

Protecting Civilians in Turbulent Times: An Interdisciplinary Workshop

Workshop Report May 2025¹

Introduction

On 6-7 February 2025, the Balsillie School of International Affairs (BSIA) hosted a two-day workshop on the protection of civilians in contemporary armed conflict. Featuring a mix of practitioners and scholars, and including both international and BSIA-affiliated experts, the event – *Protecting Civilians in Turbulent Times: An Interdisciplinary Workshop* – aimed to take stock of the state of civilian protection practice in an era marked by both a steep rise in violent conflict and a deepening crisis of multilateralism.

With more than 100 active armed conflicts currently raging around the world, the international crisis-response toolkit seems no longer fit for purpose. Parties to armed conflict display little regard for international humanitarian law, the UN Security Council is once again paralyzed by great-power discord, while the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine – adopted by UN member states in 2005 as a means of preventing mass atrocity crimes – now appears to be an artefact of a more hopeful era of liberal internationalism. At the same time, the most prominent international agents of civilian protection – peacekeepers and humanitarians – are increasingly underfunded, unsupported, and under pressure to do more with less in the world’s most dangerous and difficult environments. Little wonder, then, that the UN Secretary General recently described the global landscape for civilian protection as ‘resoundingly grim’.

The workshop included thematic sessions on the state of the wider civilian protection toolkit, on both UN and African Union (AU) peacekeeping and protection of civilian mandates, on civilian self-protection strategies in the world’s ‘forgotten conflicts’, and on the geopolitical dimensions of protection in light of eroding liberal norms, the shifting global balance of power, and ongoing crises in Ukraine and Gaza. While the imperative of providing protection to civilians caught in conflict is hardly a new theme – memories of catastrophic protection failures in Bosnia and Rwanda continue to cast very long shadows – it is also the case that in the current global context the gap between the rhetoric and the reality of protection appears to be wider than ever. With the UN’s peace and security architecture under enormous strain, and the international humanitarian system both over-extended and struggling to secure essential funding, those fragile and conflict-affected

¹ This report was written by Timothy Donais; the author is grateful to the following workshop rapporteurs for their accounts of the session discussions: Anastasia Papadopoulos, Leonardo Lombardi, Hannah Barbero, Dawit Kabede, and Fabrice Blais-Savoie.

states where the threats to civilians are greatest – Sudan and Haiti among them – are at risk of being relegated to the category of forgotten conflicts. Within this admittedly discouraging context, workshop participants endeavoured to make sense of the current moment from a civilian protection perspective and to assess the prospects for reversing these trends in order to fulfill, however belatedly, the promise of the Sustainable Development Goals to both leave no one behind and to reach the furthest behind first.

Understanding Civilian Protection

In conflict-affected contexts, civilian protection continues to mean different things to different actors. This diversity of views on the means and ends of protection persists both within the UN system and across the diverse set of actors (from humanitarian to military to political) that constitute the international presence in conflict-affected states, and continues to be a challenge to coherent and integrated field-level action on protection-related issues.² While humanitarians tend to view protection both in terms of the provision of the necessities of life and in terms of advocating for duty-bearing actors – whether states, conflict parties, or international organizations – to uphold legal and ethical duties vis-à-vis civilian populations, protection of civilians (PoC) from a UN peacekeeping context has tended to focus primarily on civilians at imminent risk of physical harm. This emphasis sits somewhat awkwardly alongside the Department of Peace Operations's own PoC guidelines, which outline three distinct protection tiers, including not only physical protection but also dialogue and engagement (with both conflict parties and conflict-affected communities) as well as the establishment of a protective environment, which can include everything from security sector reform to anti-corruption efforts to support for the implementation of both local- and national-level peace agreements. Much like earlier debates around the meanings of human security, then, there is a danger here of casting the definitional net too widely, such that any activity could be made to fit within the wider civilian protection umbrella, thus draining the concept of substantive content and rendering it largely meaningless in operational terms. Conversely, privileging one narrowly construed definition over another risks excising or diminishing important aspects of the wider protection *problématique*. In the words of one workshop participant, therefore, protection actors need to ensure that they have a clear understanding of each others' approaches, while also continuing to work towards a proper framing of protection, which is neither too broad nor too restrictive, and which acknowledges the broad range of critical work, undertaken by a broad range of actors, in the name of civilian protection.

