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# (UN-)Protected Elections – Left for Good? Withdrawal of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations and Its Effects on Violence During Electoral Periods in War-Affected Countries

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## ABSTRACT

How does the phased withdrawal of United Nations peacekeeping operations (PKOs) influence electoral violence? Many PKOs recently ended and peacekeeping personnel numbers are decreasing. Yet, research on peacekeepers' exit remains in its infancy. We help fill this lacuna and examine how peacekeepers' withdrawal affects violence during electoral periods. We focus on electoral periods because elections are both often-desired intervention endpoints and violence-prone moments in post-war trajectories. We argue that electoral violence increases shortly after a reduction in PKO troops because shortfalls in external oversight and security assistance reduce costs for organizing violence and open opportunities for pursuing a coercive electoral strategy. However, violence-inducing exit effects are likely short-lived due to adaptation by domestic security forces or peacekeepers who remain in the host country. We examine our argument across electoral periods and first-order administrative units of all African countries hosting a PKO (2001–2017). Controlling for violence trends prior to peacekeepers' exit, two-way fixed effects models suggest that a local reduction in PKO troops is not associated with subsequent increases in electoral violence. However, withdrawal incidents lead to spikes in political violence more broadly defined. Our results confirm worries that downsizing during election times may endanger security gains in post-war countries.

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## 1. Introduction

The size of United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations (PKOs) has been in decline from over 100,000 uniformed personnel in 2010 to below 75,000 uniformed personnel in 2021.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, in the past five years alone, four large operations – in Haiti, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, and Sudan – came to an end.<sup>2</sup> These developments imply frequent reductions in the number of troops across UN military bases in PKO host countries. Yet, we lack systematic comparative inquiries into the consequences of these progressive withdrawals.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that peacekeepers' withdrawal impacts the security situation in post-war countries. For example, in 2005 in Burundi, 'ONUB began the drawdown of 40 per cent of its military force [...] with the repatriation of a Mozambican guard company from Bujumbura [...] followed by the withdrawal of the Kenyan battalion from Makamba'.<sup>3</sup> Observers noted 'concerns over the hasty drawdown'. Ultimately, however, 'fears of a relapse into violence after the withdrawal of ONUB proved unfounded'.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, incidents of peacekeepers' withdrawal elsewhere apparently sparked renewed violence. Most recently, in the Sudanese Darfur region, journalists reported that '(t)he departure of the long-running UN peacekeeping mission in Darfur has created a security vacuum as hundreds of thousands flee fresh outbreaks of violence'.<sup>5</sup> Given the 'current contraction of peacekeeping',<sup>6</sup> analyzing the security repercussions of increasingly more frequent incidents of local UN troop withdrawal is a timely research priority of enormous practical interest.

This article takes up this research challenge and asks: How do withdrawals of PKO troops influence violence during electoral periods? We focus on election times for two reasons. First, elections are often envisioned as the culminating endpoints of PKOs. For example, the first Secretary-General progress report on the PKO in the Central African Republic states that the 'MINUSCA exit strategy will be based on progress made in each phase towards the achievement of an end state in which the Central African Republic will have completed a transition to a democratically elected legitimate government'.<sup>7</sup> As [Figure 1](#) illustrates, across all PKOs deployed in African countries between 2001 and 2017, there are 68 incidents of withdrawal – i.e. a significant troop reduction of at least 150 PKO troops from a given locality and their subsequent repatriation – *during* an electoral period, i.e.

<sup>1</sup>United Nations Peacekeeping, "Data: Troop and Police Contributors."

<sup>2</sup>United Nations Peacekeeping, "Past Peace Operations."

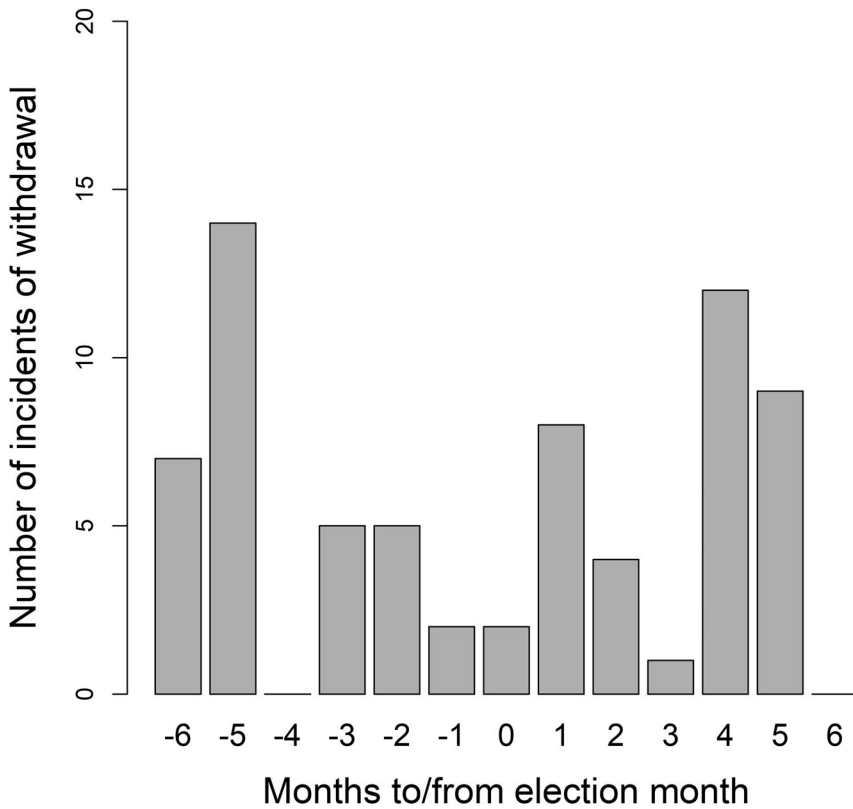
<sup>3</sup>United Nations Security Council, *Sixth report of the Secretary-General*.

<sup>4</sup>Bah, *Annual Review of Global Peace Operations*, 96–7.

<sup>5</sup>Kleinfeld and Amin, "UN Peacekeeper Withdrawal Leaves Security Vacuum in Darfur."

<sup>6</sup>Coleman, "Downsizing in UN Peacekeeping."

<sup>7</sup>United Nations, "Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in the Central African Republic," 9.



**Figure 1.** This figure shows the absolute number of incidents of withdrawals of more than 150 peacekeepers from a subnational location for each month in the pre- and post-election periods in the sample.

six months before and after an election day.<sup>8</sup> Second, election times are also periods of great volatility and danger of conflict relapse. Elections re-introduce competition and conflict over power, which sometimes degenerate into violence. Violent elections, in turn, undermine trust in newly established democratic institutions, hurt the legitimacy of the elected government, and sometimes trigger new armed conflict.<sup>9</sup> Thus, if PKO troop withdrawals exacerbate insecurity, this is particularly consequential during election times.

There is a growing scholarly interest in studying PKO exit.<sup>10</sup> However, substantial gaps remain. First, existing studies concentrate on the long-run effects of PKO withdrawal or so-called peacekeeping legacies. They evaluate

<sup>8</sup>Outside electoral periods in PKO host countries in Africa in the period 2001–2017, there are 262 incidents of PKO troop withdrawal.

<sup>9</sup>Höglund and Jarstad, “Strategies to Prevent and Manage Electoral Violence”; Brancati and Snyder, “Time to Kill”; Flores and Nooruddin, “The Effect of Elections on Postconflict Peace and Reconstruction.”

