Received: 6 June 2023 | Revised: 22 October 2023 | Accepted: 25 October 2023

DOI: 10.1111/1758-5899.13305

SPECIAL SECTION

Ad hoc coalitions: From hierarchical to network accountability in peace operations?

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Funding information
Research Council of Norway, Grant/Award Number: 314967

Abstract

Launching multinational peace operations are time and politically sensitive decisions that frequently involve the use of force. As a result, a host of accountability issues arise. To date, mainly backward-looking and hierarchical accountability measures have been developed to guide the implementation of multinational peace operations led by the most prominent actors in this policy domain: intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and ad hoc coalitions (AHCs). We argue that the existing accountability mechanisms have their flaws, which hypothetically speaking could at least be partly addressed by converting AHCs into network hubs with an emphasis on pluralistic and horizontal accountability practices. AHCs bring a diverse set of actors together and operate with a light institutional framework, in which actors meet on equal grounds. If used as network hubs, AHCs can facilitate an open information exchange and exchange of best practices.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Armed violence such as civil wars, military coups and regional(ised) conflicts persist around the globe (Davies et al., 2023). To address these forms of violence, many political leaders have asked intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) like the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU) to deploy peace operations. However, IGO-led peace operations take time to be launched, not least because political agreement between their member states needs to be achieved and troop contributions need to be assured. These shortcomings have given rise to another actor: ad hoc coalitions (AHCs). AHCs are an organisational form characterised by task-specific mandates and speedy set up with short timeframes (Reykers et al., 2023). In the realm of crisis management and peace operations, they have taken on tasks such as stabilisation and counterterrorism. Recent examples include the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) mandated to fight the Boko Haram in the area around Lake Chad (but also making the news for grave human rights and international humanitarian law violations) and the Group of Five Sahel Joint Force (G5S-JF) to fight terrorism in Mali and neighbouring countries. Increasingly, AHCs operate both alongside and *in lieu* of IGO peace operations. The parallel deployment of the G5S-JF and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) is one example.

Both IGOs and AHCs raise accountability concerns – not only about how IGOs and AHCs should be held accountable, but also how IGOs and AHCs impact each other's accountability when deployed in parallel. To address this conundrum, we first spell out existing IGO and AHC accountability mechanisms. Building on the special section's framework paper, we show that most existing accountability mechanisms have first been conceived for IGOs in isolation from other international actors. If their relationship with other actors is not defined from the start, parallel deployments of AHCs and IGOs have impacted on the safety and effectiveness of peace operations (Novosseloff & Sharland, 2019; Sherman et al., 2021).

In recent years, IGO-IGO and IGO-AHC accountability mechanisms have seen the light of day. While IGOs have started to acknowledge that they operate in a densely institutionalised environment, overall existing accountability mechanisms remain hierarchical and backward-looking. As Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann point out, 'hierarchical accountability implies

a relationship between super- and sub-ordination' which in the realm of crisis management has translated into (discriminatory) conditionality practices emphasising resource asymmetries between actors. Their backward-looking nature reinforces these asymmetries by employing sanctioning mechanisms. In short, in instances where the relationship between IGOs and IGOs and AHCs is defined, we observe a tendency towards hierarchical accountability structures built on resource dependencies, which gives the more powerful actor the advantage to define who is deemed to be held accountable and how. At the same time, when these powerful actors lack the political will to participate in peace operations themselves, they are willing to set aside their accountability mechanisms and let AHCs act as they wish.

We argue that existing accountability mechanisms could benefit from a reevaluation of AHCs. AHCs *as an organisational form* can offer accountability-enhancing opportunities. Several conditions need to be met for this to happen: First, AHCs' task-specific and crisis-oriented focus helps define a minimum baseline based on which actors should be held accountable on how to intervene. Second, if AHCs consist of several (state and non-state) actors, they can serve as a network hub which can allow for a better sharing of preferences, information and best practices in a time-sensitive and needs-based manner rather than focusing on hierarchical communication channels. Third, their heterogeneous set up on a small scale can serve as deliberation over possible accountability failures. Under these conditions, AHCs have at least in theory more potential to create everyday horizontal and pluralistic accountability practices and norms compared to IGOs on their own.