Along the same lines, it is also crucial to take stock of the various tools in the protection toolkit, and to better understand not only what works and what does not in protection contexts, but also how tools might best be combined to generate better protection outcomes. Necessity has generated a broad range of protection instruments in recent years: advocacy, military muscle, diplomacy, international law, physical presence, support for existing community self-protection strategies, capacity building at various levels,

² Various local actors – including the state itself – also understand civilian protection in different ways.

among others. And while important work has been undertaken by both qualitatively- and quantitatively-inclined scholars to assess the relative impacts of some of these instruments, developing a complete picture of the impacts of protection-related work and drawing substantive lessons from past experience remain very much works in progress.

With discussion of the multiple meanings and varied instruments of civilian protection providing essential context, the bulk of the workshop centred around the specific agents and actors involved in protection work. While UN Security Council resolutions regularly underline the primary protection responsibilities of the states hosting peacekeeping or humanitarian operations, it is widely understood that host states – especially in contexts of active and ongoing conflicts – remain problematic protection actors, and in many cases represent the most serious sources of threats to civilian populations. Recognizing that host states themselves therefore remain instrumental to wider protection dynamics – both part of the problem and part of the solution – workshop discussions placed particular emphasis on the role of conflict-affected communities themselves as well as UN and AU-led peace operations as key protection actors, with some additional reflections on the civilian protection potential of the International Criminal Court.

Community Self-Protection

Within the wider protection context, civilian self-protection (CSP) has emerged as a distinct subfield of study. Understood as ‘actions carried out by individuals and communities to protect themselves and/or others in violent settings,’ CSP recognizes that conflict-affected communities are themselves critical first-responders in protection crises, and that the most important protection actions are the ones taken by those at risk. Even if it is widely accepted that CSP is neither an alternative to nor a substitute for international protection efforts, increasingly it is the case that conflict-affected communities have little alternative but to take protection matters into their own hands. The importance of understanding the dynamics and the potential of CSP – and how the critical work of community self-protection might best be supported by external actors – has come into sharper relief in recent years as a consequence of reduced funding for, and reduced presence of, both peacekeepers and humanitarians.

While conventional narratives often default to portrayals of civilians in conflict zones as largely helpless victims of ruthless and often predatory armed actors, recent research has identified a distinct repertoire of actions available to communities as they seek to navigate, and survive, complex conflict environments. These strategies can range from flight or evasion – drawing on cultural understandings and communicative networks to anticipate armed group movements and quite simply get out of their way – to active resistance, which can entail everything from negotiating coexistence with armed groups to mobilising self-defence groups to deter and/or repel them. More generally, communities in conflict contexts deploy a wide range of creative adaptation strategies, from shifting livelihoods to collaborating with various forms of international presence, as a means of mitigating as much as possible their lived insecurities.

While CSP is increasingly recognized as a critical element of any protection context – with most external interveners acknowledging, at least in principle, the imperative of collaborating with the communities they seek to help – there is still much to be learned about the particular dynamics of self-protection strategies and their short- and long-term consequences. The term ‘civilian’, for example, remains overly broad as an analytical category, and doesn’t fully capture the particular vulnerabilities of distinct categories of civilian, or the ways that intersectionality plays out in protection contexts. To the extent that civilians are in fact differentiated for policy and planning purposes, it is often to note the particular vulnerabilities of women and children. As a range of feminist scholars have pointed out, however, this manner of differentiation too often has the effect of re-casting women in the role of helpless victims, thus further marginalizing them as agents of protection in their own right. Research is also only beginning to come to terms with the limits, and the potential, of communications technology in facilitating early warning and/or collective action in the name of protection, in generating resources for protection purposes, and in engaging with external actors. Finally, more research is needed to better understand how communities themselves perceive both threats and appropriate protection responses to such threats; it remains the case that such understandings reflect all too often the particular positionality and biases of outsiders.