<sup>10</sup>Di Salvatore and Ruggeri, “The Withdrawal of UN Peace Operations and State Capacity.”

post-peacekeeping trajectories in state capacity,<sup>11</sup> and economic development over several years.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, we provide the first study on *short-run* changes in the *security situation* in the aftermath of peacekeepers' progressive withdrawal. This focus on security matches UN policy priorities and the ambition to organize the transition from international to local forces in ways that do not cause renewed instability.<sup>13</sup>

Second, peacekeepers' exit has only been explored across countries.<sup>14</sup> We move the analysis from the country to the subnational level. Yet, cross-country comparison makes it difficult (if not impossible) to disentangle whether changes in host states are due to peacekeepers' withdrawal or country-level developments that tend to occur in tandem, e.g. the inauguration of a new government. We can hold potentially confounding country-level changes constant and identify the effect of peacekeepers' withdrawal, by exploiting within-country comparisons between subnational units where some portion of UN troops recently left and subnational units where UN troop numbers remain constant. Moreover, subnational analysis matches the actual process of staggered withdrawal: peacekeepers exit some locations within their host country earlier than others, and full withdrawal often takes several months or even years.<sup>15</sup> Thus, temporal and geographical disaggregation is *required* to discern the withdrawal-induced effects on the security situation.

Finally, we add to the growing literature on international interventions to manage electoral violence (e.g. see Birch and Muchilinsky for an overview).<sup>16</sup> Existing research shows that peacekeepers can effectively secure elections during their time of deployment.<sup>17</sup> For example, Fjelde and Smidt find that more PKO troops (compared to less or no PKO troops) are associated with less electoral violence.<sup>18</sup> In their analysis, a relatively lower troop strength in one location might result from a local withdrawal but also from fewer initial deployments or an increase in troop strength in other locations. Our article complements their research by evaluating how a *reduction* of PKO troops (compared to their continued presence) shapes electoral violence.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.; Tansey, "Evaluating the Legacies of State-Building."

<sup>12</sup>Beber et al., "The Promise and Peril of Peacekeeping Economies."

<sup>13</sup>Day, *UN Transitions*, 17.

<sup>14</sup>Beber et al., "The Promise and Peril of Peacekeeping Economies"; Brosig and Sempijja, "What Peacekeeping Leaves Behind"; Di Salvatore and Ruggeri, "The Withdrawal of UN Peace Operations and State Capacity."

<sup>15</sup>For example, reports on the closure of the PKO in Darfur reveal that "Sudan's government expected a total withdrawal after the December [2020] decision [...] but uniformed and civilian staff still need repatriating and bases need closing – a job that will stretch into 2022" (Kleinfeld and Amin, "UN Peacekeeper Withdrawal Leaves Security Vacuum in Darfur").

<sup>16</sup>Birch and Muchilinsky, "Electoral Violence Prevention."

<sup>17</sup>Fjelde and Smidt, "Protecting the Vote?"; Smidt, "Mitigating Election Violence Locally"; Smidt, "Keeping Electoral Peace?"; Fjelde and Höglund, "Introducing the Deadly Electoral Conflict Dataset (DECO)."

<sup>18</sup>Fjelde and Smidt, "Protecting the Vote?."

Building on research that ties the (electoral) security benefits of PKO troops to the subnational presence of UN military personnel,<sup>19</sup> we argue that local withdrawals trigger a temporary increase in violence during electoral periods. This is because peacekeepers' withdrawal entails an abrupt loss of reputation and implementation costs associated with pursuing a coercive electoral strategy. Yet, since PKOs tend to improve conduct and capacity of local security sectors,<sup>20</sup> domestic security agents may be able to adapt to a situation with fewer PKO troops and then close opportunities for violence entrepreneurs. Furthermore, peacekeepers who remain in the host country tend to adapt their operations to meet newly arising security challenges in the transition period.<sup>21</sup> As such, spikes in electoral violence associated with progressive drawdowns are likely short-lived.

We test our argument across first-order administrative units in all African host countries of UN PKOs in the period 2001–2017. Before embarking on the main analysis, we study non-random withdrawal decisions. We find that downward trends in violence generally precipitate peacekeepers' withdrawal, suggesting that naïve statistical analyses tend to under-estimate violence-inducing effects of peacekeepers' exit. Thus, we control for this violence trend in subsequent regression models. Nevertheless, we do not find a significant association between PKO troop withdrawals and electoral violence. However, PKO troop reductions correlate with short-run increases in political violence more broadly defined. We speculate that this differential effect is due to the international focus on electoral security. This focus helps post-exit adaptation by domestic security forces and remaining international personnel to meet electoral threats but 'normalizes' or ignores upticks in other forms of low-level collective violence.<sup>22</sup> Overall, our results offer robust empirical support for policy analysts who worry about drawdowns during election times.<sup>23</sup> Post-conflict countries suffer from upticks in coercive acts during a 'dual transition' (i.e. transition in both political administration and international security presence). Even if violence is not explicitly aimed at manipulating or spoiling elections, security concerns during the electoral period likely impinge on citizens' political rights, e.g. through freedom of movement restrictions, and potentially diminish the legitimacy of electoral processes and results.

In the remainder of this article, we first review existing knowledge on (i) peacekeepers' impact on electoral violence and (ii) peacekeeping legacies. Building on these insights, we develop an argument detailing why

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.; Fjelde et al., "Protection Through Presence."

<sup>20</sup>Karim, "The Legacy of Peacekeeping on the Liberian Security Sector"; Blair, *Peacekeeping, Policing, and the Rule of Law after Civil War*; Blair et al., "Establishing the Rule of Law in Weak and War-Torn States."

<sup>21</sup>Day, *UN Transitions*.

<sup>22</sup>Autesserre, "Hobbes and the Congo."

<sup>23</sup>E.g. Day, *UN Transitions*, 24.

peacekeepers' withdrawal leads to temporary insecurity during electoral periods. Next, we turn to the research design and then present our findings. We conclude with avenues for future research and recommendations for preserving security benefits during 'dual transitions' from both international to local security provision and an old to a new government administration.

## 2. What We (Do Not) Know About Peacekeepers' Impact on Elections

A growing body of research explores the effectiveness of peacekeepers' presence and activities in abating violence related to elections.<sup>24</sup> Separately, scholars have started evaluating developments in peacekeepers' host countries after withdrawal.<sup>25</sup> We draw on both literatures and contribute to them by exploring the short-term, local-level repercussions of PKO exit on electoral security.

### 2.1. Peacekeeping, Democratization and Electoral Violence

The peacekeeping literature has long been concerned with the relationship between peacekeeping interventions and democracy.<sup>26</sup> Following this line of research, more recent studies turn to peacekeepers' role in elections and, specifically, their ability to mitigate electoral violence.<sup>27</sup> These studies explore how peacekeepers can address the specific challenges posed by electoral violence.

Electoral violence is a subtype of political violence that is unique in terms of (i) its purpose to affect the electoral contest<sup>28</sup> and (ii) its timing in the electoral cycle ranging from registration of voters to announcements of election results.<sup>29</sup> Electoral violence tends to be conceptualized as a strategy for gaining or maintaining political influence in or despite elections.<sup>30</sup> Before elections, spoiler groups may attack voters, candidates and election workers to derail elections and government legitimacy.<sup>31</sup> Moreover,

<sup>24</sup>Fjelde and Smidt "Protecting the Vote?"; Fjelde and Höglund, "Introducing the Deadly Electoral Conflict Dataset (DECO)"; Smidt, "Mitigating Election Violence Locally"; Smidt, "Keeping Electoral Peace?."

<sup>25</sup>Beber et al., "The Promise and Peril of Peacekeeping Economies"; Brosig and Sempijja, "What Peacekeeping Leaves Behind"; Di Salvatore and Ruggeri, "The Withdrawal of UN Peace Operations and State Capacity."

<sup>26</sup>E.g. Doyle and Sambanis, "International Peacebuilding"; Fortna and Huang, "Democratization after Civil War."

