De Coning and Friis (2011) have developed a typology according to which six types of relationships occur within such operations. According to their conceptual typology, relationships between different actors vary from being united at one end of the spectrum to competing at the other end. Similar frameworks have been used to understand civil–military relations in peace operations (De Coning 2007; Rietjens and Ruffa 2019). Building on de Coning’s conceptualization of non-governmental organization (NGO)–military relations but including situations of public confrontation, Ruffa and Vennesson (2014) present a spectrum
of potential relations between NGOs and military units. According to the authors, these relations vary from the actors publicly confronting each other hindering basic exchange of information to undertaking joint action in cooperative ways in complex humanitarian emergencies (Ruffa and Vennesson 2014). These frameworks underline the complexity of relations between heterogeneous groups of actors in international peace operations.

Typological frameworks have also been developed to understand relationships between NSAGs and state actors specifically. Broadening the perspective on state–insurgent relations, and shifting the focus from military dynamics to political relationships, Staniland (2012) suggests that wartime political orders vary according to the distribution of territorial control and the level of cooperation between states and insurgents. He proposes that there are different levels of possible cooperation, active, passive, or nonexistent, between states and violent non-state actors (Staniland 2012). The leading assumption of Staniland’s typology is that primarily violent actors compete for authority and control, which shapes their interactions, whereas the frameworks on peace and stability operations underline non-violent tactics and shared interests.

Building on these insights, I suggest that the nature of interactions between the UN and NSAGs in peace operations can be best understood by using a scale ranging from public confrontation to cooperation (Ruffa and Vennesson 2014), thus forming the horizontal dimension of my typology presented in figure 1. Although the spectrum has mainly been used to describe relationships between and within international organizations and non-violent non-state actors, I argue that the framework can also contribute to understanding of interactions between non-state violent actors and the UN in peace operations. Similar to NGOs, NSAGs are formally organized non-governmental entities that are separate from international multilateral actors. They may be financially or otherwise related to state-actors but have independent decision-making capacity. Although NSAGs use armed force to reach their goals, they rarely have primary incompatibilities that concern international actors which makes the relations between them and the UN similar to other forms of relations between internal and external actors in the context of peace operations. The relations between the UN and NSAGs are arguably formed by divergent political interests but not intrinsically based on violent competition over authority. All in all, my framework bridges the previously separate typological work that has focused on either international actors or armed groups, while at the same time recognizing the both violent and non-violent nature of these interactions.

Recent research shows that among local actors involved in violent interactions with peacekeepers, organized NSAGs constitute the largest group (Bromley 2018)
referring to the prevalence of confrontation at one end of the spectrum of interactions between the UN and NSAGs. However, violent engagement with peacekeepers is generally a rather rare phenomenon (Lindberg Bromley 2017) and in reality, peacekeeping missions seldom employ military coercion (Matanock and Lichtenheld 2022). Instead, some empirical evidence on UN missions in Africa indicates that as a part of their everyday activities, peace operations do interact with rebel authorities on the ground without conflicts arising from such engagement (Ruggeri et al. 2013) and there is evidence of peacekeeping correlating with NSAG governance provision (Florea 2020). Considering these findings and the non-violent wartime strategies NSAGs often apply, it can be assumed that the interactions between the UN and NSAGs can reach the form of peaceful cooperation. This is also in line with the recorded practices and objectives of the UN and its peace operations. Following De Coning and Friis’s (2011) work, I suggest that between these two is coordination. Public confrontation here means an explicit conflict between non-state armed actors, such as the UN peacekeepers being violently attacked by a militia group while securing humanitarian aid deliveries, as well as actions hindering contacts and basic exchange of information (Ruffa and Vennesson 2014). Thus, I do not separate violence from non-violence and instead use a cumulative category of confrontations to capture active hostilities. For defining coordination, I follow De Coning and Friis (2011, 256) and describe it as “an activity aimed at sharing information—.” I define cooperation as the closest form of interaction where actors implement joint action, such as joint training on human rights. When it comes to state-insurgent relations, in addition to contestation, Staniland (2012, 248) separates between active cooperation and passive cooperation where “active cooperation involves clear coordinated action toward a shared objective” and passive cooperation “involves live-and-let-live bargains.” Here in the case of NSAGs and the UN similar to “passive cooperation,” coordination refers to bargaining about specific activities or approaches within the four thematic fields presented above, while cooperation refers to clear joint action to reach a common objective.

**Method and Case Selection**

To illustrate the comprehensiveness, relevance and empirical applicability of the above-presented typological framework, I document and describe interactions between NSAGs and the UN in the cases of Côte d’Ivoire and Mali. I use reports from the UNSG in UNOCI, authorized in April 2004, and in MINUSMA, authorized in April 2013, as an empirical material to systematically map the interactions between the UN and NSAGs for the first one and a half years since the authorization of the missions. Based on this documentation, I provide a description of the interactions in both cases. If the documentation and descriptions from the two cases overlap with the categories within the typology, the analysis illustrates the relevance and comprehensiveness of the typology. The interactions identified in the empirical material are described based on the vertical dimension of the typology—thematic field of interactions—consisting of human rights, humanitarian needs and governance, security, and political process. The nature of interactions entailing confrontation, coordination, and cooperation that form the horizontal dimension of the typology emerges in the descriptions.