In this latter context – where CSP and international protection efforts intersect – the onus is on external actors to better attend to the ways in which those they are mandated to protect understand their own contexts and their own agency; at the very least, the principle of ‘do no harm’ suggests that those responsible for external protection efforts should ensure that their actions don’t undermine those of communities themselves. Recent research undertaken by Oxfam has begun to shed light on some of these issues, in the hopes of being able to generate better answers to the question of how to more effectively empower local actors for protection purposes. Community perception research undertaken in conflict-affected communities across central Africa, for example, has exposed a critical disconnect between external and local actors across a range of protection questions. In the Central African Republic, while respondents continued to recognize the stabilizing role played by the UN’s MINUSCA mission, they also felt uninformed, excluded and unprotected despite the prominence of PoC within the mission’s mandate. Such findings point to a broader challenge facing all external protection actors: how to ensure not only better communication with local actors, but also how to centre local voices and agency across all protection activities. This requires a fundamental shift in thinking about how protection is delivered and by whom, and more specifically a concerted effort to redirect both recognition and resources towards local protection actors. At present, for example, women-led and local humanitarian organizations remain largely excluded and invisible within mainstream protection paradigms, while community alert networks and local protection committees – many of which have emerged at the instigation of international actors – are still expected to be financially self-sustaining beyond an initial start-up phase. As funding shrinks and crises deepen in countries like Sudan and the DRC, such questions simultaneously take on greater urgency while also becoming more resistant to resolution.

Ongoing crises in Sudan and in Haiti demonstrate the range of different CSP modalities at work even amidst the most challenging conflict environments. Since Sudan's dramatic descent into civil war in April 2023, estimates suggest that as many as 150,000 people have been killed, more than 14 million have been displaced, while more than 30 million are in need of humanitarian assistance. Amidst what has rapidly emerged as the world's largest humanitarian crisis, the international response has been muted, generating little concrete action at the level of the UN Security Council while humanitarian appeals for financial support for Sudan remain dramatically undersubscribed. In response, so-called emergency response rooms (ERRs) have emerged across Sudan in the form of grassroots networks committed to providing some measure of humanitarian assistance to desperate civilian populations. ERRs have their origins in the myriad resistance committees that were established in 2019 as part of the popular uprising against former president Omar al-Bashir, and which effectively acted as neighborhood watch groups. In their current manifestation, over 700 ERRs provide a range of public services across war-torn Sudan; in addition to distributing food, water, medical assistance and other basic necessities, ERRs also serve as community centres, communal kitchens, daycare centres and educational spaces. With basic supplies such as food and medicine in increasingly short supply across Sudan, the ERR network has relied on links with the Sudanese diaspora, especially as other sources of international funding remain scarce and difficult to access.

Half a world away, Haitians too are struggling to cope with a dramatic collapse of state authority, as well as with an armed gang resurgence in recent years. Haiti's own security forces are increasingly overwhelmed and outgunned, and the Kenyan-led Multinational Security Support (MSS) Mission in Haiti has been unable to turn the tide, or even come up to full strength, since arriving in mid-2024. Amidst a rapidly-deteriorating security environment, the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative in Haiti recently warned that the country is approaching a 'point of no return'. Desperate Haitians have increasingly turned to vigilante brigades and community self-defence forces as a response to the current chaos, which was exacerbated by the liberation of some 4,700 inmates from Haiti's two largest prisons in early 2024. The most prominent of these anti-gang vigilante groups, known as Bwa Kale, has adopted a 'desperate times call for desperate measures' strategy, and reportedly has systematically killed and burned hundreds of suspected gang members, mirroring the brutality of the gangs they are fighting. Well-armed, with high-calibre weapons obtained either through diaspora connections or diverted from the Haitian National Police, these groups have become central to civilian protection efforts, given the weak international response to the ongoing crisis and the inability of the Haitian government to offer citizens any meaningful level of protection. While groups such as Bwa Kale are a manifestation of Haitians quite literally fighting for their lives, they operate in most cases with no training, no oversight, and no accountability, and in some cases are increasingly difficult to distinguish from the armed gangs they oppose; indeed, many known gangs emerged originally from such community self-defence forces. With no end in sight to Haiti's current crisis, and with high levels of violence not only persisting but spreading to different parts of the country beyond the capital, Port-au-Prince, it remains