<sup>27</sup>Smidt, "Mitigating Election Violence Locally"; Smidt, "Keeping Electoral Peace?"; Fjelde and Smidt, "Protecting the Vote?"; Fjelde and Höglund, "Introducing the Deadly Electoral Conflict Dataset (DECO)."

<sup>28</sup>Birch et al., "Electoral Violence: An Introduction."

<sup>29</sup>Höglund, "Electoral Violence in Conflict-Ridden Societies."

<sup>30</sup>Dunning, "Fighting and Voting."

<sup>31</sup>E.g. Sudduth and Gallop, "Spatial Dynamics of Election Violence"; Matanock and Staniland, "How and Why Armed Groups Participate in Elections."

politicians may orchestrate and order violence to obstruct the electoral campaigns of their rivals or prevent voter constituencies of rival candidates from turning out.<sup>32</sup> After elections, electoral violence may take the form of violent mass protest or rioting aimed at overturning an unfavorable outcome.<sup>33</sup> In post-conflict settings, the main organizers behind electoral violence are both government and opposition politicians and armed group leaders with stakes in elections,<sup>34</sup> while state security forces, combatants of armed opposition groups, militias, criminal gangs and militant party supporters serve as their violence-perpetrating agents.<sup>35</sup>

Following this purposeful logic of electoral violence, researchers argue that peacekeepers improve electoral security by raising costs associated with electoral violence and augmenting expected benefits of peaceful alternatives. Analyzing variation over months and across administrative units in all African host countries of PKOs deployed in the period 1994–2016, Fjelde and Smidt find a significant negative correlation between the local presence of peacekeepers and deadly electoral violence.<sup>36</sup> The authors posit that peacekeepers prevent coercive electoral strategies in two ways: They augment violence-related reputational costs by detecting coercive acts and attributing blame to the organizers and they heighten the violence-related implementation costs by deterring, constraining and retaliating against perpetrators. Drawing on evidence from a global sample of elections in the 1990–2016 period, Smidt suggests that peacekeepers' assistance with the electoral security arrangements and the organization of elections can reassure competing parties that they will not incur any disadvantage from peacefully accepting the electoral game.<sup>37</sup> Complementing these findings, Mvukiyehe demonstrates using large-N survey and events data from Liberia that peacekeepers augment citizens' political participation in villages and towns where they are deployed, including citizens' participation in elections. He argues that peacekeepers create local 'security bubbles' that enable these positive effects.<sup>38</sup>

Importantly, many of the proposed pathways to securing elections are intimately related to peacekeepers' presence. Monitoring and exposing acts of violence, constraining, or deterring them, and retaliating against perpetrators require peacekeepers' subnational deployments. Similarly, much of

<sup>32</sup>E.g. Collier and Vicente, "Violence, Bribery, and Fraud."

<sup>33</sup>E.g. Von Borzyskowski, "The Risks of Election Observation."

<sup>34</sup>E.g. Höglund et al., "The Predicament of Elections in War-Torn Societies," 537–40.

<sup>35</sup>Staniland, "Armed Groups and Militarized Elections." "Electoral armed groups" can also have private incentives for sponsoring electoral violence and escape their principal's control.

<sup>36</sup>Fjelde and Smidt, "Protecting the Vote?."

<sup>37</sup>Smidt, "Keeping Electoral Peace?."

<sup>38</sup>Mvukiyehe, "Promoting Political Participation in War-Torn Countries." Other research suggests that civic education campaigns organized by PKOs can help secure elections (Mvukiyehe and Samii, "Promoting Democracy in Fragile States"; Smidt, "Mitigating Election Violence Locally"). Yet, this research focuses on civilian peacekeepers rather than uniformed ones.

peacekeepers' election organization assistance, such as logistical support for transporting election materials, is tied to peacekeepers' presence.<sup>39</sup> Thus, as we elaborate in the argument section below, the progressive withdrawal of PKO troops may be associated with renewed insecurity.

## 2.2. *The Withdrawal of Peacekeepers*

The withdrawal of PKOs receives increasing scholarly attention.<sup>40</sup> So far, researchers have focused on completed withdrawal (i.e. closure of PKOs) and long-term peacekeeping legacies across countries. What has not been explored are the short-term consequences of progressive pull-outs from different subnational locations. Yet, as we elaborate below, research on peacekeeping legacies can inform speculations about the likely security repercussions of local withdrawal processes.

Striking cross-country variation notwithstanding, several large-N studies indicate overall positive peacekeeping legacies of previous PKO deployments. Comparing all PKOs in civil war-affected countries in the period 1990–2015, democracy scores continue to improve within ten years after PKO withdrawal.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, examining all multidimensional peacekeeping missions in Africa in the period 2000–2014, political participation rates continuously increase within six years following mission closure.<sup>42</sup> In an insightful conceptual piece, Gledhill explains that PKOs may produce these legacies in two ways: PKOs institutionalize specific structures and practices that constrain and incentivize domestic actors' behaviors even after peacekeepers' exit (direct legacies) or PKOs make key policy decisions that lead domestic actors to adapt their expectations, preferences and behaviors and create path-dependent development (indirect legacies).<sup>43</sup> These theoretical considerations together with empirical evidence on the long-run improvements in democracy indicators tentatively suggest that peacekeepers' withdrawal does *not* cause major security disruptions during electoral periods, at least not to the degree that these disruptions imply a pause or reversal of democratization trends.<sup>44</sup>

By contrast, several in-depth case studies show that former PKO host countries stagnate in a fragile 'no war, no peace'-situation and experience reversals of initial improvements in state capacity, democracy and human

<sup>39</sup>E.g. Smidt, "Keeping Electoral Peace?."

<sup>40</sup>E.g. Gledhill, "The Pieces Kept after Peace is Kept."

<sup>41</sup>Di Salvatore and Ruggeri, "The Withdrawal of UN Peace Operations and State Capacity."

<sup>42</sup>Brosig and Sempijja, "What Peacekeeping Leaves Behind."

<sup>43</sup>Gledhill, "The Pieces Kept after Peace is Kept."

<sup>44</sup>We note that more sobering conclusions on peacekeepers' legacies exist for other indicators, including state capacity and economic development. Brosig and Sempijja, "What Peacekeeping Leaves Behind"; Beber et al., "The Promise and Peril of Peacekeeping Economies."

rights after peacekeepers' exit. Some researchers describe peacekeepers' policies and actions as more or less directly responsible for detrimental post-exit trajectories. For instance, Kolbe suggests that the heavy-handed policing by the PKO in Haiti may have led to the continued use of overly repressive tactics by domestic forces.<sup>45</sup> Other researchers suggest that positive peacekeeping legacies exist, but they are too weak to withstand subsequent counter-veiling processes. For example, tracing post-exit trajectories of UN transitional administrations in Eastern Slovenia, Kosovo and East Timor, Caplan finds that even if peacekeepers try their best, they often have only limited resources and time to build local capacity and to initiate necessary reforms.<sup>46</sup> Although follow-up missions can safeguard some achievements, state-building legacies are still too weak to forestall new tensions.<sup>47</sup> In a similar vein, researchers note that the shortfall of external oversight after peacekeepers' withdrawal leads to a resurfacing of initial war-time conditions. For example, Karim finds that although many UN-initiated police reforms in Liberia continue to shape the functioning of police, the shortfall of international monitoring led to backsliding from achievements and the re-emergence of parallel security institutions.<sup>48</sup> Overall, the findings tentatively indicate that the progressive drawdown of peacekeeping forces may lead to renewed violence as state capacity-building, democratization and human rights-oriented reforms are not sufficiently institutionalized to protect citizens against new and old violence entrepreneurs.