To examine the applicability of the typology in various contexts of UN peacekeeping two substantially different cases are chosen for the empirical analysis. The cases are, despite their uniqueness, missions that are representative of many others. Both are multidimensional peacekeeping missions, but while UNOCI is considered a successfully completed mission that has fulfilled most of its mandated tasks, similar to missions such as UNAMISIL in Sierra Leone and UNMIT in Timor Leste, MINUSMA is one of the ongoing, large, and complex “big four” missions mandated to use all necessary measures to “stabilize” the country. The cases are also substantially
different when it comes to the conflict dynamics and the key NSAGs. However, similar strategies and dynamics of armed actors can be found in other contexts as well. In Côte d’Ivoire, the civil conflict started in 2002. Three rebel groups emerging in late 2002 sought to improve the situation of previously discriminated northern population groups and to topple President Laurent Gbagbo’s government. By 2004 these groups had completely merged, leaving the Forces Nouvelles (FN) the only rebel actor in the conflict holding roughly the northern half of Côte d’Ivoire. During the analysis period, the FN established rules and practices of governance in the northern part of the country (Martin 2021; Martin et al. 2021; van Baalen 2021). Moreover, there is some evidence of the UN having relations to these structures (Förster 2015). Aligned with signed peace agreements, FN was also part of the National Reconciliation government in early 2004, although it decided to leave the arrangement later in the same year. In addition to FN, smaller militia groups were active in different parts of Côte d’Ivoire.

While Côte d’Ivoire had one relatively clear rebel actor during the period of analysis, in Mali, on the other hand, several armed groups with varying goals have cooperated, merged and fought since 2012 assumedly making it more challenging for international actors to establish relations with the groups. At the beginning of 2012, the Tuareg rebellion of the Mouvement National pour la Libération de l’Azawad (MNLA) shortly occupied large parts of northern Mali. However, soon after, Al-Qaida of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), its offshoot the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and Ansar Dine—all groups named as terrorist organizations by the UN—took control of the key population centers in the area. In January 2013, the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) and the French military intervention pushed the groups to the peripheries or underground. However, since then, the north continued to be dominated by disparate armed groupings. In June 2014, various northern groups eventually grouped themselves into two main camps: Platform (a number of organizations that seek national unity) and Coordination of Azawad Movements (several pro-independence movements, the main one being MNLA). Simultaneously the Islamists have continued to operate in the area. The substantial differences between the two cases and the preconditions for interactions between the UN and NSAGs enable illustrating the applicability of the typology in UN missions beyond UNOCI and MINUSMA. There is also temporal and spatial variation when it comes to the presence and tactics of armed groups in both cases of Côte d’Ivoire and Mali. The implications that the differences in NSAG tactics, as an example, may have for the observed interactions are discussed later in the paper.

Empirical Material and Documentation of Interactions

UNSG reports are accounts of peacekeeping missions through which the UN Secretariat under the leadership of the SG reports to the Security Council based on information from the field. Their structure is highly formalized. In the cases of UNOCI and MINUSMA, UNSG reports were published quarterly. The period covered for recording interaction activities in this paper is one and a half years since the authorization of the missions leading to six reports per mission. Efforts of both uniformed and civilian personnel are taken into account and a broad definition of the UN working within a peace operation is used, including actions by UN agencies affiliated with or supportive of the mission. Thus, the situations mentioned in the report that include a UN agency and an NSAG, and where the peacekeeping mission is to some extent involved, are coded as an interaction.3 However, only cases

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3When the primary actor on the UN side of the interaction is not the peacekeeping mission but another UN agency that is specifically mentioned in the analysis and the role of the mission is described. The empirical material includes some interactions with NSAGs that are implemented by UN actors (such as High Representatives) without a clear connection to or involvement in the mission. These are outside the scope of this paper.
where it is clear that at least one part of the dyad intentionally sought contact directly or needed the contact for their activity to be implemented are included. As an example, this leaves out cases where peacekeepers are hit by improvised explosive devices used by armed groups while patrolling but it is not clear whether the UN was intentionally targeted. The interaction activities are implemented at different levels, varying between high-level negotiation initiatives and local patrolling. Building on the rebel governance literature (Weinstein 2006; Mampilly 2011; Arjona et al. 2015; Arjona 2016; Huang 2016a), both interactions with an NSAG or with an institution associated with the group are included. Case-specific knowledge and accumulated information from the UNSG reports are occasionally used to assess the level of control that NSAGs have over specific institutions or areas, as an example. I follow Hofmann and Schneckener’s (2011) definition of NSAG as distinctive organizations that are (1) willing and capable to use violence for pursuing their objectives and (2) not integrated into formalized state institutions such as regular armies, presidential guards, police, or special forces. They, therefore, (3) possess a certain degree of autonomy with regard to politics, military operations, resources, and infrastructure (Hofmann and Schneckener 2011). In UNSG reports, NSAGs are often referred to as rebels, militias or, in the case of Mali, terrorists, or by the names of the groups. These rather broad definitions are chosen as this study is the first effort to capture the full range of interactions between the UN and NSAGs in the context of peace operations and the aim is to offer a framework through which interactions can be further conceptualized and categorized.

After identifying an interaction between the UN and NSAGs in a UNSG report, the interaction is categorized based on its thematic field and nature. When it comes to the thematic field, the direct objective that at least one of the actors has in the interaction determines the coding instead of the type of activity or the participants. Similarly, while the overarching intentions of peace and security may guide the majority of the UN’s efforts, the focus here is on the direct objective that the interaction is stated to have. Thus, not all meetings by political representatives are coded as being within the field of political process and military personnel can work with fields beyond security. As an example, discussions on the national reconciliation process at the ministerial level are part of the political process, but meetings on the rights of humanitarian personnel by political officers are within the field of humanitarian needs and governance as the direct aim of the meeting is to contribute to the delivery of humanitarian aid.