difficult to predict if, when, and how stability might be restored, and how the balance of power between armed gangs and anti-gang self-defence forces might shift over time.

UN Peacekeeping and the Protection of Civilians

Civilian protection in the context of UN peace operations – PoC in UN parlance – traces its origins back to the tragic protection failures in Srebrenica and in Rwanda during the mid-1990s, events which shook the institution of peacekeeping to its core. After a period of introspection, the Security Council broke new ground in 1999 by adding PoC as a mandated task of the UN's peace operation in Sierra Leone, and in 2000 the influential Brahimi Report insisted that uniformed UN peacekeepers who witness violence against civilian populations 'should be presumed to be authorised to stop it.' Today, the vast majority of UN peacekeepers operate with PoC mandates, and in many cases PoC has been identified as the mission's priority responsibility.

The UN's three-tiered protection framework noted above – comprising dialogue and engagement, provision of physical protection, and the establishment of a protective environment – gives peacekeepers wide latitude in operationalizing PoC mandates, although in practice it remains the case that the gap between any given mission's protection responsibilities and the resources allocated to it to fulfill these tasks remains concerningly wide. Simply put, peacekeepers cannot protect all civilians all the time, and Security Council mandates regularly include a caveat limiting a mission's PoC obligations to those 'within its capacity and areas of deployment'. At the same time, mission-level PoC obligations co-exist awkwardly with the UN's more traditional peacekeeping principles, notably impartiality, consent of the parties, and non-use of force (except in self-defence or in defence of the mandate). The shift towards more robust peace operations in recent years – a trend which culminated in the creation of the so-called Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) within MONUSCO, which was mandated to 'neutralize' named armed groups – has in particular tested the boundaries between peacekeeping and peace enforcement, and has generated considerable controversy across the UN system and among troop-contributing countries. The introduction of the concept of 'stabilization' in UN mandates in recent years, which merges the idea of neutralizing, with force as necessary, non-state armed groups with the extension of state authority, has also necessitated some creative reworking of the impartiality principle. On the one hand, working with host states to extend their authority, inevitably at the expense of the armed opposition, has made it harder to make a convincing case that UN peace operations remain impartial vis-à-vis the conflict parties. On the other, peacekeepers have often struggled to balance the twin imperatives of protecting civilians and supporting the extension of state authority, especially in situations where the UN's host-state 'partners' are responsible for the lion's share of human rights violations against civilian populations.

Despite the challenges, trial-and-error in some of the world's most complex conflict environments has produced considerable innovation in PoC practice. More than a decade ago, for example, the UN introduced its so-called Human Rights Due Diligence Policy

(HRDDP), a set of guidelines regulating the manner in which peacekeepers collaborate with host state security forces, in the interests of avoiding UN complicity in human rights abuses committed by local partners. At the same time, MONUSCO has in particular emerged as something of a laboratory for PoC innovation; community liaison assistants, community alert networks, and local protection committees have all emerged from such experimentation, and have provided the foundations for a PoC-focused early warning and rapid response network across the eastern DRC. Many of these innovations have been replicated in other mission contexts. While the protection efforts of UN peace operations continue to face serious challenges – among them declining budgets, and absence of peace to keep in mission environments, difficult relationships with host states, differential levels of preparation among troop contingents, and language barriers that impede effective communication between peacekeepers and those they are meant to protect – it is also the case that academic research is demonstrating that PoC efforts do in fact make a positive difference. A mounting body of empirical evidence points, in fact, to the impact of peace operations in reducing civilian casualties, deterring armed group from attacking civilian populations, and mitigating the scope and intensity of local and subnational conflict. In addition to decades of hard-won experience, UN peacekeeping as an institution continues to possess unique advantages as a protection actor in conflict-affected contexts. These include the ability to sustain extensive field presences and build durable links both with local and state-level actors alike, the multidimensional nature of its field presences (integrating both civilian and uniformed elements), and its capacity to leverage cooperation both with other UN agencies, funds and programs and with other bilateral actors in the interests of both peace and protection.