This discussion should not be understood as providing off-the-shelf solutions, but rather as a conversation starter. We very much agree that existing AHCs are seriously flawed in practice. However, AHCs as an organisational form are likely here to stay, given how popular they are with various governments. We, therefore, want to introduce ideas of how to rethink AHCs by discussing some of the opportunities they could offer to make peace operations more accountable.

2 | IGO ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS AND EFFORTS TO INCREASE ACCOUNTABILITY

UN-led and UN-mandated peace operations have been the dominant type of peace operations since the end of the Cold War. Since 1948, the UN Security Council (UNSC) has mandated 71 UN peace operations (UN, 2023a). As the following discussion shows, IGOs have adapted to criticism and developed accountability mechanisms over time. Despite changes, these accountability mechanisms are mainly centred on (i) a hierarchical understanding between the UN or another IGO to grant the right to intervene and (ii) backward-looking sanctioning mechanisms.

2.1 | UN-led peace operations

Peace operations led by the UN are executed by the UN Department of Peace Operations and the UN Department of Field Support. These operations are fielded to assist states emerging from conflict by protecting civilians, support disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of former combatants, help protect and organise elections, monitor borders and assist reform of the judiciary, the police and the military. Usually, they are given a one-year renewable mandate, which until recently has been almost automatically renewed when it was deemed necessary.

Discussions on the UN's accountability are mainly about hierarchical accountability relationships and backward-looking mechanisms of retroactive sanctioning—mainly at the national level—that do not take into account the timing and robustness of the operation. Military troops should be repatriated and trialled in their national jurisdiction. Likewise, for civilian staff involved in criminal actions, the case should be referred to their national jurisdiction for follow-up. Misconduct by UN civilian staff can lead to a reprimand, fine or dismissal (UN, 2023b).

Above and beyond individual responsibility, a UN peace operation should respect international humanitarian law, protect civilian populations and seek to avoid civilian casualties if engaging in the use of deadly force. UN peace operations are frequently deployed with a wide range of tasks, often referred to as 'Christmas tree' mandates (Oksamytna & Lundgren, 2021). However, they have repeatedly neglected to use their power or even abused it (Donnelly et al., 2022; Wheeler, 2020). The failure to protect civilians in Srebrenica and Rwanda is the most known and egregious examples, but there have also been many examples of inaction, sexual abuse and exploitation (see e.g. UN, 2021). In a backward-looking fashion, these cases, if at all, are prosecuted in national courts.

The hierarchical nature is visible, for example, through the critique that UN peace operations are predominantly top-down efforts which have insufficiently involved local governments and populations in the planning and implementation of substantive activities (von Billerbeck, 2016). Furthermore, UN peace operations have been criticised by those living through armed conflict as coming too late and lacking robustness. Operations are hard to field, slow and often too small because of debates about their 'normative' orientation (Coleman & Job, 2021; Gowan, 2020).

Over the past years, several initiatives have been taken to strengthen organisational accountability in UN peacekeeping (di Razza, 2020; Lottholz & von

Billerbeck, 2019). These include the Comprehensive Planning and Performance Assessment System (CPAS), which is a framework designed for UN officials to collect data on mission performance and more systematically assess the impact of their activities on local stakeholders (de Coning & Brusset, 2018; Forti, 2022). The UN also regularly conducts both mission-specific and thematic evaluations on topics such as the protection of civilians, detailing incidents where troops refused to execute orders or simply abandoned their posts, as was the case in Malakal, South Sudan in 2013 (UN, 2014, 2018). Frequent incidents of sexual exploitation and abuse have also been documented (see e.g. Nordas & Rustad, 2013), which have tarnished the reputation of UN peacekeeping and led to a strengthened accountability framework (UN, 2016, 2021). The Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) and the A4P Plus (A4P+) initiatives have since 2018 sought to bring renewed confidence in UN peace operations by presenting a range of measures to strengthen the effectiveness and accountability. Although these initiatives foster more data-driven performance evaluation, it remain a backward-looking process largely controlled and defined by the UN Department of Peace Operations (Forti, 2023).

