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Liberal Peacebuilding and Its Limitations in the Case of the Failed UN Mission in Mali

SUMMARY

The failure of the United Nations mission in Mali clearly reflects the crisis in contemporary peacebuilding. Rather than creating security and stability, the mission deteriorated within an increasingly hostile political and security environment and could not prevent the breakdown of democratic governance. The mission was based on liberal peacebuilding principles, but the approach was combined with a stabilisation mandate. The article uses this mission as a case study to examine the limits of such peacebuilding and the consequences of the stabilisation turn and increased mandate hybridisation. Through process tracing of Security Council records and mission reports, the analysis explores how the mission was designed around an internally contradictory mandate that combined liberal state-building objectives with stabilisation priorities and examines the consequences of hybrid design. The results show that this hybrid design diluted political leverage, enabled illiberal behaviour, and prevented the mission from addressing the structural root causes of conflict. This indicates that liberal peacebuilding is obstructed when security-first stabilisation is prioritised and that hybrid mandates produce paralysis rather than complementarity. An argument is thus made for the need to reform liberal peacebuilding by integrating elements of the local

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turn with greater context-sensitivity and offers a theoretical contribution by clarifying the conditions under which it can remain viable.

Keywords: United Nations, peacebuilding, stabilisation, liberal institutionalism, conflict prevention, peacekeeping.

Ograničenja liberalne izgradnje mira: slučaj neuspjele misije Ujedinjenih nacija u Maliju

SAŽETAK

Neuspjeh misije Ujedinjenih nacija u Maliju predstavlja izrazitu manifestaciju krize savremene izgradnje mira. Umjesto da doprinese uspostavljanju bezbjednosti i političke stabilnosti, misija je djelovala u sve nepovoljnijem političkom i bezbjednosnom okruženju, pri čemu nije uspjela da spriječi urušavanje demokratskog poretka. Iako je bila zasnovana na načelima liberalne izgradnje mira, njen mandat istovremeno je uključivao i snažnu stabilizacionu komponentu. Polazeći od ovog slučaja, članak ispituje ograničenja savremenih pristupa izgradnji mira, kao i posljedice stabilizacionog zaokreta i sve izraženije hibridizacije mandata mirovnih misija. Primjenom metode praćenja procesa, zasnovane na analizi dokumenata Savjeta bezbjednosti Ujedinjenih nacija i izvještaja misije, istražuje se način na koji je mandat koncipiran kao unutrašnje protivrečna kombinacija ciljeva liberalne izgradnje države i bezbjednosnih prioriteta stabilizacije, kao i posljedice koje je takva institucionalna postavka proizvela. Rezultati pokazuju da je hibridni karakter mandata oslabio politički uticaj misije, stvorio prostor za neliberalno djelovanje domaćih aktera i ograničio njenu sposobnost da se suoči sa strukturnim uzrocima sukoba. Nalazi ukazuju na to da su mogućnosti liberalne izgradnje mira ozbiljno ograničene kada se prednost daje stabilizaciji zasnovanoj na primatu bezbjednosti. Istovremeno, hibridni mandati ne dovode nužno do međusobnog dopunjavanja različitih funkcija, već mogu proizvesti institucionalnu paralizu i stratešku nedosljednost. Na toj osnovi, članak zagovara reformu liberalne izgradnje mira kroz snažnije uključivanje elemenata „lokalnog zaokreta“ i veću osjetljivost prema specifičnostima političkog i društvenog konteksta. Teorijski doprinos rada ogleda se u preciziranju uslova pod kojima liberalna izgradnja mira može zadržati relevantnost i održivost.

Ključne reči: Ujedinjene nacije, izgradnja mira, stabilizacija, liberalni institucionalizam, prevencija konflikta, održavanje mira.

Introduction

The failure of the United Nations (UN) mission in Mali is a clear example of the current crisis in international peacebuilding. It raised questions about the planning and conduct of the mission itself, as well as about the wider direction of contemporary peacebuilding. After more than a decade during which the UN mission, supported by extensive international engagement, actively attempted to end the crisis in the country, Mali did not experience the stability, security, political reform, or democratic consolidation the mission was expected to provide. Rather, the political system collapsed, security deteriorated across large parts of the country, and the relationship between the mission and the local government gradually broke down. This outcome is highly significant because the mission was conceived at a moment when liberal peacebuilding had come under criticism and when international peacebuilding had taken a turn towards prioritising stabilisation. Even where security concerns and stabilisation are prioritised, expectations regarding liberal democracy continue to shape the formal objectives of UN missions. This fact represents an interesting basis for analysing the model's limits and hybrid attempts to combine it with stabilisation. As liberal theory is the foundation of this model of peacebuilding, the article relies on it as a central framework for understanding the process. As such, the article examines the Mali mission's mandate, character, and process through the lens of its own theoretical presuppositions.

The analysis explores the Mali mission from its beginning to its conclusion, taking into account the preconditions for the successful achievement of the mission's objectives. It does so by examining how the mission attempted to fulfil its mandate in practice. The main question of the article is how the hybrid peacebuilding-stabilisation mandate undermined the potential for a positive outcome of the mission. As the mission in Mali had a hybrid mandate that brought together the liberal peacebuilding model and a stabilisation approach, the main argument is that these two approaches are mutually exclusive, resulting in an incoherent and inconsistent strategy that would undermine the mission's goals and the mechanisms for achieving them. Through this examination, the case study serves not only as an evaluation of a failed mission but also as an examination of the transformation of peacebuilding itself. The failure of the Mali mission should not be seen only as a failure of liberal peacebuilding as such, but rather as a failure to apply it consistently and coherently and to adapt it properly to the local context. This analysis is expected to provide insight into the development of peacebuilding and the limitations of both

established models and their derivative hybrids. The article begins with a section contextualising the crisis in Mali and the mission, followed by a theoretical review of liberal peacebuilding and its resulting theoretical framework. This is followed by an extensive empirical analysis of the mission, leading to a theoretical discussion and the conclusion.