The UN's experience with so-called PoC sites in South Sudan over the past decade provides one particularly dramatic example of the organization's ability to adapt to a rapidly-changing security context. When newly-independent South Sudan collapsed into civil war in late 2013, thousands of terrified civilians fled to UN bases in search of protection. Ultimately, some half-dozen PoC sites emerged at different UN bases across the country, and at one point the UN was sheltering more than 200,000 displaced South Sudanese. While some sites began life quite literally as nothing more than open fields in close proximity to UN bases, over time they developed into functioning communities featuring local self-governance and well-established educational, recreational, healthcare and religious facilities; at one point, the Bentiu PoC site was the country's second-largest population centre. From the beginning, UNMISS relied on close partnerships with affected communities, as well as with a wide range of humanitarian organizations who provided key services, in order to ensure functional order within the sites; given the mission's limited resources, this was a case of innovation by necessity. While there is a compelling case to be made that the PoC sites were responsible for saving the lives of literally tens of thousands of civilians, the experiment was far from unproblematic. Attacks on numerous PoC sites over the course of the conflict claimed the lives of dozens of site residents, and UNMISS peacekeepers were accused during some of these episodes of gross derelictions of duty. At the same time, the PoC sites were a continuous source of friction between UNMISS and the Government of South Sudan, with the latter accusing the former of

sheltering within the sites anti-government rebels and criminals. While most PoC sites have now been transitioned into internally-displaced persons camps under host-government control – only the Malakal PoC site remains under UNMISS supervision – the mission’s experience with PoC sites remains one of the most dramatic experiments in protection practice in the UN’s history, even if it is unclear whether the model could, or even should, ever be replicated in other mission contexts.

While PoC practice has adapted and adjusted to particular mission contexts over the years, broader trends at the level of the international system are increasingly throwing into question not only the future of PoC, but of peacekeeping more generally. Over the past quarter-century of practice, PoC has been overwhelmingly focused on the downstream consequences of armed violence, rather than its upstream causes; in many ways, the experience of the FIB has been the exception that has proven the rule that the UN is institutionally ill-equipped to choke off or eliminate threats at their source. At the same time, PoC has also been deeply affected by the ongoing crisis of peacebuilding; not only has the post-cold war consensus around the basic premises of liberal peacebuilding – along with the liberal international order more generally – largely broken down, but the changing nature of conflict has also meant that the UN’s ability to facilitate durable negotiated solutions to conflict has also declined dramatically. The ongoing crisis in the DRC, where the UN has had peacekeeping boots on the ground since 1999, is just the most dramatic manifestation of this trend. Among other things, these developments have meant that PoC, rather than a complement to wider peacebuilding processes, has come to be in some ways a substitute for them, with the effect that missions such as MONUSCO are increasingly viewed by host-state populations as having outlived their utility and overstayed their welcome. For their part, host-state governments have become increasingly impatient with peace processes that do not deliver peace, and have increasingly turned against conventional approaches aimed at reconciling with armed groups and towards the idea that those opposing them should be crushed rather than accommodated. This trend is most visible in the Central African Republic, whose government has leaned increasingly on Russia’s Wagner Group in its ongoing – and reportedly brutal – campaign to defeat the country’s diverse collection of armed opposition groups once and for all. This has posed serious dilemmas for the MINUSCA mission, which has struggled to come to terms with the reality that the most serious threats to civilians in CAR now comes from mercenaries closely aligned with a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Such developments are increasingly pointing to the emergence of a more authoritarian form of peacebuilding, more aligned with the foreign policy preferences of both Russia and China, that is focused less on human rights or the rule of law and more on strengthening the capacities of host states to control territory and impose their will. Such an agenda, as the experience in CAR demonstrates, not only implies robust stabilization efforts that exact heavy tolls on civilian populations but also the establishment of repressive states that stifle dissent and individual liberties in the name of stability.