Taken together, extant research on peacekeeping legacies informs expectations regarding local security developments in the immediate aftermath of peacekeepers' staggered withdrawal. Of course, these expectations can only be tentative, because short-term subnational effects may still run counter to long-term country-level trends. For instance, even a high level of localized withdrawal-induced insecurity during election times may only slow down but not reverse the trend towards greater democracy in the former PKO host country. We thus need to analyze local-level phased withdrawals specifically to understand their security effects. We turn to this task next.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>45</sup>Kolbe, "Prospects for Post-MINUSTAH Security in Haiti." See also Un, "A Mixed Legacy" on authoritarianism in Cambodia; Koester, "Gendered Legacies of Peacekeeping" on human trafficking in Bosnia.

<sup>46</sup>Caplan, "After Exit."

<sup>47</sup>See also Tansey, "Evaluating the Legacies of State-Building" on East Timor.

<sup>48</sup>Karim, "The Legacy of Peacekeeping on the Liberian Security Sector." See also Kolbe, "Prospects for Post-MINUSTAH Security in Haiti," 52. Gledhill ("The Pieces Kept after Peace is Kept," 5) describes this development as an "interrupted legacy": the resurfacing of conditions that existed prior to PKO deployment.

<sup>49</sup>To the best of our knowledge, there is only one study that has systematically analyzed the impact of international troop withdrawals on patterns of violence (Fetzer et al., "Security Transitions"). Yet, this study focuses on a single country – Afghanistan – and the withdrawal of NATO forces rather than UN PKO troops.

### 3. Theoretical Argument

Contrary to most existing research on peacekeeping legacies, we shift the focus from *country-level* developments *after* completed withdrawal to *local* developments *during* the withdrawal process. After conceptualizing this staggered withdrawal process in more detail, we develop our argument and hypotheses of the short-term effects of the local drawdown of PKO troops.

#### 3.1. The Phased Withdrawal of Peacekeepers

The UN Security Council decides on the exit of a PKO. Its resolutions do not only determine an ‘end date’ but also demand an ‘end state’ for the mission.<sup>50</sup> As detailed below, fixing an end date can conflict with reaching an end state, which renders the process of PKO drawdown lengthy, heterogenous across space and non-linear over time.

To define a desirable end state that warrants the exit of a PKO, the practice of benchmarking emerged. Benchmarks are markers or guideposts to measure progress towards fulfilment of the mandate. While there is heterogeneity across PKOs, a core benchmark across all missions is linked to security and stability. Other core benchmarks include the progress regarding election quality, human rights, rule of law and socio-economic recovery.<sup>51</sup> Although benchmarks are useful in principle, ‘most are fraught with vagueness and ambiguities’.<sup>52</sup> Thus, it is unsurprising that different stakeholders of peacekeeping – including UN Security Council members, the host government, troop-contributing countries, and headquarter and field-level staff of the UN Department of Peace Operations – hold different interpretations of when and where benchmarks are reached.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, the introduction of benchmarks as conditions for withdrawal implies that some measurable progress towards mandate implementation must be made before the closure of a PKO.

However, trajectories from war to peace are fraught with unforeseen obstacles. Thus, while reaching a specific end state – however defined – is partly shaped by PKOs’ activities (e.g. their electoral assistance), it is not completely in their purview. Progress towards the attainment of desired benchmark conditions allowing for the pull-out of PKO troops can be unsteady over time and varied across subnational locations in the host country. By consequence, the UN Security Council may repeatedly delay the date of an operation’s closure. As such, the drawdown of PKO troops can stretch over long periods of time. During the phased withdrawal, the

<sup>50</sup>Day, *UN Transitions*, 11.

<sup>51</sup>Olin, “Measuring Peacekeeping.”

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>53</sup>Day, *UN Transitions*.

process might be ‘paused’ for several months (as in the Sudanese Darfur region in 2019) or even years (as after the 2010 presidential elections in Côte d’Ivoire that triggered the so-called Second Ivorian Civil War). In volatile subnational regions, redeployments of PKO troops remain possible (for example, in Western provinces in Burundi during the drawdown of ONUB).<sup>54</sup> Overall, the withdrawal of peacekeepers is geographically heterogeneous, temporally non-linear and often lengthy.

Interestingly, staggered drawdowns tend to concur with election times. For example, the UN Security Council first mandated the drawdown of the PKO in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, known by its acronym MONUSCO, when the country started to prepare for elections in 2015. MONUSCO has thus gradually reduced its military footprint from about 19,500 soldiers in 2015 to about 14,000 soldiers by 2019.<sup>55</sup> This phased withdrawal continued despite preparations for repeatedly delayed elections, which were finally held in 2018 and whose contested results led to a new government in 2019.<sup>56</sup> In Liberia, the withdrawal process also coincided with the electoral period. The Security Council authorized the last phase of the drawdown process in late 2016, only a few months before the holding of presidential elections in 2017. The withdrawal was completed three months after the election run-off in March 2018.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, in Côte d’Ivoire, the first UN Security Council resolution requesting the gradual exit of the PKO passed in 2012, only months after legislative elections. The subsequent drawdown of PKO troops spanned local elections in 2013, presidential elections in 2015 and legislative elections in 2016.<sup>58</sup> The next section explores security repercussions of peacekeepers’ phased withdrawal during election times.

### 3.2. Emerging Electoral Security Gaps

Progressive PKO troop reductions frequently take place during electoral periods. Yet, many of the mechanisms through which PKO troops guarantee stability during these periods require their local presence. By consequence, incidents of local withdrawals of PKO troops may exacerbate incentives for coercive electoral strategies compared to a prolongation of the troop strength in a location.

<sup>54</sup>“At the request of the Government, ONUB began the drawdown of 40 per cent of its military force in December 2005, with the repatriation of a Mozambican guard company from Bujumbura [...] In view of the precarious security situation in the western provinces, ONUB military observer teams have, however, been reinforced in Bubanza, Bujumbura Rural and Cibitoke” (United Nations Security Council, *Sixth Report of the Secretary-General*, 11).

<sup>55</sup>IPI, “Providing for Peacekeeping”.

<sup>56</sup>MONUSCO already attempted to draw down in 2010. The Security Council Resolution S/RES/1925 authorized the first phase of the draw down in May 2010, one and a half years before general elections in November 2011.

<sup>57</sup>Day, *UN Transitions*.

<sup>58</sup>Novosseloff, *Lessons Learned from the UN’s Transition in Côte d’Ivoire*.

Peacekeepers usually manage to keep electoral violence in check by raising the associated *reputational costs* and *implementation costs* for agents of violence. PKOs augment reputational costs by monitoring the electoral environment, for example during patrols around vulnerable election sites, and publicizing coercive misbehavior, for example, in press conferences or through their regular reports.<sup>59</sup> Naming and shaming can then trigger political and material costs for the organizers behind election-timed violence because donors may subsequently reduce aid to perpetrator governments or voters may punish violence-using political parties at the ballot box.

PKO troops increase *implementation costs* for agents of violence. PKO troops can protect voters, candidates, election workers and the electoral infrastructure through patrols and deployments in volatile electoral districts. Troops may also de-escalate election-related clashes between rival party (militia) members through inter-positioning and mediation.<sup>60</sup> Finally, peacekeepers tend to offer guidance and intelligence to domestic forces and coordinate electoral security-related activities, thereby augmenting their effectiveness.<sup>61</sup>

Both the reputational and implementation costs-mechanisms through which PKO troops guarantee stability during electoral periods are closely tied to their presence. By consequence, when a significant number or all troops exit a location, domestic actors incur fewer costs for pursuing a coercive electoral strategy compared to when the same number of troops would remain deployed. As cost-related constraints loosen, electoral violence becomes a more efficient way of influencing or spoiling elections. As such, as peacekeeping troops start to pull out of a subnational locality, political entrepreneurs may seize the opportunity and mobilize agents of violence to coerce opposition voters into abstention or force rival candidates into abandoning their political ambitions. Spoiler armed groups may use the local protection gap and organize attacks on voters and candidates, election workers and infrastructure with the goal of disrupting polling and undermining the legitimacy of post-war governments. While PKO troop withdrawals are not a fundamental cause of electoral violence, they likely exacerbate domestic actors' extant incentives to gain or maintain political power through coercion.