When it comes to the nature of the interaction, the distinct but often connected categories of confrontation, coordination, and cooperation are coded based on the information that the UNSG reports provide on the level of contention, on one side of the spectrum, and joint action, on the other side, that is associated with the interaction. What occurs in-between is coordination that focuses on information sharing. Concrete joint actions to reach an objective separate cooperation from coordination. Thus, as an example, negotiations on a national dialogue process between an NSAG and the UN mission are considered coordination but when a concrete joint output is mentioned, such as an agreement on holding elections, the interaction is considered cooperation. The three categories are often logically interlinked but the contributions of the UN are frequently presented in the reports as separate events which facilitate making distinctions between the interaction events and categories. Although the focus here is on interactions between NSAGs and the UN, and the nature of the interactions itself aims to capture the depth of the dyadic nature of the relation taking into account the form of involvement of the NSAG, the UNSG reports naturally only provide the perspective of the UN on the interactions. However, as this paper is the first effort to systematically document and conceptualize the NSAG–UN interactions, even an overview of the engagement focusing on the perspective of one of the interaction actors at a strategic level can be considered a contribution to the field.
Documenting interactions within the period of one and half years in the cases of Mali and Côte d’Ivoire leads to 148 observations of UN–NSAG interactions. The first reports in both missions include relatively few interactions since the missions have not been fully deployed, but the number of interactions per report remains rather stable throughout the rest of the time period. Interactions in a UNSG report vary between five (United Nations Security Council 2013a) and eighteen (United Nations Security Council 2004c). The vast majority of the UN–NSAG interactions identified in the UNSG reports from Côte d’Ivoire and Mali can be categorized based on the typology. When it comes to the vertical dimension of the typology, the only clear theme identified in the empirical material that falls outside the typological framework is the UN’s public outreach toward rebel-controlled areas to raise awareness of the mission and its mandate in Côte d’Ivoire. Regarding the nature of interactions, events where the mission clearly was present in a rebel-controlled area but no activity requiring coordination through information sharing took place fall outside the scope of the typology. During the analysis period, the missions started to address all of their mandated tasks and, based on the reporting, the activities in both of the missions clearly stabilized since their initial organization. Due to the stabilization of the activities and large number of documented interactions, patterns in the interactions could be identified.

UNSG reports are a commonly used source of data in peacekeeping research but have several shortcomings. For instance, although reports are used for documenting peacekeeping activities (Blair et al. 2022), they are not expected to be comprehensive accounts of specific events in the field, but instead describe the overall situation within the mission (Amicarelli and Di Salvatore 2021). What is more, there may be substantial reporting differences across missions and time. As UN peace operations depend on government consent, cooperation with NSAGs and actions legitimizing the efforts of actors opposing the government may be underreported. All in all, the mandates may cause bias in the reporting making it challenging to capture the empirical reality of interactions. This may be true especially in cases such as Mali where the mission is highly supportive of the Malian state. However, probing the empirical applicability of the typology based on two missions reduces the risk of biases relating to mission-specific reporting practices or actual events in the contexts at hand. As NSAG–UN interactions are likely to be underreported rather than overreported, the findings of my empirical analysis and the applicability of the typology may be even stronger than those presented below when using other type of data sources.

Describing NSAG–UN Interactions in Côte d’Ivoire 2004–2005

Human Rights

The empirical material from Côte d’Ivoire illustrates that confrontation, coordination, and cooperation occurred between the UN and NSAGs when the actors worked with human rights. In accordance with its mandate to contribute to the promotion and protection of human rights and to ending impunity for human rights violations in Côte d’Ivoire, UNOCI deployed human rights officers to areas controlled by the main rebel group FN. UNOCI personnel monitored, investigated, and reported on several cases of human rights violations in areas controlled by rebel forces requiring coordination with them. UNOCI also conducted, together with its partners, assessments focusing specifically on the rights and protection of children. It is reported that some of these assessments in the west and north of the country confirmed the

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4The aim of this paper is not to collect and present quantitative data on interactions but some numbers are presented here to provide an overview of the systematic documentation that underlies the descriptive analysis.

5To illustrate the documentation, the interactions in these two UNSG progress reports can be found in tables 1 and 2 in the supplementary files.
continuous use of child soldiers by the FN as well as by pro-Government militia groups (United Nations Security Council 2005c). UNOCI also engaged in direct dialogue with FN authorities to discuss the results of its investigations on human rights abuses with a view to ending violations and holding perpetrators accountable (United Nations Security Council 2005b).

Some of the deepest and most cooperative forms of interactions between rebels and UNOCI during the analysis period were manifested in different training initiatives in the fields of security and human rights. Within human rights, UNOCI developed a program to strengthen human rights protection based on an evaluation of the level of human rights awareness in the general population and on the capacities of authorities in areas controlled by the FN, implicitly the rebel authorities, to promote and protect human rights effectively (United Nations Security Council 2005b). However, the FN also at times actively hindered the UN from having access to information in the areas it controlled. This was related to human rights violations, for instance, demonstrating confrontation (United Nations Security Council 2005a).

**Humanitarian Needs and Governance**

In Côte d’Ivoire, UNOCI supported the delivery of humanitarian aid and services to civilians, such as medical care and education, in the rebel-controlled areas both strategically and operationally. Similar to the investigative missions on human rights, field assessment missions, led by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), were conducted in the FN-controlled areas during the analysis period (United Nations Security Council 2004b). UNOCI maintained dialogue with FN regarding humanitarian needs and governance demonstrating coordination between the actors.

Some of the humanitarian and governance activities related to the efforts to strengthen state capacity, but in practice required cooperation with rebel authorities or implicitly strengthened the rebel-led governance structures. As an example, UNOCI supported the restoration of administration and public services in areas under the control of the FN. Additionally, in rebel-controlled Korhogo, fuel supplies provided by UNOCI ensured the functioning of the main hospital (United Nations Security Council 2005b, 2004c). These examples allude to cooperation between the UN and FN.