While these broader trends raise difficult questions about the future of PoC within UN peace operations, a broader crisis of confidence within the peacekeeping ecosystem also

seems to be taking hold, with potentially profound consequences for the future of peacekeeping itself. Amidst downward pressure on peacekeeping budgets, a growing emphasis on transition and exit strategies, and deepening divisions within the permanent membership of the UN Security Council, there is a widespread sense that peacekeeping is no longer delivering. While the UN Secretary-General's 2018 Action for Peacekeeping initiative was meant to generate renewed global commitment to peacekeeping operations, recent years have also witnessed greater experimentation with other modes of engagement with conflict-affected states. These include a growing emphasis on AU-led operations, a trend towards the deployment of Special Political Missions (which lack uniformed contingents), and experimentation with ad hoc arrangements such as the Kenya-led MSS Mission in Haiti. Thus, while PoC over the course of recent decades has become sufficiently institutionalized within the UN system that it is unlikely to be discarded as a central priority of UN operations, the shift away from large, multidimensional deployments is certain to have profound implications for the ways in which PoC mandates are operationalized.

The African Union as a Protection Actor

The emergence of the African Union as an institutional actor with ambitious regional security governance aspirations represents a crucial test case for the ability of non-UN peace operations to deliver on civilian protection outcomes. While the legacy of colonialism, coupled with the constraints of the post-World War II global governance architecture, continues to shape Africa's security landscape, the AU has worked to put in place the building blocks of a regional security governance architecture that will, it is hoped, eventually allow it to fulfill the long-standing promise of 'African solutions to African problems'.

PoC has become an increasingly prominent component of AU thinking and practice as its institutional capacity to engage in peacekeeping, peacebuilding and conflict resolution has developed. As part of its transition from the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to the AU in the early 2000's, the AU embraced both the principle of non-indifference (in lieu of non-interference), committing itself to intervening in situations involving mass atrocity, and to the idea of sovereignty as responsibility, which holds member states accountable for the security of their citizens. Structurally, the AU Peace and Security Council serves as the principal organ responsible for peace and security affairs, and like its UN counterpart is comprised of 15 member states. The AU Standby Force serves as the main operational body of the emerging African Peace and Security Architecture, under the direction of the Peace and Security Council, while the Panel of the Wise and the African Commission play complementary roles in the areas of conflict resolution, governance, and human rights promotion.

The AU's successive peace support operations in Somalia (AMISOM, ATMIS and now AUSSOM) have been the most high-profile and high-stakes manifestations of the AU's resolve to manage conflicts in its own backyard. These successive missions have

demonstrated the AU's robust posture vis-à-vis peace operations, and its willingness to aggressively pursue armed actors – al-Shabaab in the case of Somalia – that represent key threats to both peace and to civilian populations. More so than their UN counterparts, the Somalia missions have more openly embraced peace enforcement, and have been more inclined to view the protection challenge as one of defeating those armed groups posing the greatest threats to civilians; at the same time, a key element of the AU's PoC strategy has revolved around ensuring that its own offensive operations do not unduly threaten civilian lives. This strategic posture has come at a considerable cost to those on the front lines, with some 4,000 casualties recorded between the AMISOM and ATMIS missions.

Beyond the ongoing challenges of its most high-profile frontline engagement, it has also become increasingly clear that despite its strategic vision, the AU faces structural and operational challenges that hinder its effectiveness. These include:

- **Financial Constraints:** The AU remains heavily dependent on external funding, with the European Union (EU) serving as its largest financial contributor to peacekeeping missions.
- **Lack of Political Will:** Member states frequently fail to mobilize resources or coordinate effective responses.
- **Institutional Limitations:** Bureaucratic inefficiencies and inconsistent enforcement mechanisms limit proactive intervention.
- **Organized Hypocrisy:** Despite the mantra of 'African solutions to African problems', external dependencies continue to undermine true self-sufficiency.