### 3.3. Filling Electoral Security Gaps

Insecurity as a result of PKO troop withdrawals is likely temporary rather than permanent. Two adaptation processes – one linked to domestic security

<sup>59</sup>Fjelde and Smidt, "Protecting the Vote?" for more details.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.; Smidt, "Keeping Electoral Peace?"

<sup>61</sup>Smidt, "Keeping Electoral Peace?"

forces and the other one linked to international troops – may prevent upticks in electoral insecurity during the drawdown process or, at least, make increases in violence subside relatively quickly over time.

While some mechanisms through which UN troops enhance electoral security are intimately linked to their presence, other security-enhancing mechanisms, especially those connected to building the capacity of the domestic security sector, could outlast PKOs' deployments. Specifically, peacekeepers provide material assistance and training to domestic security forces, improving their skills and capacity to prevent and mitigate violence.<sup>62</sup> Training efforts often entail elements of persuading domestic security agents of peace-conducive norms, e.g. rule of law or human rights,<sup>63</sup> shifting domestic security forces' incentives towards protecting citizens and away from implementing politicians' coercive electoral strategies. Such capacity-building activities may produce 'direct legacies'<sup>64</sup> that enable and incentivize domestic security sector agents to fill the electoral security vacuum after peacekeepers' withdrawal. Moreover, PKO troops do not leave all at once. When the UN force component is reduced in a military base, some portion of the uniformed personnel stays behind or, alternatively a military base in the vicinity remains operational. The remaining PKO forces can adapt their operations to counter newly arising challenges, for example, by relocating to violence hotspots. This adaptation to emerging security threats is often built into phased withdrawal planning. For example, the mandated drawdown before the 2018 presidential elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo reduced the force strength of the PKO by over 3000 troops compared to the previous mandate (i.e. from 19,815 to 16,215 military personnel), leading to the closure of five fixed bases in the North Kivu. Yet, the drawdown was accompanied by a new operational device for more flexibility and mobility in military operations, including 'long-distance patrols, presence demonstrations patrols, air surveillance and *rapid deployment in the event of security incidents*'.<sup>65</sup>

Both positive peacekeeping legacy effects on domestic security forces and a more flexible posture by remaining PKO troops may enable a smooth

<sup>62</sup>E.g. Blair et al., "Establishing the Rule of Law in Weak and War-Torn States." At the national level, peacekeepers also often initiate structural changes in security sector institutions and legal frameworks that help domestic forces to better protect citizens from (electoral) violence (Karim, "Restoring Confidence in Post-Conflict Security Sectors").

<sup>63</sup>Blair, *Peacekeeping, Policing, and the Rule of Law after Civil War*.

<sup>64</sup>Gledhill, "The Pieces Kept after Peace is Kept."

<sup>65</sup>MONUSCO, "Closure of 5 Fixed Bases in the North-Kivu Province," own emphasis. Similarly, the UN Security Council issued a resolution before the 2015 presidential elections in Côte d'Ivoire to further downsize the military component and, at the same time, to request an update on the 'shift towards a more mobile posture' (Novosseloff, *Lessons Learned from the UN's Transition in Côte d'Ivoire*, 5). The Council also asked the PKO in Côte d'Ivoire to enhance inter-mission cooperation with the PKO in neighboring Liberia, which led to a 'regional quick-reaction force' serving as a rapid response to deteriorating security in both countries (Ibid., 8).

international-to-local security transition. Both adaptation processes may be particularly conducive to electoral security. In fact, electoral security planning is a prominent part of PKOs' curricula for domestic security sector agents, so that the latter may be able to immediately fill the protection gap left by repatriating PKO troops. Remaining forces may also work in the background to guarantee peaceful elections. For example, the PKOs in both Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia helped coordinate domestic security forces in protecting the polls despite ongoing drawdowns.<sup>66</sup> If planning and transition support works well, then the withdrawal of PKO troops will not be associated with upticks in electoral coercion.

Yet even newly trained and better-equipped state security forces likely require time to adapt to a situation with fewer PKO troops. During their deployment, international peacekeepers are often 'co-located' with domestic troops to provide guidance. When peacekeepers are repatriated, domestic military forces need time to plan and practice electoral security routines on their own, implying an initial shortfall in implementation costs for violence. Moreover, violence entrepreneurs might try out a coercive electoral strategy because they *misjudge* the capacity of the domestic security sector. In war-affected countries, domestic actors likely hold a low prior of security sector strength. If there are capacity-enhancing legacies of peacekeeping, this prior might be wrong. Yet only after domestic forces start countering attacks, violence-entrepreneurs may realize that implementing violence is still costly even upon the withdrawal of PKO troops and, subsequently, scale back investments in coercive strategies.

Similarly, adaptation processes in UN military operations might not take immediate effect. Since withdrawals usually happen in localities and periods of growing stability, threats or acts of violence in the wake of troop reductions are likely unforeseen.<sup>67</sup> Before remaining troops on the ground can effectively counter new security challenges, mission-analysts first need to collect intelligence on the new security situation, make sense of this information to derive actionable insights and share these insights with UN military leadership.<sup>68</sup> This cumbersome process likely slows down peacekeepers' effective response to withdrawal-induced insecurity. Moreover, managing drawdowns are resource-intensive processes: hundreds or thousands of soldiers need to be flown out of the country and military equipment needs to be liquidated.<sup>69</sup> When the PKO is pre-occupied with organizing a local

<sup>66</sup>United Nations Security Council, *Special Report of the Secretary General*; Forti and Conolly, *The Mission Is Gone, but the UN Is Staying*.

<sup>67</sup>Day, *UN Transitions*, 10–12; Di Razza, *Mission in Transition*, 38.

<sup>68</sup>Duursma, "Information Processing Challenges in Peacekeeping Operations."

<sup>69</sup>Day, *UN Transitions*; Di Razza, *Mission in Transition*; Novosseloff, *Lessons Learned from the UN's Transition in Côte d'Ivoire*.

**Table 1.** PKOs in the sample.

| Acronym of PKO | Host country  | Electoral period | Complete (country) withdrawal |
|----------------|---------------|------------------|-------------------------------|
| MINURCAT       | CAR           | 09/2010–09/2011  | 01/2011                       |
|                | Chad          | 08/2010–10/2011  | 01/2011                       |
| MINUSCA        | CAR           | 06/2015–09/2016  | ongoing                       |
| MINUSMA        | Mali          | 01/2013–05/2014  | ongoing                       |
| MONUC          | DRC           | 01/2006–04/2007  | 06/2010                       |
| MONUSCO        | DRC           | 05/2011–05/2012  | ongoing                       |
| ONUB           | Burundi       | 01/2005–01/2006  | 12/2006                       |
| UNAMSIL        | Sierra Leone  | 11/2001–11/2002  | 12/2005                       |
| UNMIL          | Liberia       | 04/2005–05/2006  | 03/2018                       |
|                |               | 04/2011–06/2012  |                               |
|                |               | 06/2014–06/2015  |                               |
|                |               | 04/2017–12/2017  |                               |
| UNMIS          | Sudan         | 10/2009–10/2010  | 07/2011                       |
| UNAMID         | Sudan         | 10/2009–10/2010  | 12/2020                       |
| UNOCI          | Côte d'Ivoire | 04/2010–06/2012  | 05/2017                       |
|                |               | 04/2015–04/2016  |                               |
|                |               | 06/2016–06/2017  |                               |

drawdown, it might take a while for remaining forces to adapt to security challenges arising in the immediate aftermath of the troop reduction.