2.2 | UN-mandated peace operations

The UNSC has also mandated peace operations executed by third parties, often regional organisations, acting under Chapter VIII of the Charter. These operations have repeatedly been mandated with enforcement tasks, as foreseen in Chapter VII of the UN Charter. The AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM, 2007–2022) is among the best-known examples. Other examples are the EU Force in the Central African Republic (EUFOR RCA, 2014–2015) or, earlier, the AU mission in Burundi (AMIB, 2003–2004). When operating under a UNSC mandate, these operations must report back to the UNSC on a regular basis, although the reporting is more limited than what is provided by UN-led peace operations (Reykers, 2018).

Also here, hierarchical measures have been taken to strengthen accountability and oversight of UNSC-mandated peace operations implemented by other IGOs; the AU in particular. With regards to AU operations, not only the relationship between the AU and the UN plays a role here but also those who help finance AU operations (Hofmann et al., 2023). These external funders use their leverage to promote the development of accountability frameworks in a hierarchical manner.

For instance, at the UN level, a system-wide Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP) was established in 2013, which applied to all UN entities that provide support to state or regional security forces that are not part of the UN. The policy was set up to establish an accountability framework for material, financial and technical support and outlines key due diligence actions to ensure that support is not given to security forces that are committing, or are at risk of committing, grave human rights violations. The policy's main message is that the UN should ensure that regional organisations (as well as AHCs and individual troop- and police-contributing countries) that want to access UN funding are fully aware and sensitised to the requirements of the HRDDP. Funding should be stopped if the HRDDP is violated, or if the risk for violation is high (UN, 2015).

This policy has in turn resulted in a string of more concrete accountability measures at the field level. One recent example is the official launch of the AU-EU-UN tripartite project in support of the AU Compliance and Accountability Framework for Peace Support Operations in November 2022 (UN, 2022a). The main purpose of this Framework is to ensure that planning and conduct of AU peace support operations take place in compliance with international human rights and humanitarian law standards, paying particular attention to the protection of civilians and preventing sexual abuse and exploitation. Although the tripartite framework suggests a peer-to-peer accountability relationship, it is predominantly a hierarchical relationship between the AU and its main donors (UN, 2022b).

3 | AD HOC COALITIONS ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS AND EFFORTS TO INCREASE ACCOUNTABILITY

While no new UN or AU peace operations have been mandated since 2014, and since that time four large UN peace operations have been closed (UNAMID, UNMIL, UNOCI and MINUSTAH) and others are in transition processes (UNMISS, MONUSCO, MINUSCA and MINUSMA), AHCs have been established and fielded at a steady pace to respond to violent conflicts. Their task-specific mandate and short-notice activation for a limited period of time make AHCs attractive governance options when IGOs face gridlock or delay, and when facing situations of urgency (Reykers et al., 2023). Although AHCs are not new, as illustrated by examples such as the International Force East Timor operation led by Australia (INTERFET, 1999–2000), they are increasingly prominent given the gradual withdrawal and downsizing of UN peace operations. Their use signals a shift from comprehensive peace operations to peace operations that have stabilisation, counterterrorism and counterinsurgency at their core.

The time-sensitive and task-specific mandate of AHCs should, at least in principle, make it easier to hold them accountable for their performance and impact on the security situation on the ground. This contrasts with IGO peace operations, which tend to operate with wider and longer-term mandates. AHCs are set up

with a task-specific mandate, focused more on actively reducing conflict or countering (terrorist) threats rather than state-building or peacekeeping.