While these persistent institutional weaknesses might be attributed to the inevitable growing pains of an organization struggling to build operational capacity amidst an increasingly unfavourable global and regional context, a more critical perspective raises questions about whether the AU's institutional weaknesses are in fact rooted in a continued reliance on colonial-era state structures that reinforce exclusion and repression instead of working towards genuine civilian protection. According to this perspective, while the AU possesses institutional mechanisms designed to enable engagement and dialogue with both civil society and the African diaspora, these mechanisms remain weak and underutilized, and have been deliberately disempowered by AU member states who remain distrustful of civil society and resistant to allowing it greater voice in AU affairs. This ongoing resistance from what remains a firmly state-centric organization may represent a critical missed opportunity for the AU to benefit from the energy and expertise of civil society organizations in both peace and protection work. Across the Horn of Africa, for example, civil society actors – despite largely being excluded from formal peace processes – have played important roles, from Somali elders working to mediate disputes in Kenya's informal justice systems to the work of South Sudanese women's networks in promoting grassroots reconciliation. At the very least, these examples demonstrate that as the AU's peace and security architecture evolves, a greater openness to engagement with and inclusion of civil society actors, especially those working to build peace and resolve conflict at the community level, could pay considerable dividends.

The adoption, in late 2023, of Security Council Resolution 2719 on the financing of AU-led peace operations represents an important step forward in formalizing AU pre-eminence in the maintenance of peace and security on the African continent. At the same time, however, it is clear that much remains to be done to strengthen the organization's institutional capacity to manage and ultimately resolve Africa's persistent conflicts, while at the same time providing meaningful levels of protection to those caught up in these conflicts. Despite the progress represented by SCR 2719, which opens the door to using UN-assessed peacekeeping contributions to fund AU operations, more needs to be done on the part of the AU to reduce reliance on external donors and self-finance its own operations. Institutional capacity-building more generally remains a work in progress, with greater (and faster) progress needed to enable and empower crisis-response mechanisms and to streamline institutional processes more generally at the AU level. Finally, as noted above the AU could at least partially compensate for its ongoing institutional deficits by exploring opportunities to both constructively engage with the African diaspora and to more effectively leverage local and indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms to further the goals of both peace and protection.

International Criminal Law and Civilian Protection

Finally, the discussion also touched on the ways in which the International Criminal Court (ICC) could more effectively leverage its deterrence and prosecutorial roles for civilian protection purposes. Such considerations are of particular relevance in the context of the recent addition of the crime of aggression – defined as the use of armed force by a state against the sovereignty, territorial integrity or political independence of another state – to the list of international crimes over which the ICC has jurisdiction. Expanding the ICC's role in this area is also especially pertinent in an era in which the prohibition against interstate aggression appears to be progressively eroding. While couched in the language of 'pre-emptive self-defence', the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and more recently the Rwanda-backed M23 campaign in eastern DRC, which led to the capture of Goma and large swaths of the Kivus, have all generated massive levels of civilian suffering and insecurity. In the latter case, while the Rwandan government continues to deny reports of its involvement despite mounting empirical evidence to the contrary, the offensive has added another layer of complexity to the long-running conflict in the eastern DRC, even as it poses difficult questions as to whether the DRC and its regional allies can re-capture its lost territory, or whether Rwanda intends ultimately to annex it. Meanwhile, US President Donald Trump's bellicose rhetoric towards Canada, Greenland and Panama in recent months – and his seeming willingness to recognise Russian sovereignty over captured Ukrainian territory – has further challenged the longstanding norm against using of military force to alter international borders.