An Overview of the Crisis in Mali

The structural and conflict dynamics in Mali before and during the mission need to be outlined to contextualise the contradictions that later undermined the mission. The crisis in Mali occurred despite earlier expectations that it would democratise, and its destabilisation was rather abrupt. In fact, Mali's preconditions were not specifically suitable for liberal democracy. The northern desert region was undeveloped and never well integrated into the state. Its population had staged several rebellions in the past, which ended in failed peace agreements, leading to its increased marginalisation by the government (Chauzal and Van Damme 2012). As the region was prone to crisis, international support was generally directed towards security rather than socio-economic development (Okon 2015). Mali's weak social cohesion and lack of national unity resulted from this lack of integration of minorities and the lack of representation of the entirety of society in government. This internal instability worsened as several regional crises and unstable neighbouring states contributed to it (Ritter 2014). Effective government control over the north was extremely limited until the mission started. The north of Mali was the most unstable region for a long time (Okyere 2015). In such a volatile internal and external context, various internal conflicts emerged. This led to a lack of democratic consolidation, and state institutions became weak and fragile (Vermeig 2015), which undermined the preconditions necessary for the mission's goals to be achieved.

The acute phase of instability began when an ethno-religious insurgency led by the Tuareg people broke out in the north in early 2012. They proclaimed an independent "Azawad", causing the central government to collapse (Chauzal and Van Damme 2015). That led the authorities to ask France for help, which in turn led to an international intervention led by the UN. The UN established a mission in the country but also enabled the African Union (AU) to participate in conflict resolution, while France provided military assistance (Ramsbotham et al. 2024). This was supposed to be a multidimensional stabilisation mission that would primarily support state authority and maintain security and stability, while at the same time fostering dialogue, reconciliation, and the

rule of law (Ritter 2014). The mission was necessary as regional organisations, including the AU and ECOWAS, failed to stabilise the situation on their own (Francis 2013), especially in the north, which was suffering from a debilitating crisis and experiencing severe intercommunal violence (Guichaoua 2016). The extent of the crisis justified a broad and interventionist mandate for the UN. UN peacebuilding during this period was transitioning towards stabilisation as the main focus, making support for reconciliation, human rights, and political reforms secondary to security concerns (Daniel 2017), and thereby becoming more pragmatic than transformative.

The UN was welcomed due to its ability to mandate and undertake complex peace operations, despite internal debate within the UN about the character of its mission, local concerns over interventionism, and the post-colonial complexities of the legacy of intervention (Avezov and Smit 2014). France framed the intervention and mission as promoting freedom and democracy, even with the obvious turn towards stabilisation (Charbonneau and Sears 2014). Liberal values served as a principled justification for the mission, which increased support. That is important as missions with broad multilateral support generally have greater success than unilateral ones, and only the UN was able to stabilise the region (Oluwadare 2014). The situation became critical after regional organisations failed to resolve it due to their limited capacity and authority to undertake large-scale action (Okon 2021). The initial optimism was moderated by a lack of trust, as well as by the lack of credibility and legitimacy of the government, giving the rebels a justification to continue their militancy and refuse dialogue, even with the new UN presence (Boas and Torheim 2013). This discontent with the fragile government and its lack of openness to compromise enabled the inter-ethnic conflict to continue and militias to proliferate (Hickendorff 2019).

The government was unstable and fragile, with unconsolidated and weak institutions underpinning a shallow democracy. It expressed low commitment and accountability to the population, as well as an apparent disinterest in compromising with the rebels (Wing 2013). The mission's focus on ensuring security harmed the UN's credibility as a liberal peacebuilder. Its focus seems to have been more on state-building so that a strong government could physically restrain insurgents than on addressing the underlying causes of the insurgency (Bere 2017). The mission's mandate to ensure free and inclusive elections was sidelined, promoting a culture of irresponsibility masquerading as stability, as the government was not making good on its promises (Cold-Ravnkilde 2013). Low state capacity and legitimacy, dissatisfaction with governance, and a

lack of dialogue eventually led to an increase in inter-ethnic and religious conflict that the mission had to manage (Tobie 2017). Progress towards stabilisation and state-building was minimal in such circumstances, and the state remained fragile and undemocratic (Strydom 2019), making the mission even more necessary. As stabilisation was directed towards strengthening the failing government through state-building, rather than addressing the needs of the wider population, it failed to resolve the underlying sources of instability. A sustainable peace requires broader political and social transformation. Charbonneau argues that peace is harder to achieve without reconciliation and dialogue and that the security situation will deteriorate accordingly (Charbonneau 2022).

According to Karlsrud, strong support for the central government, despite its mistakes, combined with tacit support for its pressure on the rebel forces, deviated from previous UN peacekeeping practices, which were meant to use minimal force and remain impartial, rather than intervene on one side (Karlsrud 2019). Even with significant international support, Mali's security situation deteriorated, along with its effective governance and rebel militancy, while the financial aid it received was misused and the democratic process stagnated (Tronc, Grace and Nahikian 2019). As the UN used force directly for the sake of stabilisation rather than focusing on democratisation and liberalisation, its reputation suffered. Building democracy in post-conflict societies depends on the reconstruction of trust and reconciliation, which was sidelined in this case for the sake of short-term stability (Bratton 2016). The unfocused approach of the mission led to disunity within the UN, compounded by the diverging national interests of regional and contributing countries, further harming the coherence of the mission (Albrecht and Cold-Ravnkilde 2020). The peacebuilding process itself seems to have been more accountable to external than local aspirations, and the local government was oriented more towards satisfying the mission rather than being accountable to its population. Raineri argues that the government focused on retaining international support through shallow reforms, resulting in an undemocratic government without wide legitimacy (Raineri 2016).