While no confrontations between NSAGs and UNOCI were documented within humanitarian needs and governance during the analysis period, confrontation between other UN actors and the FN arose. When it comes to humanitarian aid, military elements of the FN for instance fired several shots into the air as a World Food Programme (WFP) aircraft landed at the airport controlled by them, protesting that they had not been informed in advance of the arrival of the plane. Related to the issue, UNOCI communicated with the rebels, whose leadership assured that UN personnel would have free and unimpeded access to all areas under their control (United Nations Security Council 2004c). Correspondingly, the interactions transformed due to the coordination by UNOCI that facilitated further cooperation between the FN and the UN as a whole.

**Security**

When it comes to security-related interactions with FN, UNOCI troops were deployed to rebel-controlled and governed areas to support the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) process and work for increased security through patrolling. Coordination between the actors took also place when UNOCI engaged in dialogue with FN authorities to discuss the mission’s security activities. For instance, National Armed Forces of Côte d’Ivoire (FANCI), the military elements of
the FN, the French Licorne force, and ONUCI had meetings on the cantonment of troops and joint preparations for the DDR program (United Nations Security Council 2004b).

Also, cooperation with FN was evident within the DDR activities of UNOCI. UNOCI troops supported the DDR process operationally engaging and acting together with the rebels. Another main task of UNOCI in relation to the rebels was unarguably to provide security for the FN ministers of the Government of National Reconciliation and to contribute to the security situation through patrolling jointly with FN and FANCI. These actions required joint efforts between the UN and FN. What is more, cooperation was evident also in security training activities. The UNOCI police component developed training modules for courses in the maintenance of public law and order, community policing and the investigation of major crimes, including money-laundering, and then provided training for 600 security auxiliaries recruited from the ranks of the FN (United Nations Security Council 2005c). The trained personnel were to be deployed together with UNOCI forces in the north and be responsible for providing security once the cantonment of the FN began. However, this did not commence during the analysis period. UNOCI also occasionally cooperated with militias. UNOCI and Licorne troops, along with elements of FANCI, secured the release of the leader and members of l’Alliance Patriotique Wé militia group who were being held hostage by “young patriots”⁶ (United Nations Security Council 2005c).

Although relations between the UN and NSAGs are often expected to be confrontational or coercive, during the analysis period in Côte d’Ivoire, only a few confrontations between the UN and the main rebel group FN were reported. However, based on the UN reporting, the most frequent and severe confrontations occurred between UNOCI and another armed actor; a grouping called “young patriots,” highly supportive of the presidency of Laurent Gbagbo. On one occasion, robust intervention by UNOCI was required when a large number of young patriots, some armed with guns, forcefully tried to take over a hotel where several FN ministers were residing (United Nations Security Council 2004c). UNOCI was tasked to provide security for the ministers. “Young patriots” also often prevented UNOCI from conducting its activities as military observers investigating violent incidents (United Nations Security Council 2005c).

Political Process

Since the deployment of the UNOCI peacekeepers, some of the interactions between the UN and FN aimed to facilitate dialogue to support the peace process at a political level. These efforts included urging the parties to adhere to the commitments made under peace agreements signed between 2003 and 2005 and actions aiming to reduce tensions and build trust between FN and FANCI making it possible to negotiate on the agreements. Some of the coordination activities contributing to the peace process were general joint meetings between the mission and the two main parties to the conflict (United Nations Security Council 2004a). Others were high-level bilateral meetings, such as discussions between the Special Representative and the Secretary-General of the FN (United Nations Security Council 2004c). Some of the reconciliation and trust-building that paved the way for the peace process at the national level were implemented “on the ground” as UNOCI troops interacted and maintained “close contacts” with both FANCI and FN fighters during crisis times (United Nations Security Council 2004c). This liaison led to cooperation between the different parties.

The political efforts by UNOCI and FN occasionally faced resistance and were confronted especially by pro-government groups. “Young patriots” often confronted

⁶Referred in the report as “Young Wé Patriots of Duékoué.”
UNOCI by obstructing its movement and for instance prevented UNOCI’s meeting with local authorities (United Nations Security Council 2005c).

The Typology

As highlighted in the descriptive analysis and in table 1 below, it is possible to identify interactions along both dimensions of the typology in Côte d’Ivoire—thus making use of the whole typology. The UN facilitated dialogue and trust-building between the conflict parties within not only the political process but also other thematic fields such as security. UNOCI and FN implemented joint action as a part of security provision and the mission engaged with the FN to improve human rights compliance. UNOCI was also deeply involved in responding to humanitarian and governance needs in rebel-controlled areas. However, also confrontations took place. What is notable is that while coordination and cooperation dominate UNOCI–FN interactions, interactions between UNOCI and the pro-government group “young patriots” were mainly confrontational.

Describing NSAG–UN Interactions in Mali 2013–2014

Human Rights

During the reporting period, there is a lot of variation in the form of interactions between the UN and NSAGs in Mali. Coordination and cooperation between MINUSMA and armed groups within human rights were especially prevalent when it comes to activities aiming at addressing the rights of children as well as monitoring the legal proceedings and assessing detention conditions of alleged members of armed...
groups. MINUSMA had access to individuals detained by armed groups, at least by the group MNLA and HCUA active in northern Mali implying information sharing (United Nations Security Council 2014c). The mission also coordinated and negotiated with MNLA on the release of children formerly associated with the group and detained in a jail controlled by it (United Nations Security Council 2013b). These negotiations were at least partly successful. Additionally, with the support of MINUSMA, the joint MAA–MNLA military leadership committed to sign a command order prohibiting the recruitment of children and to allow the mission to screen its troops in September 2014 illustrating important cooperation on the rights of children (United Nations Security Council 2014d). Within the field of detention and corrections, the Special Representative negotiated with the NSAGs, such as MNLA, to hand over non-combatant prisoners affiliated with other groups, in this case MAA (Platform) (United Nations Security Council 2014d).