But there are also accountability concerns surrounding AHCs. Particularly challenging is that there is no permanent international secretariat or bureaucracy that oversees the operation according to pre-set standards. Because of the higher levels of autonomy of individual contributing states, one could argue that national parliaments can fill this accountability gap. As with IGO accountability, this implies that accountability is scattered, because of the huge variation in national legislative oversight procedures and practices, and often weak reporting mechanisms (see e.g. Hirschmann, 2020).

When their task-specific mandate focuses on fighting terrorists, in practice existing AHCs have committed human rights violations. AHC counterterrorism or counterinsurgency operations frequently result in significant civilian losses, human rights abuses, corruption and weakening of local economies, further driving recruitment to violent extremist groups and with little external scrutiny (Attree & Street, 2022; UNDP, 2022). Empirical examples are not difficult to come by. For instance, the G5S-JF troops of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger have repeatedly been accused of grave human rights and international humanitarian law violations: 'Military forces deployed in the region are suspected of being responsible for 27% of civilian deaths between April 2021 and March 2022' (The People's Coalition for the Sahel, 2022: 10; see also HRW, 2021, 2023). Similarly, MNJTF troops have repeatedly been accused of committing human rights and IHL violations (HRW, 2015, 2020).

Attempts have therefore been made by IGOs such as the UN to hold AHCs more accountable, but just like the aforementioned AU-led operations, these are mostly based on hierarchical structures that orchestrate AHC actions through conditionality. The degree to which AHCs are encumbered with accountability structures can in part be seen as a function of the need for funding and support from donors and IGOs. For instance, UN logistical support to the G5S-JF was premised on the acceptance and implementation of a human rights and IHL compliance framework and the human rights due diligence policy on UN support to non-UN security forces (see UN, 2022c). The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) provided support for the implementation of the framework (OHCHR, 2021). The G5S-JF put in place a Civilian Casualties Identification, Tracking and Analysis Cell (CITAC) in January 2021, shortly before Mali pulled out of the coalition (CIVIC, 2021).

Likewise, EU financial support to AHCs has thus far been contingent on conditions which suggest a similar hierarchical accountability logic (Staeger, 2023). One condition is that some kind of political support is needed from a legitimate IGO such as the AU, or the UN. In its most robust shape, this can be a mandate for the AHC, but it can also take the form of authorisations, endorsements and recognitions. Another condition, according to the framework of the European Peace Facility, is that the operation should be IHL-compliant (EU, 2021). For example, EU financial support to the MNJTF includes support for measures to improve human rights, international humanitarian law and civilian protection, provided by the AU Mission Support Team to the MNJTF (MNJTF, 2022; interview with AU official, N'Djamena, 23 November 2022). Nevertheless, according to the International Crisis Group (2020) 'the office has been unable to properly carry out its mandate of improving human rights compliance', and 'security forces' abuses have angered communities and, in some cases, fuelled support for militancy'. Likewise, the implementation of the comprehensive compliance framework set up for the G5S-JF still rests on political will that continues to be elusive (Goxho, 2022). In its support to the G5S-JF, the EU has raised concerns about IHL compliance, and it has requested the installment of monitoring mechanisms, yet revoking financial support in case of non-compliance rarely happens (interview with EU official, Brussels, 3 April 2023). Troops are given a modicum of training and reporting mechanisms are set up, but IHR and IHL violations do not lead donors to withhold financing. AHCs have thus instrumentalised accountability mechanisms to access donor funding. In sum, the accountability mechanisms currently put in place by IGOs to hold AHCs accountable not only reflect a hierarchical and backward-looking approach, but they are also not effective as the appearance of being accountable is more important than accountability as such.

4 | TOWARDS MORE PLURALISTIC AND FORWARD-LOOKING ACCOUNTABILITY

As the preceding discussion has shown, establishing accountability of multinational peace operations is not easy to come by. For now, while IGOs have tried to adjust to new realities, accountability mechanisms are still predominantly rooted in hierarchical and backward-looking mechanisms. This puts the onus of the accountability assessment on the headquarters and national courts and parliaments of those who mandate and/or finance the operations. In the following paragraphs, we suggest that these mechanisms can and should be complemented with more forward-looking and pluralistic ones – especially if the trend continues, in which AHC-led peace operations are the go-to option and IGOs support them one way or another.