In fact, the distinction between war and peace in Mali was blurred, and state violence was justified by the struggle for peace and counter-terrorism. The population was divided into those with whom peace was possible and those who had to be defeated by force (Charbonneau, Ricard and Moe 2022). This corresponds to the issue of stabilisation missions mixing liberal and illiberal goals and strategies and focusing on strengthening state authority, even while the government was actively repressing multiple social groups (Duarte and Souza 2014). While the presence of peacekeepers

generally makes locals more optimistic about other groups reciprocating cooperation, this requires peacekeepers to be in direct contact with locals, which Nomikos argues was lacking there (Nomikos 2021). Gazeley argues that the peacekeepers acted more like peace enforcers, who used force to maintain stability rather than pressing for political reforms and democratic legitimacy, thus normalising force and setting the conditions for the eventual capture of the state (Gazeley 2022). Thereby, stabilisation was undermined as one of the few positive effects of the mission. These dynamics show the contradictions inherent in mixing stabilisation and liberal peacebuilding and in the expectation that one would follow the other. The following section examines the theoretical approaches behind these practices in order to delineate and operationalise them.

The Limitations of Contemporary Peacebuilding Approaches

Liberal peacebuilding, previously the norm in peacebuilding practice, has been under continual criticism from multiple perspectives due to many failures, leading to repeated attempts to adjust or revise it. The approach is based on the idea that peace can best be built through the imposition of liberal-democratic norms based on Western models in conflict-affected states (Lemay-Hebert 2013), aiming to address the sources of hostility after a peace has been negotiated or imposed by building local capacities for conflict resolution and stronger state institutions (Doyle and Sambanis 2000). However, the line between peacekeeping and peace enforcement has been blurred as missions increasingly receive wide mandates to use force and impose solutions rather than reduce tensions and mediate (Ramsbotham 2005). A notable supporter of the model, Paris, criticises anti-liberal views and argues against the romanticisation of local practices, noting that they often reinforce existing power structures and impose social conformity. He claims that there is no real alternative to liberal values in peacebuilding despite claims of West-centrism (Paris 2010). Likewise, he argues that the international liberal normative environment shapes the design of peacekeeping operations so that they conform to the established norms even when alternative strategies might be required (Paris 2003), which calls for greater contextual sensitivity and flexibility.

A leading supporter of the approach that prioritises the local perspective is MacGinty, who argues against the universal applicability of liberalism and its values (MacGinty 2010). He criticises liberalism for its interventionism, which undermines the sovereignty of its recipients, and for imposing Western models of statehood through state-building (MacGinty 2011). Richmond argues that the liberal approach neglects local

agency and the particular needs of local societies, imposing foreign values on them in a hegemonic way (Richmond 2006). He argues that any attempt to ignore local context and impose just one model in different contexts would fail, especially in the Global South (Richmond 2013). The view promotes peacebuilding through local efforts and direct reconciliation, which would give local actors ownership over the process, while liberal norms could play a secondary and supportive role (MacGinty and Richmond 2013). While liberal approaches have been criticised for their Western-centric bias, they include concepts such as democracy, human rights, free markets, and the rule of law, which are widely accepted as useful for war-torn and struggling countries. However, the main criticism is not aimed at the norms *per se* but rather at the top-down interventionist method employed by liberal peacebuilding, so that the norms could be salvaged and a more heterogeneous conception of peace based on local characteristics, with international influence, could be attempted (Van Leeuwen, Verkoren, and Boedeltje 2012).

Apart from the critics of the local position, Selby takes a revisionist stance, arguing that peace interventions during this period were not primarily driven by liberal norms but by power politics and strategic interests, leading to peacebuilding practices that instrumentalised liberalism to legitimise outcomes rather than democratise societies (Selby 2013). Paffenholz offers another perspective, arguing that peacebuilding is limited by the constraints imposed by the binary understanding of the local and the international as the only relevant locations of power and resistance, generating an unrealistic view of local contexts and overstating local resistance (Paffenholz 2015). These two views therefore consider that the liberal character of peacebuilding is either misleading or constraining, offering possible reasons for the mission's failure, given that it both included a liberal mandate and had a problematic relationship with local actors. Hameiri argues that, despite these criticisms, the liberal paradigm can outlast its apparent decline and that statebuilding as a tool and process is not in crisis or being superseded. While stabilisation and a focus on security are replacing the model, support based on liberal norms is still widely accepted (Hameiri 2014).

De Coning offers another position, arguing that international peacebuilding is experiencing a pragmatic turn, in which peace is being interpreted on a context-specific basis. He suggests an approach to adaptive peacebuilding, focused on reactive support rather than direct state-building through the UN (De Coning 2018). This would integrate the local approach but still give a large role to liberal institutions, while pragmatism would not be value-free like stabilisation. Finkenbusch

considers that this would undermine peacebuilders' intentions to create socially transformative projects in the Global South, as in liberal peacebuilding (Finkenbusch 2016), and this corresponds to the major critiques of the approach. Karlsrud argues that the stabilisation turn is the paradigm that truly replaced the liberal one, noting that such a turn is counterproductive. That leads to more oppressive governments and disillusionment in the long run, which undermines the UN as a liberal institution, harming its missions by extension (Karlsrud 2019). Since the international environment became generally liberal, civil wars were more likely to end in negotiated settlements. However, as the international environment changed, stabilisation became more favoured over democratisation, weakening the effect of liberal norms (Howard and Stark 2018) and necessitating a more hybrid approach if the positive effects were to be carried over.