Taken together, we argue that deficits in electoral oversight and security assistance as a result of peacekeepers' withdrawal can incentivize opportunistic violence. Politicians may seize the chance to complement campaigning with violent electoral tactics or armed group leaders may use the window of opportunity to derail unwanted elections. Yet, the shortfall in violence-associated costs is likely temporary. As domestic security forces and remaining international peacekeepers adapt to a situation with fewer PKO troops, electoral violence is likely to return to pre-withdrawal levels.

*Hypothesis:* If PKO troops withdraw from a subnational location, then this location experiences more electoral violence in the following months compared to locations where troop strength is unchanged. Yet, the increase in electoral insecurity subsides over time to pre-withdrawal levels.

#### 4. Research Design

We investigate our hypotheses across subnational locations and months in electoral periods in all African countries that hosted a UN PKO in the period 2001–2017 (see Table 1). The African continent has hosted most peacekeeping operations and experienced most peacekeeping exits compared to all other world regions.<sup>70</sup> Focussing on PKOs in Sub-Saharan Africa from 2001 onwards also guarantees comparability regarding (i) the drawdown process and (ii) resulting shortfalls in electoral security assistance provided

<sup>70</sup>United Nations Peacekeeping, "Past Peace Operations." Of 51 global PKO exits since 1990, 24 took place in Africa.

by PKO troops. Since the publication of the Brahimi report in 2000,<sup>71</sup> all PKOs in Sub-Saharan Africa carried out electoral security tasks. Moreover, in the same year, the UN Security Council discussed PKOs' exit and established guidelines for transition strategies, which were subsequently included in the UN Secretary General report entitled 'No exit without strategy' published in 2001.<sup>72</sup>

In line with previous research, electoral periods are defined as starting six months before the election month and ending six months afterwards.<sup>73</sup> Election dates until 2015 were taken from the National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) dataset version 5.0<sup>74</sup> and are manually extended to 2017, based on the election guide by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems.<sup>75</sup> Data on peacekeeping deployments in Africa are taken from the UN website.<sup>76</sup>

Our units of analyses are first-order administrative units, that is, the largest administrative subdivision of a country below the national level. We compare time periods within subnational units rather than countries for two reasons. First, peacekeeping withdrawal never happens to all areas within a country at the same time and can span many months or even years. Subnational analyses thus allow for a more precise measure of withdrawal time. Second, subnational comparisons help us to construct meaningful counterfactuals by reducing confounding cross-case heterogeneity. Specifically, it is easier to find similar subnational areas with and without withdrawals of peacekeepers than similar countries with this sort of variation.

#### 4.1. Dependent Variable: Violence During Electoral Periods

Our dependent variable is the logged count of events of electoral violence. We use two measures of electoral violence: the Deadly Electoral Conflict (DECO) dataset<sup>77</sup> and the Electoral Contention and Violence (ECAV) dataset.<sup>78</sup> Both datasets only record events of violence in the electoral period and discard violence without a direct issue-based link to the electoral contest. The DECO dataset includes only lethal events and omits less severe forms of physical violence and non-violent intimidation. Thus, this measure of violence is sparse, as only 157 events of lethal electoral violence are recorded in our period of analysis (with a mean of 0.042 events).

<sup>71</sup>United Nations, *Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations (Brahimi Report)*.

<sup>72</sup>United Nations Security Council, *No Exit Without Strategy*.

<sup>73</sup>E.g. Fjelde and Höglund, "Introducing the Deadly Electoral Conflict Dataset (DECO)"; Fjelde and Smidt, "Protecting the Vote?"

<sup>74</sup>Hyde and Marinov, "Which Elections Can Be Lost?"

<sup>75</sup>IFES, "ElectionGuide."

<sup>76</sup>United Nations Peacekeeping, "Past Peace Operations."

<sup>77</sup>Fjelde and Höglund, "Introducing the Deadly Electoral Conflict Dataset (DECO)."

<sup>78</sup>Daxecker et al., "Electoral contention and violence (ECAV)."

The ECAV dataset also includes non-lethal forms of violence.<sup>79</sup> Unfortunately, however, it already ends in 2012. Thus, we lose about one-third of the observations in our sample and exclude some of the most interesting cases of contested elections (for instance, the election in 2016 in the Central African Republic, the elections in 2015 and 2016 in Côte d'Ivoire and the elections in 2014 and 2017 in Liberia). In the 2001–2012 period, ECAV records 218 events of lethal and non-lethal violence. Thus, our ECAV-based measure of electoral violence is less sparse.

Additionally, we also test our hypothesis with a measure of election-timed violence from the Armed Conflict Locations and Events Dataset (ACLED).<sup>80</sup> While we can discard events that do not occur during the electoral period, ACLED does not allow us to identify whether an event has a substantive link to the electoral contest or outcome. Thus, our count of election-timed violent events includes any incident of battles, remote violence (such as explosions), violence against civilians, violent repression of protest (such as the excessive use of state force against protesters) and riots during the electoral period. Based on ACLED, there are 2736 events of election-timed violence in our sample. While this measure is not a good proxy for electoral violence, it does capture political violence and insecurity during electoral periods that likely indirectly affect the behavior of voters, candidates and election workers, and thus the electoral process and outcome.

#### ***4.2. Independent Variable: Peacekeeping Withdrawal***

Our independent variables capture the incident and magnitude of PKO troop withdrawal in a given month and administrative unit. Withdrawal incident is a binary variable for whether there is a reduction in PKO troops from the previous month to the current month in a given location. Withdrawal magnitude is a continuous variable for the number of PKO troops withdrawn from the previous month to the current in a given location.

Importantly, we want to capture troop reductions that are part of a larger withdrawal process. Therefore, we exclude (i) potential redeployments and (ii) insignificant troop changes. Thus, the variables for PKO withdrawal incident and withdrawal magnitude are coded 0 if PKO troops in the country as a whole do not decrease and if fewer than 150 soldiers leave a location. In Appendix C, we also show that results hold if we drop all withdrawals that do not occur as part of a drawdown process authorized by the UN Security Council.

Finally, we create three lags of both PKO withdrawal incident and magnitude to assess how long the withdrawal-induced effect on violence lasts. Data

<sup>79</sup>ECAV also records non-violent contention related to elections, which we exclude.

<sup>80</sup>Raleigh et al., "Introducing ACLED."

for our withdrawal variables come from the Geo-PKO dataset version 2.0.<sup>81</sup> This dataset draws on UN deployment maps provided by the UN Geospatial Information Section to estimate monthly PKO personnel numbers at UN bases within countries.<sup>82</sup> In Appendix D, we show how our main independent variable capturing *reductions* in PKO troops is different from and uncorrelated with the measure of the level of PKO troops used by Fjelde and Smidt.<sup>83</sup> In fact, we use the level of PKO troops as a control variable.

#### 4.3. Control Variables

We control for several potentially confounding factors. Drawing on the Geo-PKO dataset, we include the number of peacekeeping troops and formed police units. Personnel strength likely influences violence and defines a natural limit for how many PKO troops can be repatriated.<sup>84</sup> In addition to these peacekeeping-related variables, our models control for population size because more populated areas host larger PKO deployments and are more prone to electoral violence.<sup>85</sup> Both conditions can also shape PKOs' decisions to exit. Data come from the country datasets provided by WorldPop.<sup>86</sup> The variable is logged due to high skewness.