Even though the empirical expression of AHCs is currently flawed, we suggest that AHCs, in theory, have

the potential to complement the hierarchical and punitive relationship between IGOs and donors or IGOs and member states. Yet, this requires that AHCs are approached differently from current practice. This might at first sight sound naïve. However, AHCs are not only illustrative of the increased density of the global peace and security architecture. They are also a different organisational form of cooperation, which has the potential to bring various types of actors, including state and non-state actors, together on short notice around the same task-specific problem.

What is needed is a move away from thinking in terms of hierarchies between actors towards using the densely institutionalised governance space to develop accountability mechanisms that work across actors. By thinking more in terms of AHCs as 'network hubs', in which different types of actors collaborate with each other on a more equal footing in addressing a shared problem, important steps can be taken towards accountability provisions, which are more forward-looking and pluralistic.

First, the crisis-oriented or problem-oriented nature of AHCs helps define concrete goals, set out in task-specific mandates that all actors share, that serve as baselines to hold actors accountable more effectively how to intervene and what to do during the intervention compared to operations with wide and long-term mandates. Second, AHCs' mixed composition could facilitate information diffusion and learning, which resonates with a pluralistic forward-looking approach to accountability. A mixed membership – including inter alia states, non-state actors *and* IGOs – where actors act on equal footing, disregarding resource asymmetries, formal institutional links or even power structures, should in theory allow for quicker diffusion of preferences and information about activities or abuses. Third, this environment could also facilitate joint deliberation, as few but heterogeneous sets of actors with a narrow set of goals and much information can meet in this setting on a regular basis. In short, understanding AHCs as network hubs emphasises their task-specific nature as well as their flexibility towards who can be a member. Taking this aspect seriously can in theory lead to more accountable outcomes.

As the examples of the MNJTF or G5S-JF have shown, such progress has not yet materialised. Our reflection only emphasises that what is arguably most needed now is a move away by AHCs' key donors from treating existing accountability mechanisms as fig leaves and instead have participating countries and organisations meet on equal footing both on the political and (especially) on the field level to discuss and reach agreement on how operations can best achieve their goals. By complementing existing accountability mechanisms with more forward-looking and pluralistic ones, we suggest that current trends of turning a blind eye to human rights and IHL violations can potentially be reversed.

5 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

Accountability issues in peace operations are abundant. In parallel to the trend of increasing robustness of international interventions, moving from peace- and state-building towards counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, a division of labour seems to be developing, where interventions are implemented by AHCs. These are most often mandated, endorsed or welcomed by the UNSC or the AU Peace and Security Council, which is a necessary precondition for donor states to provide technical, material and financial support to these coalitions. A second precondition for support is the establishment of accountability mechanisms. However, while these mechanisms have proliferated, they have also increasingly instrumentalised to access funding, and have so far insufficient impact on the practices on the ground.

With this article, we intend to start the conversation about how to improve accountability of peace operations in an era in which major UN peacekeeping operations are being closed down and both states and non-state actors increasingly seem to seek refuge in AHCs. Instead of throwing out the child with the bathwater, driven by the often horrendous practices of some of today's AHCs in the field, we suggest that the organisational format of AHCs, at least in theory, still holds some potential. By speculating about how AHCs could be used as network hubs, we highlighted their potential to contribute to more horizontal and pluralistic accountability relationships in peace operations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article is part of the project 'Ad hoc crisis response and international organisations' (ADHOCISM) funded by the Research Council of Norway (RCN) (project number 314967).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We have no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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How to cite this article: Hofmann, S.C., Karlsrud, J. & Reykers, Y. (2023) Ad hoc coalitions: From hierarchical to network accountability in peace operations? *Global Policy*, 00, 1–7. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.13305