As for state-building, while a strong state can act as a barrier to inter-group violence, it can also be instrumentalised as a tool of violence itself, potentially leading to separatism and opposition to centralisation. For stable peace in a multiethnic state, centralisation is discouraged, while durable peace has been found to be possible even without resolving all outstanding issues, provided the political process is considered legitimate, and third-party mediation and support are available (Hartzell, Hoddie, and Rothchild 2001). Downs and Monten find that regime change imposed from abroad by democracies does not generally lead to significant democratic gains, as democratisation depends on domestic conditions being favourable rather than on external conditionality (Downs and Monten 2013). This creates a persistent tension between peacebuilders, who have a vested interest in promoting democracy, and local elites, who seek to preserve privileges that democratisation may disrupt, leading to pragmatism and opportunism (Barnett, Fang, and Zurcher 2014). Liberal peacebuilding might not reliably produce democratisation, but it can improve prospects for peace, provided the strategy is designed to fit the conflict and local context (Doyle and Sambanis 2000), which would connect it directly to the local turn.

Such approaches have also been proposed. Liden identifies attempts to revise the liberal model through a more open approach that integrates the local turn with greater respect for local norms and institutions, proposing a form of social peacebuilding that combines cosmopolitan human rights advocacy with respect for local cultural diversity and political autonomy (Liden 2009). This aligns with Paris's view that peacekeeping during this period was not only a method of conflict management but also a product of a global culture marked by liberalism.

He also notes that the liberal model cannot function where societies are overly heterogeneous and unaccustomed to democracy (Paris 2003). Finkenbusch similarly argues that greater emphasis must be placed on the socio-cultural preconditions of democratic institutions and on assessing the feasibility of transforming conflict-generating local institutions (Finkenbusch 2016). De Coning likewise contends that peacebuilding has struggled because it relied on linear, externally driven models that underestimate the complexity of conflict-affected societies, warning that externally imposed, top-down approaches focused on state capacity can regulate conflict but not resolve it (De Coning 2016).

These inadequacies of the liberal model contributed to a pragmatic turn towards stabilisation, which, according to Hunt and Curran, puts too much focus on strengthening host governments and fails to address the root causes of conflict or to include the population to a significant extent (Hunt and Curran 2020). This criticism is in line with Autesserre, who argues that sustainable peace cannot be achieved without the agreement of local parties to resolve their differences and without taking into account their interests. She recommends combining efforts that integrate top-down and bottom-up approaches as most likely to produce a positive peace (Autesserre 2017). In relation to democratisation, Downes and Monten argue that peacebuilding has generally failed when the preconditions for democratisation are poor, namely, a lack of economic development, heterogeneous populations, and a lack of democratic experience. Aligning with the aforementioned critiques, they found that interventions had a poor track record both regarding imposing democracy and achieving stable peace (Downes and Monten 2013). Karlsrud similarly argues that the weakening of enthusiasm for the liberal model is the main reason for its phasing out, which itself was caused by the difficulty of achieving peace in light of increasing authoritarianism in host states and in the international order (Karlsrud 2019).

Connecting liberal peacebuilding to the liberal paradigm, Finkenbusch argues that the problems of liberal peace are rooted not only in operational failures but also in an erosion of confidence in liberal universalism itself. However, he notes that while critics have noted the limitations of his argument, they also undermined the capacity to formulate guiding norms for collective action, contributing to the formation of a cautious and risk-averse governance stance focused on harm avoidance rather than transformation (Finkenbusch 2021). Ikenberry contextualises this within the crisis of the liberal international order, characterised by the rise of populism, nationalism, and authoritarianism, yet argues that liberal internationalism remains reformist in orientation, grounded in institutions

and cooperation, and historically linked to the expectation that external conditions can support domestic political development (Ikenberry 2018). MacGinty similarly contends that the liberal peace, understood as a framework shaping international peacebuilding, has fragmented rather than collapsed, leading to a hybrid peace system characterised by overlapping and often contradictory norms, actors, and practices, reinforced by a retreat from transformative peacebuilding towards stabilisation and short-term containment (MacGinty 2025).

Richmond situates the evolution of peacebuilding within a layered international peace architecture that has progressively shifted away from peace as reconciliation and justice towards peace as management and control. This movement intensified as the liberal order weakened, so that peace has become increasingly linked to stabilisation, regime security and state-building, weakening the relationship between peace and justice and producing authoritarian outcomes in many post-conflict contexts (Richmond 2021). He developed this critique by arguing that both liberal peacebuilding and stabilisation-oriented conflict management have converged on producing stalemated peace processes, characterised by formal agreements without political resolution, elite consolidation of power and the suppression of justice claims, often with international acquiescence in the name of stability (Richmond 2025). Even so, despite extensive criticism of its top-down and interventionist tendencies, inflexible practices and limited local sensitivity, liberal peace provisions remain widely embedded in post-war settlements and are, on average, associated with longer durations of peace when implemented consistently (MacGinty, Joshi, and Lee 2019). This suggests that the problem lies less in liberal norms themselves than in partial, selective or inconsistent implementation, and that a stalemate peace emerges when liberal peacebuilding is undermined by stabilisation mandates that hollow out its normative foundations.