The UN engaged with NSAGs, including MNLA and HCUA, specifically on conflict-related sexual violence. UN informed the actors of being responsible for carrying out such acts, being listed in the SG report on conflict-related sexual violence, and discussed the actions required to prevent and respond to conflict-related sexual violence (United Nations Security Council 2013b). To conclude, in the fields of human rights, in addition to ensuring that NSAGs adhere to human rights standards, the UN worked to safeguard that alleged members of armed groups are the objects of international norms, for instance when it comes to detention conditions. No confrontations within the thematic field of human rights were found in the reports.

Humanitarian Needs and Governance

Compared to UNOCI, fewer interactions with NSAGs evolved around service provision to civilians living in rebel-controlled areas. Some indications of NSAGs and the UN interacting to address the humanitarian needs in northern Mali, however, exist. For instance, the Humanitarian Coordinator of MINUSMA reached out to armed groups stressing that it was essential that they help to ensure the safety of humanitarian workers ensuring the access to humanitarian aid (United Nations Security Council 2014d). Thus, similar to UNOCI, MINUSMA coordinated with armed groups to ensure humanitarian access implemented by other partners.

Additionally, some coordination and cooperation between MINUSMA and especially MNLA took place with respect to governance and MINUSMA’s efforts to facilitate the re-establishment of state authority and basic services in the north. For instance, the SRSG and other MINUSMA personnel had an active role in consultations to vacate a Governorate building and the national radio station in Kidal controlled by MNLA in November 2013. The coordination consultations led to the armed groups signing a declaration committing to vacate the Governorate and radio station. The operation by MNLA took place in the presence of a high-level delegation from MINUSMA (United Nations Security Council 2014a). However, also occasional confrontations took place. As an example, MNLA’s strong control of justice and corrections institutions reportedly hindered the reopening of courts and prisons supported by MINUSMA (United Nations Security Council 2014c).

Security

One of the main tasks of MINUSMA in Mali has been to provide security to civilians, including areas where the rebels had a strong presence. In the case of Mali, many of the security-related tasks entailed violent confrontations with NSAGs. However, MINUSMA also occasionally nonviolently coordinated and cooperated with NSAGs to contribute to security. A theme that often occurs in the reporting when it comes
to the UN’s relations with rebels in the case of MINUSMA is cantonment. In Mali, the cantonment was considered the first stage toward an effective program for DDR ("Continuation of Preparatory Work on the Cantonments" 2014) and MINUSMA supported the cantonment of the armed groups (MNLA and HCUA) at technical and strategic levels. MINUSMA interacted with the NSAGs to build a common understanding among the conflict parties of the cantonment process indicating coordination. For instance, in workshops facilitated by MINUSMA, the parties discussed the modalities for conducting reconnaissance and validation visits of the cantonment sites, the establishment of a coordination cell, security arrangements inside and outside the cantonment sites and a timeline for the implementation of the arrangements (United Nations Security Council 2014b). Some of the coordination interactions led to joint action later during the reporting period illustrating the continuum-like character of the interaction spectrum. For instance, coordination transformed into cooperation as dialogue and information sharing on the cantonment process eventually led to a technical document, signed by the representatives of all armed groups, the Government, and the international community. The agreement outlined the steps necessary for the development of the cantonment process (United Nations Security Council 2014b).

In the field of security provision, fewer cooperative military interactions such as joint patrols with NSAGs were mentioned compared to the case of UNOCI. One exception was when in July 2014 mixed observation and monitoring teams, which comprised representatives of the MINUSMA force, the Malian Defense and Security Forces, MNLA, HCUA, and MAA, were established and mandated to assess reported allegations of abuse and/or provocations by the parties of a previous ceasefire agreement (United Nations Security Council 2014d). Instead, many of the security-related interaction activities entailed information-sharing, dialogue, and negotiations. For instance, MINUSMA facilitated a cessation of hostilities between two NSAGs that enabled the safe return of civilians to their home communities (United Nations Security Council 2014d). All in all, in Mali, the beneficiaries of coordination or cooperative protection interactions were implicitly and explicitly mainly civilians. This can be contrasted with Côte d’Ivoire where the focus was on providing protection to high-level rebel leaders.

As mentioned above, confrontational security interactions were prevalent in Mali. For instance, MINUSMA checkpoints were attacked leading to the death of peacekeepers, series of rocket and improvised explosive device attacks targeted MINUSMA, when operating together with the Malian armed forces and Operation Serval, and MINUSMA premises were targeted by rocket and mortar fire incidents (United Nations Security Council 2014c). The Islamist groups claimed responsibility for many of the violent attacks on MINUSMA. However, as in many of the attacks involving MINUSMA the perpetrators remain unknown or it is not clear whether they have targeted MINUSMA intentionally, these are not considered interactions between the UN and NSAGs.

**Political Process**

When it comes to the UN’s interactions with NSAGs active in norther Mali, mainly MNLA and HCUA, MINUSMA’s role in the beginning of the mission focused strongly on supporting the political process. MINUSMA representatives actively en-

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7In UNSG reports the individuals at cantonment sites are referred to as combatants or members of armed groups. Due to this and the described coordination with the armed groups regarding the cantonment process the interactions around the cantonment are considered interactions with armed groups instead of former combatants.