While taking the prosecution of the crime of international aggression seriously would represent a significant step forward for both international criminal law and for civilian protection, given the widespread civilian casualties typical of recent wars of aggression, the obstacles to doing so remain daunting. At present, ICC jurisdiction over this particular

crime is limited to acts of state parties on the territory of other state parties, which leaves enormous holes in ICC coverage, and effectively precludes prosecutions involving permanent members of the UN Security Council (the US and Russia in particular). In the case of Rwanda, which is not a state party to the Rome Statute, prosecution would require a referral by the UN Security Council, which though not impossible remains improbable. More generally, while prosecuting state leaders responsible for launching wars of aggression could ultimately prove to be an important tool in the wider civilian protection toolkit, it will require considerable political will – which appears lacking in the current international context – to expand ICC jurisdiction, apply pressure on aggressor states, and ensure a universally-applicable single standard vis-à-vis territorial aggression.

Conclusion

The workshop's concluding session was framed around a single, broad question: is the liberal international order coming to an end, and if so what are implications for the protection of civilians agenda? On the first part of the question, panelists expressed broad agreement that the post-World War II order, which has been largely shaped by US hegemony, was at least in crisis and possibly even 'on its last legs'. While the neoliberal tilt of the global order has been widely criticized in recent decades, the broader merits of the system have become more apparent as it begins to unravel. The liberal international order has significantly advanced international cooperation (and generated a significant reduction of interstate conflict), while international law and key international norms, including around human rights and international humanitarian law, have also been strengthened and their reach broadened. While realist power politics have persisted throughout this period, liberal norms, values, and institutions have at least tempered some of the more negative aspects of persistent anarchy at the international level, and have enabled both the functioning of key global institutions such as the UN and the articulation of universal projects such as the Sustainable Development Goals. The pushback against the 'universalization' of the liberal project has been evident for some time now, most notably in the growing assertiveness of both China and Russia on the international stage and more generally in the shift in global power dynamics represented by the rise of the so-called BRICS group of developing countries. The second administration of US President Donald Trump has accelerated existing trends, pushing the current international order to a tipping point from which it may not be possible to recover. While it remains premature to speculate about what might replace the liberal international order if it is indeed pushed beyond the point of no return, the impacts of its decline are already being felt. The UN – and particularly the UN Security Council – appears increasingly paralyzed by deepening divisions among key powers, while more generally the capacity and willingness to respond to emerging and ongoing international crises appears to be in dramatic decline. Investments in key conflict management tools such as mediation, conflict resolution and peacebuilding have lagged, even as new threats, such as cybersecurity, are emerging and new conflicts, including wars of aggression, are exposing the existing international peace and security architecture as increasingly unfit for purpose.

Peacekeeping – and by extension PoC – has increasingly become a casualty of some of these wider trends. Increased fragmentation and emerging multipolarity have rendered multilateral governance more unwieldy and eroded consensus around how and when to intervene in the world’s most troubled regions. At the same time, national self-interest increasingly trumps global solidarity, with intervention seen less in terms of stopping violence (or protecting civilians) and more in terms of the promotion of specific national interests; great powers, in particular, have become less inclined to act – regardless of the extent of civilian suffering – in countries or regions where key national interests are not seen to be at stake. While PoC may still enjoy widespread support across the UN system and among key UN member states – even if widespread support among Western governments for Israel’s ‘total war’ in Gaza, which has exacted a terrible toll on civilians, has exposed Israel’s allies to charges of hypocrisy and double standards with regard to the question of which civilians are worth protecting and which are not – the PoC consensus remains fragile and there is little political space for dialogue around either the politicization of protection issues or how protection practices may be enhanced. In the context of specific peace operations (MONUSCO, for example), debates around PoC therefore tend increasingly to revolve around technical issues rather than around broader political challenges. Finally, echoing an earlier workshop theme, the one element of the PoC agenda where constructive engagement remains possible is around bottom-up approaches to protection; here, there may still exist sufficient political space to explore ways in which multilateral efforts can meaningfully empower communities and local organizations in support of their own self-protection efforts, and to examine strategies for institutionalizing such support within international organizations like the UN.