Theoretical Framework

The framework is based on liberal institutionalist theory and peacebuilding literature and tests their expectations in practice to refine the theoretical framework. The mission is analysed as having an incomplete and inconsistent liberal mandate, based on the expectation that liberal-democratic norms can reduce the likelihood of renewed conflict, especially when supported by international engagement. This approach connects peace to political transformation, democratisation, and reconciliation, attempting to address the underlying causes of conflict. It

depends on consistent political pressure from the mission on local authorities, with credible conditions. The stabilisation elements of the mission are assessed by focusing on short-term security, state authority, and stabilisation rather than political transformation, as well as by supporting local authorities regardless of their adherence to liberal norms if they can provide security. The argument is that these two approaches are rather contradictory than complementary, as the former relies on normative pressure and credible conditionality, while the latter weakens both by prioritising security over political transformation.

The main argument and proposed mechanism are that hybrid mandates reduce the credibility of political conditionality, weakening the mission's political leverage over local elites. As leverage declines, local authorities become more likely to engage in symbolic rather than substantive compliance with reform commitments, while illiberal practices become increasingly difficult for the mission to challenge effectively. It is therefore expected that, as stabilisation is increasingly prioritised over the course of the mission, political leverage and legitimacy will decline, preventing both meaningful liberalisation and long-term stabilisation. The focus on stability would also make the mission's credibility depend on success in security matters, while disincentivising local elites from undertaking substantive reforms. This focus, which incorporates insights from the local turn in peacebuilding, alongside critiques of the liberal model, allows for an in-depth examination of the flaws and limitations of liberal peacebuilding by contrasting its theoretical approach with its actual implementation. The expected results are also meant to show whether such hybrid mandates produce paralysis and a failure to transform the political and security situation, particularly in contexts characterised by weak democratic institutions.

Method

To examine the mission's full duration and complexity, this study uses theory-testing causal-process tracing. It enables an analysis of how the mandate, instruments, and political effects of the UN mission have evolved and how this evolution affected the mission's capacity to achieve either political transformation or lasting stabilisation. It also allows the reconstruction of causal sequences and the examination of the mechanisms through which peacebuilding operates in practice. The analysis therefore follows the implementation of the mandate, its subsequent adjustments, and their effects on ensuing changes in the political and security situation and the mission itself. The empirical analysis is based on a comprehensive

documentary examination of UN Security Council reports and meeting records related to the mission, as these sources constitute the most authoritative and extensive body of evidence available for providing a full account of the mission. The timeline covers the full duration of the crisis and the mission, beginning immediately before its establishment in 2012 and extending all the way to its termination in 2023.

The analysis focuses on how liberal peacebuilding and stabilisation were implemented within the mission mandate, examining political mediation, diplomatic pressure, support for institutional reform, electoral processes, and security cooperation as the principal mechanisms through which international engagement was translated into political effects. It traces how changes in their prioritisation, credibility, and enforcement affected the mission's political leverage and how this corresponded to changes in the behaviour of local political elites, particularly in terms of compliance with reforms, resistance, and symbolic adaptation. The reconstructed causal sequence is then compared with the expectations derived from the theoretical framework, linking changes in mandate design and implementation to changes in elite behaviour, reform, security practices, and local legitimacy. This enables the proposed causal mechanism to be assessed within the specific political and institutional context of Mali to examine the conditions under which liberal peacebuilding was constrained, diluted, or rendered ineffective through a mandate that prioritised stabilisation.

The Practice of UN Peacebuilding in the Mali Mission

The Sahel region, in which Mali is located, was generally unstable during this period and was further destabilised by the civil war in nearby Libya in 2011. The acute crisis in Mali began in 2012 with a rebellion by the Muslim Tuareg minority in the north, which proclaimed the independent state of Azawad and entered into conflict with the central authorities in Bamako, followed by Islamist militant groups seizing control of northern areas and causing deterioration in the humanitarian situation. This destabilisation culminated in a coup in Bamako that removed the president from power and installed a military government unwilling to accept ECOWAS involvement. The UN was surprised by the rapid unravelling of central authority and immediately attempted to mediate together with the AU and ECOWAS to resolve the crisis and restore the country to a democratic path (Security Council 2012a; 2012b; 2012c). Mali was in the midst of a political, socioeconomic, and security crisis marked by ineffective governance, fragile social cohesion, weak institutions, and

abuse of power, a situation that both produced the crisis and was further exacerbated by it (Security Council 2012d). This regional deterioration and state collapse highlight the absence of structural preconditions for democratisation and the need for an urgent international response due to limited local capacities.

The UN and AU pressured the new government to restore constitutional rule, demanding an inclusive national dialogue with all political forces and elections within a year. The pressure led the government to appoint an interim president, Traore, who subsequently formed a national unity government in the summer. He claimed to be willing to cooperate with the UN, while the rebels and Islamist militias continued to consolidate their control in the north (Security Council 2012e; 2012f; 2012g). The UN's initial goals were to support the government in establishing a political dialogue and restoring constitutional order, with a negotiated settlement with non-terrorist rebel groups. It did so while threatening intervention, which made some rebel groups more open to dialogue. However, there were deep internal political divisions in the country, which precluded a common vision. The government was primarily interested in the UN's help in restoring military control of the north, focusing on the security crisis, and offered to address the grievances of the Tuareg people while claiming that they were not marginalised and had no cause for rebellion (Security Council 2012h). The initial response was consistent with liberal peacebuilding, centred on political conditionality and a return to constitutional order. However, limited territorial control and rebellion had already weakened international leverage and local governance, thereby requiring stabilisation.