8When the actors are referred to as “armed groups,” “militias,” or similar, they are considered NSAGs. Often in these cases, it is clear from the context that these categories refer to groups named elsewhere in the reporting. However, when there is mention of “unidentified assailants,” as an example, it remains unclear whether these are NSAGs or actors such as individual criminals. Thus, these events are not coded as UN–NSAG interactions.
Table 2. Typology on NSAG–UN interactions with examples of documented activities from Mali.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of interaction</th>
<th>Confrontation</th>
<th>Coordination</th>
<th>Cooperation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Human rights</strong></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Discussing with armed groups about the actions required to prevent and respond to conflict-related sexual violence</td>
<td>As a result of UN efforts rebels commit to a command order prohibiting the recruitment of children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>MINUSMA- MNL-A and HCUA</td>
<td>MINUSMA- MAA- MNL-A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Humanitarian needs and governance</strong></td>
<td>MINUSMA control of justice and corrections institutions hinder the reopening of the Justice of Peace Tribunal and the prison supported by MINUSMA</td>
<td>Informing armed groups and communities about ensuring the safety of humanitarian workers</td>
<td>Due to consultations by MINUSMA, MNLA vacates a Governorate building together with MINUSMA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MINUSMA- MNL-A</td>
<td>MINUSMA- “armed groups”</td>
<td>MINUSMA- MNL-A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Security</strong></td>
<td>Armed groups attacking UN checkpoints</td>
<td>Negotiating with, non-state armed groups to ensure the safe return of civilians</td>
<td>Mixed observation and monitoring teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MINUSMA - Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb</td>
<td>MINUSMA- MNL-A and HCUA</td>
<td>MINUSMA- MNL-A, HCUA and MAA (Coordination)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political process</strong></td>
<td>MNLA and HCUA suspend their participation in the Monitoring and Evaluation Committee chaired by SRSG</td>
<td>Negotiations and preparations for a national dialogue process</td>
<td>Signing an agreement to hold election and inclusive peace talks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MINUSMA- MNL-A and HCUA</td>
<td>MINUSMA- “armed groups”</td>
<td>MINUSMA- MNL-A and HCUA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

MINUSMA also managed some confrontational interactions with NSAGs and transformed them at least occasionally into positive interactions. In September 2013, MNLA and HCUA suspended their participation in the Monitoring and Evaluation Committee responsible for monitoring and supporting the implementation of the preliminary agreement to hold the presidential election and inclusive peace talks in Mali. Interactions between the Special Representative and representatives of the armed groups led to the resumption of their participation (United Nations Security Council 2014c).

The Typology

As table 2 and figure 2 illustrate, although MINUSMA is commonly known as the UN’s most dangerous peacekeeping mission and highly supportive of the Malian state, various types of non-confrontational and non-violent interactions between NSAGs and the UN have emerged in the mission context. Although confrontations—most commonly within the field of security—took place, other
forms of interactions with NSAGs dominate the reporting. Especially within human rights and political processes, the UN and NSAGs actively coordinated and cooperated to address issues such as sexual violence, the rule of law, and the peace process. MINUSMA engaged with the Tuareg rebels to facilitate trust-building not only politically but also by monitoring detention conditions and protecting civilians. MINUSMA’s engagement took place at high levels entailing dialogue, advocacy and negotiations and to a lesser extent by military personnel than in the case of UNOCI, where several assessment missions, training initiatives, and liaison between military forces occurred.

**What Explains the Variation?**

The empirical evidence and subsequent conceptual typology illustrate that interactions between the UN and NSAGs take various forms beyond violent security-focused confrontations or coercive engagement—tactics often highlighted by previous research. As highlighted above, the UN and NSAGs interact within four main thematic fields: human rights, humanitarian needs and governance, security, and political process. The vast majority of the UN–NSAG interactions identified in the UNSG reports from Côte d’Ivoire and Mali can be categorized under these four themes, which brings forth the relevance of the vertical dimension. Furthermore, as the empirical descriptions highlight, the three different but often connected forms of interactions—confrontation, coordination, and cooperation—appear clearly within the empirical material. This is despite the deficiencies of the UN reporting and the at times fluid character of different interactions. The typology’s dimensions together with capturing the documented interactions underline the comprehensiveness and aptness of the typology.

However, there is substantial variation in the interactions between the two missions and across NSAGs within them. As the descriptions and figure 2 illustrate, in Côte d’Ivoire coordination and cooperation between the mission and NSAGs are more common in the field of security compared to Mali. On the other hand, in Mali, the political process dominates coordination and cooperation while such interactions within humanitarian needs and governance are also relatively rare. In both contexts, confrontations are most common in the thematic field of security but the descriptions demonstrate within mission variation. The interactions within security are confrontational mainly with NSAGs that the missions do not otherwise coordinate or cooperate with. Two key factors are expected to account for the variation in the interactions: institutional arrangements including the UN mission’s mandate and peace agreement as well as the characteristics of the NSAGs. The characteristics of the NSAGs entail ideology, legitimacy seeking and local governance structures and practices.
The institutional arrangements that guide the UN’s engagement and the relationship between the conflict parties are likely to affect both the thematic field and the nature of the UN–NSAG interactions. Peace agreements and peacekeeping mandates build the foundations of the relations between different actors in conflict contexts and define the thematic priorities of the actors in the (post)-conflict period. As an example, in Côte d’Ivoire, the Linas–Marcoussis Agreement had legitimized the FN and defined its role in the Government of National Reconciliation. UNOCI was further mandated to assist the Government of National Reconciliation, including the FN ministers. To implement its mandate, UNOCI needed to coordinate with the FN by, for instance, liaising “with the National Armed Forces of Côte d’Ivoire (FANCI) and the military elements of the FN in order to promote, in coordination with the French forces, the re-establishment of trust between all the Ivorian forces involved” (United Nations 2004b). The FN, on the other hand, could benefit from security guarantees that the peacekeeping mission, and cooperation with it, offered. Peacekeeping interventions may protect the rebel side abuse by the often stronger government side (Fortna 2008, 23) explaining the motivation of the rebel group and, accordingly, the prevalence of cooperation within the field of security.