Furthermore, we control for previous violence. We include the event count of state-based armed conflict in the twelve months prior to a month during the electoral period, drawing on the UCDP GED dataset version 20.1.<sup>87</sup> Higher levels of armed conflict exacerbate the risk of electoral violence<sup>88</sup> and likely prevent peacekeepers' withdrawal.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, we account for the trend in violent events. The trend variable is the difference between the sum of monthly changes in violence one to six months previously and the sum of monthly changes in violence seven to twelve months previously. Thus, a positive value stands for a net increase in armed violence, while a negative value suggests a net decrease in armed violence in the year prior to a given month during the electoral period. Summary statistics are in Appendix A.

Finally, and importantly, we account for socio-economic and other conditions with administrative unit-specific fixed effects because these

<sup>81</sup>Cil et al., "Mapping Blue Helmets."

<sup>82</sup>We note that since withdrawals are staggered, they can occur multiple times during an electoral period. For instance, in the district of Sassandra-Marahoué in Côte d'Ivoire, 115 troops were withdrawn in July 2011, five months before the legislative elections on 11 December 2011, and 150 troops were withdrawn five months after these elections in May 2012.

<sup>83</sup>Fjelde and Smidt, "Protecting the Vote?"

<sup>84</sup>Hultman et al., "United Nations Peacekeeping and Civilian Protection in Civil War."

<sup>85</sup>Fjelde and Smidt, "Protecting the Vote?"

<sup>86</sup>WorldPop, "Open Spatial Demographic Data and Research."

<sup>87</sup>Sundberg and Melander, "Introducing the UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset."

<sup>88</sup>Daxecker and Jung, "Mixing Votes with Violence."

<sup>89</sup>Fortna, *Does Peacekeeping Work?*

conditions are mostly stable over time in the relatively short electoral periods. This means that we essentially estimate how PKO withdrawals in a given administrative unit change the level of electoral violence in that administrative unit over time. This type of comparison fits with our argument and our hypothesis about over-time effects of PKO troop reductions.

#### 4.4. Endogeneity of Withdrawal and Identification of Withdrawal Effects

The withdrawal decision of PKOs is likely endogenous to electoral violence. Although benchmarks for withdrawal are wide and varied, they always include security. In fact, security conditions are oftentimes considered prior to other benchmarks, allowing the troop component of PKOs to withdraw first.<sup>90</sup> Thus, peacekeepers should be more likely to withdraw from areas where violence is trending downwards, and renewed instability is unlikely.

For example, Di Razza notes for the PKO in Haiti that ‘[t]he perception of a stable security situation was the UN’s strongest argument for a transition. It justified moving away from militarized peacekeeping and eventually withdrawing all peacekeepers’.<sup>91</sup> Conversely, in 2019, despite pressures from the Sudanese government, ‘the UN Security Council has paused the draw-down of peacekeepers from Sudan’s troubled western province of Darfur ... in the light of the country’s continued political violence’.<sup>92</sup>

Therefore, as a first step, we investigate the determinants of withdrawal. If a trend in declining violence indeed precipitates peacekeepers’ exit *and* if this trend is indicative of contemporary levels of violence, then we under-estimate the violence-inducing effect of withdrawal. As such, non-random withdrawal decisions should bias our findings *against* our hypothesis.

### 5. Analysis and Results

We estimate two-way fixed effects linear models of logged counts of electoral violence and election-timed political violence across administrative units and months during 16 electoral periods in all PKO host countries in Africa in the period 2001–2017. Administrative unit fixed effects account for time-invariant subnational heterogeneity, for example, stable socio-economic conditions or withdrawal strategies of contingent commanders in different locations. Monthly fixed effects account for unobserved shocks during the electoral period that are common to all administrative units (e.g. voting in

<sup>90</sup>E.g. Day, *UN Transitions*, 17.

<sup>91</sup>Di Razza, *Mission in Transition*, 38.

<sup>92</sup>Anyadike, “Rethink Urged Over Withdrawal of Peacekeepers from Sudan.”

the election month). In line with our hypothesis, the fixed effects set-up allows us to compare the level of electoral violence at the time of PKO troop withdrawal with the level of electoral violence afterwards in a given subnational unit.

### 5.1. Analyzing Endogenous Withdrawal Decisions

Before we turn to our models of electoral violence, we first present the results of the model of withdrawal incidents and the model of withdrawal magnitude in Table 2. The coefficients on the level and the trend in violence over the past 12 months are significant in both models. Yet, they point in different directions. While the trend variable is negatively associated with drawdown propensity and magnitude in a given location, the level of violence is positively associated with these outcomes. The former result indicates that PKO troops more likely withdraw and repatriate in greater numbers if violence is trending downwards. The latter result might emerge from the fact that more violent times attract more PKO troops that eventually withdraw in contemporary periods. Moreover, coefficients on many control variables are also significant at conventional levels: withdrawal of troops is more likely and of greater magnitude if administrative units become more populous, have fewer PKO troops already and host more formed police units (FPUs).

Overall, the results suggest that PKOs' withdrawal decisions during electoral periods are all but random. Since PKO troops tend to pull-out as locations become increasingly secure, it should be harder to find evidence consistent with our hypothesis, i.e. a violence-inducing effect of peacekeepers' exit. We turn to testing this hypothesis next.

**Table 2.** Two-way fixed effects linear regression models of peacekeepers' withdrawal.

|                                 | Model 1a<br>Incident of withdrawal | Model 1b<br>Magnitude of withdrawal |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Violence trend (past 12 months) | −0.001**<br>(0.0004)               | −1.521***<br>(0.209)                |
| Violence level (past 12 months) | 0.0000<br>(0.0003)                 | 0.597***<br>(0.139)                 |
| Number of troops                | −0.0001***<br>(0.00001)            | −0.068***<br>(0.007)                |
| Number of FPUs                  | 0.0005 ***<br>(0.007)              | 0.220***<br>(0.007)                 |
| Population (mio, ln)            | 0.016**<br>(0.007)                 | 11.669***<br>(3.516)                |
| Administrative unit FE          | Yes                                | Yes                                 |
| Month FE                        | Yes                                | Yes                                 |
| Observations                    | 3744                               | 3744                                |
| F Statistic                     | 9.285*** (df = 5)                  | 39.826*** (df = 6)                  |

Note: \* $p < .1$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

## 5.2. Analyzing Withdrawal Effects on Insecurity During Electoral Periods

**Table 3** summarizes the results of our two-way fixed effects regression models of electoral violence. Models 2a and 2b describe the results for deadly electoral violence (using DECO), while Models 3a and 3b are for the measure of electoral violence that also includes non-lethal events (using ECAV). As expected, the coefficients on contemporaneous incident and magnitude of withdrawals of PKO troops are consistently positive. However, none of them reach conventional levels of significance. The coefficients on the one month-lag, two months-lag and three months-lag of incident and magnitude of withdrawals are either positive or negative and they also fail to reach statistical significance. All models control for levels and trends in past violence as well as time-invariant subnational heterogeneity and temporal shocks.