While the UN initially provided mediation and support, the collapse of state authority in the north under the insurgency led it to mandate an initial support mission to protect the population and restore national unity and constitutional order (Security Council 2012i). The Security Council stressed the need for a multidimensional approach to peacekeeping to facilitate peacebuilding and prevent a relapse into conflict, preparing the ground for a full mission (Security Council 2013a). The government established a commission for dialogue and reconciliation but limited the dialogue to rebel groups that respected territorial integrity and the secular nature of the state. The governance crisis exposed by the conflict further weakened the state and political system, leading the UN to focus primarily on strengthening state capacity and political legitimacy through long-term reforms and free elections within a constitutional order, an approach undermined by high political and social polarisation and low public confidence in the democratic process (Security Council 2013b). Pressure

from the Security Council and UN support for the state and overall security led the interim government to promise presidential elections with international assistance and commit to inclusiveness and plurality. At the same time, the UN demanded the participation of marginalised groups in socio-political life in line with liberal values (Security Council 2013c). Liberal norms were still being integrated into peacebuilding alongside efforts to stabilise the state, but limited dialogue, weak legitimacy, and persistent polarisation constrained international leverage.

With the situation unresolved, the Security Council decided to establish a full peacekeeping mission in Mali, with the government promising to cooperate. The mission was mandated to facilitate security and stability alongside democracy and civil liberties through support for national political dialogue, inclusion, transparent elections, disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration, reconciliation, and human rights protection (Security Council 2013d). Despite this mandate, the country continued to face major political challenges undermining social cohesion, including social polarisation, political antagonism, and intercommunal tensions, even as the government followed UN instructions and engaged in dialogue with northern groups, supported by the mission through political facilitation, technical assistance for democratic consolidation and election preparation, and increased UN pressure following failed regional mediation efforts (Security Council 2013e; 2013f). After several difficult months of diplomatic negotiations and UN pressure, a presidential election was held with UN support and oversight, resulting in Keita's victory and the formation of a new government that included a ministry for reconciliation and the development of the northern regions (Security Council 2013g). This success was limited, as the elections did not immediately lead to reconciliation and former coup leaders retained political influence, despite the renewed government's commitments to reform and democratisation in line with liberal norms in a united and peaceful Mali (Security Council 2013h). The early period was marked by enthusiasm for liberal goals, as electoral support, political conditionality, and normative expectations briefly aligned. However, weak institutions, unreformed power structures, elite resistance, and limited commitment indicated that these achievements were shallow.

The implementation of the promises was slow and limited. Inclusive and credible negotiations with the rebels were still not underway after several months, even though the remaining rebels had offered to disarm upon the signing of a comprehensive peace accord. President Keita claimed that Mali would be fully in charge of the reconciliation process rather than accepting UN support, since it now had legitimate institutions.

He demanded the disarming of the rebels as a precondition for negotiations and said that Mali did not need mediation to create a new peace agreement (Security Council 2014a). The UN demanded negotiations and reform implementation without preconditions and stressed the danger of delay in the peace process, since the growing lack of trust between the sides created the risk of radicalisation. State authority was still not fully established in the north, where violent intercommunal outbursts occurred as many communities felt under-represented in the limited dialogue (Security Council 2014b).

Despite government reluctance, the UN mission mediated between the authorities and the rebels, pressuring both parties to come to the negotiating table and demanding urgent measures to be addressed – not only security but also governance and socio-economic issues. In response, the government held a national conference in the north to promote reforms, development and unity (Security Council 2014c). The rebels demanded federalisation as a solution to the conflict, while the government offered only decentralisation and rejected these demands, increasing volatility and putting progress towards peace at risk. The UN continued to push for reforms in line with liberal norms such as social inclusion, the rule of law, impartial governance and stable democracy, presenting them as essential to peace and arguing that international support and mediation were necessary to prevent a relapse into crisis (Security Council 2014d). Progress remained limited, which the government blamed entirely on the rebels, while the rebels maintained a low-level insurgency that resulted in serious ceasefire violations in the north (Security Council 2014e). The prime minister subsequently resigned, citing the government's failure to address core challenges, deliver reforms and advance inclusive dialogue (Security Council 2014f). Throughout this period, the UN pressed the government to prioritise political dialogue over security measures, criticising its reliance on security forces in response to the rebellion (Security Council 2014g). The lack of credible enforcement behind the UN's pressure to conform to liberal reforms resulted in ineffective conditionality, and the government's instrumentalisation of negotiations, refusal to accept responsibility, and prioritisation of security ultimately undermined its long-term effectiveness.

The UN mission prevented an immediate worsening of the situation by mediating an urgent ceasefire, but the government remained focused on achieving security through military force and on prioritising stabilisation before dialogue rather than addressing the causes of the conflict (Security Council 2014h; 2014i). The first major result was the signing of the Algiers Agreement between the government and the

Azawad rebels with international mediation, which formally institutionalised the peace process but excluded some rebel groups and failed to stop ceasefire violations (Security Council 2014j). Nevertheless, the negotiations produced partial agreement on certain principles, including the secular and unitary nature of the state, decentralisation, recognition of cultural diversity and reconciliation, even as the institutional framework remained unresolved because the rebels continued to demand federalism rather than the limited regionalism offered by the government (Security Council 2014k). As a result, the security situation deteriorated further, the ceasefire was not respected, and the peace process stalled with little implementation of the agreement (Security Council 2015a). The situation worsened amid growing communal polarisation and instability within the central authorities, as governments failed in quick succession (Security Council 2015b). The period reflects a stabilisation logic in which temporary ceasefires and formal agreements substituted for political resolution and elite agreement, weakening the UN's leverage for institutional reform.