In the case of Mali, a comprehensive peace agreement was only signed in 2015 and when mandating MINUSMA the Security Council demanded all rebel armed groups to put aside their arms and cease hostilities immediately encouraging an inclusive negotiation process only with groups who had cut all ties with terrorist organizations and who “recognize, without conditions, the unity and territorial integrity of the Malian State” (United Nations 2013, 2). Furthermore, MINUSMA was mandated to “deter threats and take active steps to prevent the return of armed elements” (United Nations 2013, 7). The mandate resisted the security activities of NSAGs which could explain the lack of cooperation in the field of security. Mandate formulations may also partly explain why, for instance, MINUSMA underlined human rights coordination and cooperation compared to UNOCI. While MINUSMA was mandated to “promote and protect of human rights” (United Nations 2013, 8), UNOCI’s mandate was only to “provide assistance in the field of human rights” (United Nations 2004b, 4). Although mandates tasks do not always translate into actions in the field (Blair et al. 2022), they provide crucial guidance for the priorities of the missions.

The importance of institutional arrangements for cooperation is underlined by the fact that only after the first round of formal peace negotiations toward a peace agreement took place and a road map and a declaration of cessation of hostilities were signed between the Government of Mali and the two respective coalitions of armed groups, mixed observation, and monitoring teams which comprising of MINUSMA force, the Malian Defense and Security Forces and some of the armed groups were established (United Nations Security Council 2014d). On the other hand, the lack of a peace agreement also explains the focus of MINUSMA on high-level coordination and cooperation with the NSAGs within the political process. The mission needed to coordinate and cooperate in order to advance the peacemaking process while in the case of UNOCI such process was already further. In 2013, the MINUSMA civilian component was reportedly “focusing on supporting the political process including negotiations with armed groups and preparations for the inclusive national dialogue process” (United Nations Security Council 2013b, 13). In a civil war context where NSAGs challenge the authority of the state through violence, it can be expected that cooperation between international actors and NSAGs within security is more sensitive than within other fields underlying the importance of institutional arrangement for non-confrontational interactions within this thematic field.

In addition to institutional arrangements, characteristics of the NSAGs are likely to form the interactions they have with the UN. It is apparent in the empirical analysis that while some NSAGs seem to actively coordinate and cooperate with
the UN, and vice versa, others are more prone to have confrontations with the UN. In the case of Mali, violent confrontations mainly occurred with the Islamist groups that were excluded from the political process and with whom the mission did not engage non-violently. In Côte d’Ivoire, confrontational interactions with Young Patriots dominate the category of confrontation. Both of these actors’ ideologies are opposite to that of the UN hindering possibilities for coordination and cooperation. For other NSAGs, coordinating and cooperating with the UN may provide opportunities to strengthen their legitimacy. Previous research has shown that NSAGs occasionally seek legitimacy from international actors (Jo 2015; Stanton 2020; Cunningham et al. 2021). Although existing research has not focused on the UN or its peacekeeping specifically, it can be assumed that international legitimacy building may incentivize NSAGs to cooperate with the UN. Both the MNLA in Mali and FN in Côte d’Ivoire commonly cooperated with the missions across thematic fields have been found to seek legitimacy not only internally but also externally. MNLA has practiced diplomacy toward varying international audiences (Bos and Melissen 2019) and FN had close relations with France, among others (Boulden 2013).

At a local level, structures and practices of NSAG governance could explain why the interactions in some cases only take place within specific thematic fields. For example, for the UN to be able to train rebel police forces and harmonize civilian protection, the rebels need to have the police forces to engage with. While some NSAGs have police forces, there is substantial variation across NSAGs when it comes to their policing capacities (Huang 2016a). Similarly, the type of civilian governance structures implemented by the FN may, for instance, partly explain the prevalence of coordination and cooperation within humanitarian needs and governance in Côte d’Ivoire. In Korhogo, which was the second largest city controlled by the rebellion, FN administrators involved themselves in a broad range of local affairs which enabled coordination with UNOCI (Martin et al. 2021, 224).

Also, different operational environments on the ground may contribute to explaining some of the observed differences. MINUSMA is the most dangerous UN mission for peacekeepers, which poses challenges to interactions with NSAGs as a whole. If the international actors have hard time leaving their bases, constructive interactions are likely difficult to build. However, a lack of coordination and cooperation may have crucial consequences for advancing conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes. As the analysis highlights, coordination with NSAGs helped to solve confrontations within humanitarian needs and created foundations for agreements on human rights commitments, as an example. This interlinked nature of the different forms of interactions highlights the need of information sharing in order to avoid confrontation and promote cooperation, even—or especially—in cases where confrontational interactions are prevalent.

**What to Do with the Typology?**

The typology not only contributes to understanding UN–NSAG relations but also enables explaining different forms of interactions between the UN and NSAGs. It also provides avenues for future research to theorize on peacekeeping effectiveness and non-state actors in conflict contexts and to further formulate and examine causal claims that have been largely overlooked by previous research. I will now illustrate how the typology and its novel dyadic approach contribute to existing research. Additionally, I will bring forth some of the wide-ranging policy-implications of my contribution.