Several months passed with both sides consolidating their positions until several rebel groups signed a provisional peace and reconciliation agreement with the government. At this stage, the UN focused more on peacebuilding and state-building. Despite formal agreements, there was almost no implementation, and security and political conditions remained unfavourable (Security Council 2015c). The government continued to establish reconciliation committees without making progress, failing even to maintain a lasting ceasefire (Security Council 2015d). Governments collapsed in succession, leading political elites to postpone regional and local elections due to a claimed lack of the necessary conditions, while socio-economic development stalled and insecurity deepened (Security Council 2015e). Successive governments ignored the root causes of the conflict, implementing limited decentralisation poorly and prioritising hard security measures. Peace agreements were not enforced, dialogue was delayed, and limited consultations produced no results due to persistent disagreements and a lack of compromise (Security Council 2016a). Trust eroded as the security situation deteriorated and rebel groups expressed growing dissatisfaction with the government's lack of political reform. The reconciliation process was stalled, and the agreement was not implemented (Security Council 2016b). The government increasingly treated the UN as a military support mission to resolve security problems, conditioning reforms on such support, while the UN insisted that political measures had to precede military solutions and urged renewed political dialogue (Security Council 2016c; 2016d). The period revealed growing

mandate incoherence, as rhetorical commitments to peacebuilding coexisted with a stabilisation-driven reliance on UN security provision and persistent non-compliance in practice.

Security problems increasingly overshadowed other issues, and disagreements between signatory parties intensified as local elections were delayed due to a lack of security (Security Council 2016e). Intense international engagement failed to reduce tensions, with rebels decrying exclusion from decision-making and the government refusing to compromise (Security Council 2017a). The government demanded peace on its terms, rejecting rebel demands as illegitimate and pursuing its programme without inclusivity (Security Council 2017b; 2017c). To prevent repeated government collapse, a draft constitution was proposed that concentrated excessive power in the presidency, including control over the judiciary, while offering no clear vision for implementing the peace agreement or decentralisation. At the same time, the UN mission faced serious capability constraints due to mandate overextension, while the government remained unable to ensure security or implement necessary reforms (Security Council 2017d). As international pressure weakened, the transitional period without elections extended, and dialogue failed to halt hostilities or generate reconciliation, with governments constrained by internal mistrust, rivalries and limited state capacity, and the UN exercising only limited influence (Security Council 2017e). The period reflects a consolidation of stabilisation logic, in which security priorities prevailed, international leverage eroded through elite resistance, and the mission's legitimacy and capacity for political pressure declined.

The situation in Mali continued to deteriorate as the peace dialogue stagnated, marked by social unrest, protests against the government, absence of constitutional reform, and violent clashes in the north between armed groups and the government, and among armed actors themselves (Security Council 2017f). Both the government and the rebels increasingly lost patience with the peace and reconciliation process and became more resistant to foreign pressure. Presidential elections were held in 2018, resulting in Keita's re-election, while all other elections and constitutional reform were delayed. The UN expressed serious concern over the lack of progress and instability, as well as the absence of reforms in line with liberal norms, as the government failed to establish authority, ensure minority inclusion, or advance decentralisation (Security Council 2018a; 2018b). The government also failed to follow the UN electoral timetable, raising concerns within the Security Council over whether future elections would be peaceful and credible, as implementation of the agreement became a political struggle and Malian representatives grew less receptive to international guidance

(Security Council 2018c; 2018d). Mistrust between the government and the opposition deepened after delays in regional and local elections, leading to increased polarisation and a breakdown of dialogue. At the same time, the UN mission remained overstretched, understaffed and under-resourced, bearing the burden of stabilisation efforts and suffering unusually high casualties among peacekeepers (Security Council 2018e). In response, the UN placed greater emphasis on the peace process itself, demanding inclusive political dialogue and political dispute settlement to prevent further erosion of institutional legitimacy (Security Council 2018f). In this way, the UN sought to recover fading leverage through renewed commitments while tolerating only minimal democratisation and liberal norm internalisation in favour of stability and security, thereby enabling elite compliance without substantive reform.

UN pressure resulted in elections, but they were marked by political tensions, incidents, very low turnout and a lack of transparency, which the UN nonetheless accepted as credible while continuing to work with the government and press for reform. As part of this pressure, the government signed a “pact for peace” with the UN, reaffirming its commitments to the peace process, the rule of law, decentralisation, inclusive political reform, national reconciliation, and security and economic reform (Security Council 2018g; 2018h). The government formally complied by attempting to relaunch national reconciliation. However, rebels refused to cooperate and questioned the elections’ validity, while progress stalled and the political opposition boycotted the process because it was not inclusive (Security Council 2018i). Polarisation deepened as regions developed parallel political processes and entrenched ethno-religious divisions, with central authorities rapidly losing legitimacy and the peace dialogue collapsing as rebel demands remained unmet (Security Council 2019a; 2019b; 2019c). The situation further unravelled in 2020 as peace implementation remained slow and uneven, key decisions were postponed, elections and constitutional reform were delayed, the rebels continued to refuse disarmament, and the government offered only the appearance of dialogue without applying or enforcing reforms (Security Council 2020a). Under renewed internal and international pressure, elections were again permitted but were marred by violence and armed interference, leading the UN to press for constitutional reform and continued dialogue while increasingly prioritising security concerns, further tilting the mandate towards stabilisation (Security Council 2020b; 2020c). The period thus marked a shift from liberal conditionality to stabilisation-driven accommodation, as formal compliance and managed elections substituted for substantive reform and inclusive dialogue, deepening fragmentation.