First, the typology provides a framework for future data collection and systematic empirical analysis on the causes and consequences of interactions between the UN and NSAGs. Temporally and geographically expanded data—collected based on the typology and combined with existing data sources—would enable further anal-
yses on the factors that explain both within and between case variations presented above. Additional data collection would, for instance, enable assessing the extent to which the theoretical expectations presented above on mandate formulations, peace agreements or rebel group characteristics have explanatory power in the cases of Côte d’Ivoire, Mali, and beyond. Data collection and descriptive analyses on other UN missions, based on the typology, could also prompt further theorization on factors that explain the documented variation. Additional data would also enable investigating temporal variation in interactions across missions due to global peacekeeping policy changes or shifts in armed group leadership, for instance. With new data based on the typology, also subnational variation in interactions could be further brought forth. Although this article has highlighted key factors that may explain variation in the typology, additional work would be necessary to develop an explanatory typology.

Second, the typology facilitates examining what explains peacekeeping success. Two recent studies are used here to demonstrate the contribution of the typology. Focusing on UN peacekeeping in Africa, Fjelde et al. (2019) found that the presence of peacekeeping forces locally is associated with a lower risk of civilian targeting by rebel actors. Their results imply that local deployment matters for rebel-perpetrated violence due to the ability of peacekeepers to shape the local incentive structure for civilian victimization (Fjelde et al. 2019). However, it remains unclear how in practice the incentive structure for civilian targeting can be shaped. Here, the typology can offer useful insights. For instance, cooperation in the form of humanitarian needs and governance is likely to enhance the possibilities for the NSAGs to provide services and gain civilian support reducing the to behave coercively toward civilians, especially in the presence of the UN. This typology could, thus, facilitate studying and identifying the interactions that successfully shape the incentive structure of NSAGs and explain local variation in civilian victimization.

Additionally, the typology may contribute to recent efforts to more comprehensively theorize about mechanisms explaining peacekeeping effectiveness. Although these efforts have generally been scarce in the existing literature, in her recent book Howard (2019) presents mechanisms of persuasion, inducement and coercion through which peacekeepers exercise power and act effectively. The typology could be used to explore how Howard’s innovative, but at times broad, mechanisms relate to concrete interactive behavior in mission contexts. For instance, persuasion that for the UN refers to efforts that aim to “convince the warring parties to stop fighting, and to consolidate peace, by engaging politically as opposed to violently” (Howard 2019, 32) assumably requires interactions with NSAGs and is constructed around dyadic behavior between two actors. However, previous research has not systematically studied this engagement. By showing how persuasion could be applied in relation to NSAGs, the typology provides a tool for further unpacking theoretical mechanisms of peacekeeping effectiveness. As an example, coordination or cooperation in the field of political process could explain success in persuasion while confrontation could disrupt such mechanism.

Relating to the scholarly perspectives presented above, this typology and related research can have substantial implications for UN policies. Disaggregating the UN–NSAG interactions based on different fields of interactions that capture UN policy areas enables assessing the implications of UN peacekeeping engagements and allocation of resources. Formulating causal claims based on the typology can ultimately provide answers to questions on how the UN can best protect civilian lives, provide human security, or avoid casualties within its own personnel. Similarly, further analyzing how mandate characteristics or security environments may drive variation in interactions within and across cases could provide guidance for the UN on how to formulate its mandates and implement its operations. Additionally, a better understanding of what peacekeepers do when deployed within different policy fields
in relation to local actors could also provide avenues for assessing relationships between mandated tasks and practices in the field.

Conclusions

This article has provided the first typological framework on UN–NSAG interactions. Through detailed and systematic descriptions of the interactions in the cases of Côte d’Ivoire and Mali, this paper shows that the UN often engages with NSAGs across various policy fields within peace operations. What is more, these interactions are not only confrontational but often entail cooperation or coordination. While the aim of this article has been to conceptualize rather than quantify the interactions, the typology provides future research a framework within which to further collect data and examine the prevalence of NSAG–UN interactions. The typology, future data collection efforts, and theorizations enable assessing the causes and consequences of the interactions that define and form local realities in contemporary civil war settings, as illustrated in this article. Based on this research, policies on different forms of engagement that aim to, among others, provide humanitarian aid, protection and compliance with international law can be formulated.

The typology aims to capture the dyadic nature of interactions both when it comes to the form of the interaction as well as its thematic area. Through its dimensions, the typology addresses the agency of both NSAGs and the UN, but the empirical material unarguably only provides the perspective of the UN on the events. Future research should aim to gather data on and examine the perspectives of the NSAGs on interactions with international interveners. Although this article focuses on capturing interactions acknowledged by the UN through its reporting, future research could provide additional perspectives by applying the typology to empirical material beyond UNSG reports. Additional data would also enable examining temporal and sub-national variation in the interactions.

The different activities that the UN implements in coordination and cooperation with NSAGs also tie into and highlight some noteworthy issues around the principles that guide UN peace operations, especially the principles of consent of the warring parties and impartiality. On one hand, interactions with NSAGs may contribute to the missions’ objectives of impartiality. This was stated to be the case in Côte d’Ivoire when human rights officers were deployed to northern parts of the country. On the other hand, as UN peace operations depend on government consent, legitimizing the efforts of rebels through cooperation may result in losing access to the ground or contribute to increased tensions. Issues around these principles may also cause variation in the forms of interactions. The tensions that the UN–NSAG interactions may raise in terms of the doctrinal principles illustrate that these interactions are at the core of the UN and its PKOs. Due to the rising importance of non-state actors in the international system, interactions with NSAGs at different levels are and will most likely continue to be an important part of the tasks of the UN with wide-ranging policy implications that should be thoroughly analyzed.

References


From Confrontation to Cooperation