The fragility of central authority and democracy, combined with widespread protests and dissatisfaction with the president, culminated in the overthrow of the government, which was removed in a violent coup in August. The president and prime minister were imprisoned and forced to resign and dissolve the assembly, after which Colonel Goita installed himself as head of a military government, promising to end poor governance and restore security. The coup was internationally condemned, with ECOWAS suspending Mali and imposing sanctions. The new authorities promised elections following a transition period. They established transitional institutions, including a small appointed assembly, while Goita blamed the deposed leadership for failing to resolve the security crisis and for the population's loss of faith in state institutions (Security Council 2020d; 2020e). The UN tolerated the change of government on the condition that elections would be held within one and a half years and that implementation of the peace agreement would continue (Security Council 2020f; 2020g). The junta ruled by decree amid criticism from both the former government and the opposition, as governance weakened, reforms were suspended, and peace implementation stalled. Goita subsequently consolidated full power by removing the transitional president and prime minister he had appointed and assuming the presidency himself (Security Council 2021a). The UN's tolerance of an unconstitutional transfer of power in exchange for promised elections reflected stabilisation-driven accommodation, marking a decisive breakdown of liberal leverage by suspending conditionality and enabling undemocratic elite consolidation.

The UN maintained that only an inclusive, civilian-led government chosen through credible elections could restore social cohesion and public trust in state institutions. The government instead prioritised security and continued to rule by decree, increasing repression without reducing intercommunal violence (Security Council 2021). It blamed the UN for the country's problems, accusing the mission of failing to provide security (Security Council 2021c). The government then announced that elections would not take place as planned and refused to cooperate with the UN and ECOWAS, prompting sanctions and border closures (Security Council 2022a). Although the UN mission continued to operate, it became clear that it had lost influence and could no longer mediate effectively. Tensions intensified as the transition deadline passed, democratisation plans were halted, and northern rebel signatories resumed their arming and recruitment activities (Security Council 2022b). The government attributed instability to foreign interference, pursued stabilisation through force and central authority, and rejected international mediation, leaving the UN

without a local partner and unable to continue as before (Security Council 2022c; 2023a). As authoritarian consolidation deepened, democratic norms were openly rejected, and the government demanded the mission's departure, leading the UN to close the mission amid worsening security, failed democratisation, and sustained hostility (Security Council 2023b; 2023c). The mission's termination marked the consolidation of stabilisation logic, as the loss of political conditionality and local partnership removed the remaining leverage necessary for liberal peacebuilding.

Discussion

The empirical analysis confirms the theoretical framework's expectations by showing that the hybridisation of liberal peacebuilding and stabilisation did not produce complementarity. They rather weakened the mechanisms through which the mission was expected to achieve its objectives. It further shows that, as stabilisation priorities increasingly took precedence in the implementation of the mandate, the credibility of political conditionality declined, reducing the mission's leverage over local political elites. That, in turn, incentivised shallow and formal compliance with reform demands. Although the mission initially combined political pressure, electoral support, mediation and security cooperation with some degree of success, this balance was unsustainable as insecurity increased and the need for cooperation with state authorities became prioritised over normative pressure on it. As a consequence, liberal commitments remained declaratory, while security cooperation became sufficient to maintain international engagement despite delays in implementing liberal-democratic reforms. The causal mechanism proved correct because the weakening of normative conditionality through stabilisation disincentivised political transformation and allowed local political elites to adapt discursively to the mission's demands without undertaking substantive reforms. Likewise, the findings suggest that the limitations of liberal peacebuilding in this case did not result simply from the incompatibility of liberal norms with the local context but from the weakening of the political mechanisms required for their implementation, which was inherent to the hybrid design.

Conclusion

As the concept of liberal peacebuilding has come under increasing pressure and critique, and there is widespread disillusionment with it, it is important to examine its recent practice and adaptations. Accordingly, this article examines a paradigmatic mission as one of the most notable

peacebuilding missions in recent times. The mission did not have a purely liberal mandate but a hybrid one. It appears that the true cause of its failure was not in its theoretical foundation. The results indicate that this hybridisation did not provide complementarity between the two approaches. Instead, it produced tensions that weakened the mission's ability to pursue both democratic reform and security. The mission operated under unfavourable structural conditions, yet it also failed to provide consistent pressure within a coherent normative framework and under clearly defined conditionality. As the mission failed to achieve transformative or stabilisation goals, it increasingly resorted to accommodation with the local government's formal compliance to maintain security. This led to an abandonment of its normative liberal goals of resolving the root causes of the ongoing conflict, which, combined with the failure to achieve security, led to a loss of trust between the mission and the government. Thus, the prioritisation of short-term stability proved detrimental to both long-term stability and liberalisation.

Extrapolating the mission's results to the wider theoretical debate, it appears that the hybridity of the liberal approach and stabilisation contains fundamental tensions that challenge the assumption that these approaches can be easily combined. Stabilisation is harder to achieve if the symptoms are treated rather than the underlying causes. When stabilisation is prioritised, it can marginalise the normative goals required for this very purpose. Such an approach would then reduce the leverage of the international mission, which is required to compensate for weak institutions, limited democratic experience, and fragmented authority. Therefore, the conclusion is that the two approaches are conceptually contradictory rather than complementary, as stabilisation systematically weakens the political mechanisms on which liberal transformation depends, undermining the latter rather than enabling it. The mission's tolerance of a government turning towards authoritarianism and its acceptance of symbolic compliance with demands for political transformation undermined its legitimacy and contributed to the loss of its remaining influence. This happened in Mali's case. Therefore, the mission's failure should not be considered as caused by an abrupt or unexpected event but as a predictable outcome of a mandate that prioritised short-term stability over normative consistency. In the end, the mission failed to provide both political transformation and genuine stable security. It should be noted that the Mali crisis occurred in a specific local and regional context, so the findings concerning its mission, while providing useful insight, remain specific to the case. The results of the analysis therefore suggest the need for greater caution in the design of

hybrid peacebuilding mandates. Further research could examine whether similar dynamics emerge across other stabilisation-oriented international missions, as well as across similar hybrid mandates.

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