**Table 3.** Fixed effects linear regression models of logged counts of electoral violence.

|                                        | Model 2a                                      | Model 2b             | Model 3a                                   | Model 3b             |
|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------------------|----------------------|
|                                        | Deadly electoral violence<br>(ln), using DECO |                      | All electoral violence<br>(ln), using ECAV |                      |
| Incident of withdrawal                 | 0.089<br>(0.079)                              |                      | 0.189<br>(0.178)                           |                      |
| Incident of withdrawal (lag 1 month)   | 0.029<br>(0.078)                              |                      | -0.107<br>(0.173)                          |                      |
| Incident of withdrawal (lag 2 months)  | 0.004<br>(0.078)                              |                      | 0.212<br>(0.174)                           |                      |
| Incident of withdrawal (lag 3 months)  | -0.065<br>(0.079)                             |                      | -0.001<br>(0.174)                          |                      |
| Magnitude of withdrawal                |                                               | 0.0001<br>(0.0002)   |                                            | 0.00002<br>(0.0003)  |
| Magnitude of withdrawal (lag 1 month)  |                                               | -0.0001<br>(0.0002)  |                                            | -0.0002<br>(0.0003)  |
| Magnitude of withdrawal (lag 2 months) |                                               | -0.0001<br>(0.0001)  |                                            | -0.0001<br>(0.0003)  |
| Magnitude of withdrawal (lag 3 months) |                                               | -0.0002<br>(0.0001)  |                                            | -0.0001<br>(0.0003)  |
| Number of troops                       | -0.0001<br>(0.0001)                           | -0.0001<br>(0.0001)  | -0.0001<br>(0.0001)                        | -0.0001<br>(0.0001)  |
| Number of FPU's                        | -0.0005<br>(0.001)                            | -0.0005<br>(0.001)   | 0.001<br>(0.001)                           | 0.001<br>(0.001)     |
| Population (mio, ln)                   | 0.004<br>(0.032)                              | 0.007<br>(0.032)     | -7.893***<br>(2.292)                       | -7.742***<br>(2.281) |
| Violence level (past 12 months)        | -0.007***<br>(0.001)                          | -0.007***<br>(0.001) | -0.008***<br>(0.002)                       | -0.007**<br>(0.002)  |
| Violence trend (past 12 months)        | 0.007***<br>(0.002)                           | 0.007***<br>(0.002)  | 0.002<br>(0.004)                           | 0.002<br>(0.004)     |
| Administrative unit FE                 | Yes                                           | Yes                  | Yes                                        | Yes                  |
| Month FE                               | Yes                                           | Yes                  | Yes                                        | Yes                  |
| Observations                           | 3744                                          | 3744                 | 1674                                       | 1674                 |
| F Statistic                            | 7.086***                                      | 7.174***             | 3.184***                                   | 2.905***             |

Note: \* $p < .1$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

Therefore, we think that it is unlikely that these consistent null results are an artefact of selection – and we reject our hypothesis. Local withdrawals do not lead to upticks in electoral violence.

Why are subnational withdrawals unrelated to electoral violence? One reason might be that PKOs are aware of the challenges associated with reducing troops and organizing elections at the same time. Therefore, they design and plan the drawdown accordingly and, for instance, keep troops with electoral security functions and only repatriate troops responsible for more general security tasks. Moreover, as Autesserre points out, PKOs generally privilege holding elections over addressing local security threats.<sup>93</sup> While peacekeepers may work hard to secure elections, they tend to ‘normalize’ rural and communal violence and view it as innate and not amenable by external actors. These mental frames likely impact transition planning. Peacekeepers may train domestic security agents to secure elections and adapt a more flexible posture to secure the ballot, but they may pay less attention to other types of violence. This could be why local withdrawals do not increase electoral violence, i.e. violence organized to affect the electoral process or outcome.

However, the reduction in international forces could still heighten violence *more broadly defined*. Anecdotal evidence speaks to this effect. In Sudan’s Darfur region, following the start of the drawdown pursuant to UN Security Council 2429 (2018),<sup>94</sup> a resident reported that ‘the number of UNAMID troops has visually reduced in the area and this did and does put the locals at danger and makes them easy prey for the pro-government militia’.<sup>95</sup> Reflecting our argument on withdrawal-induced shortfalls in costs for (electoral) violence, especially due to reduced monitoring capacity, Human Rights Watch explains that ‘(t)he departure of UNAMID not only left vulnerable communities in Darfur unprotected but also led to a gap in monitoring of the abuses’.<sup>96</sup> Indeed, UN military camps have been looted, and ‘(t)he United Nations has reported a rise in violence across Darfur including tribal clashes, militia attacks on protesters, and renewed fighting involving rebel forces led by Abdel Wahed el-Nur’.<sup>97</sup>

The situation in Liberia exemplifies the differential effect of PKO troop withdrawal on electoral violence and political violence broadly defined. The drawdown went into its final phase a few months before the October 2017 general elections and ended just three months after the December 2017 presidential run-off. UNMIL’s mandated priorities continued to

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<sup>93</sup> Autesserre, “Hobbes and the Congo.”

<sup>94</sup> The first mentioning of drawdown is already included in UN Resolution 2173 on 27 August 2014.

<sup>95</sup> UN Association United Kingdom, “Peacekeeping Cuts.”

<sup>96</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Sudan: New Wave of Attacks in Darfur.”

<sup>97</sup> Eltahir and Abdelaziz, “Darfur Displaced Fearful as UN Peacekeepers Hand Over to Local Forces.”

include electoral security, transition planning was designed to fit the electoral cycle, and ‘UNMIL’s symbolic presence [in the capital Monrovia] during the elections contributed to perceptions that the elections would be peaceful’.<sup>98</sup> At the same time, ‘[c]ivil society organizations highlighted that communities outside of Monrovia expressed concerns about potential security vacuums following UNMIL’s complete drawdown’.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, Karim notes ‘growing concerns in Liberia about the development of parallel coercive security institutions’.<sup>100</sup> Indeed, according to ACLED, during the withdrawal phase and after UNMIL’s exit in the 2017–2019 period, both violent repression by Liberian state forces and rioting became more frequent.<sup>101</sup>

Similarly, in the final drawdown phase of UNOCI in Côte d’Ivoire, the electoral situation remained stable while other forms of political violence were on the rise. Pursuant to Security Council resolution 2162 (2014) UNOCI repatriated about 1500 troops just after the 2015 presidential elections and pursuant to resolution 2260 (2016) subsequently withdrew a little more than 1800 soldiers before the 2016 parliamentary elections. Three months after those elections, in March 2017, merely eight troops remained in the country. Despite the drawdown, a UN report (2016) emphasizes that ‘(t)he polls were conducted peacefully’.<sup>102</sup> However, the same report also notes an increase in communal violence in more remote areas. Furthermore, UN News deplores that during the final phase of the drawdown and mission closure in June 2017, the ‘security climate is worsening’, citing ‘eight episodes of military uprisings’ and ‘outbreaks of gunfire’.<sup>103</sup>

Taken together, additional theoretical arguments and anecdotal evidence suggest that while domestic security sector agents and remaining international forces may be able to contain electoral insecurity in the aftermath of local pull-outs of PKO troops, an uptick in political violence more broadly defined is likely. We systematically test this hypothesis next.

Table 4 summarizes additional two-way fixed effects regression models of election-timed political violence. Election-timed political violence includes all violent events during the electoral period, even if they do not have a substantive link to electoral competition and outcomes. Events data is drawn from ACLED. The coefficients on PKO troop withdrawal incident and magnitude are now positive and significant. Significance levels diminish with deeper lags of two or more months. These results match our expectation: Local withdrawals are related to contemporaneous spikes in violence during election times, including communal violence, violent escalations of

<sup>98</sup>Forti and Conolly, *The Mission Is Gone, but the UN Is Staying*, 24.

<sup>99</sup>*Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>100</sup>Karim, “The Legacy of Peacekeeping on the Liberian Security Sector,” 63.

<sup>101</sup>Raleigh et al., “Introducing ACLED.”

<sup>102</sup>United Nations Security Council, *Special Report of the Secretary General*.

<sup>103</sup>Adele, “Sporadic Violence and Presidential Tussle put Côte d’Ivoire’s Hard-Won Security at Risk.”

**Table 4.** Fixed effects linear regression models of logged counts of election-timed violence.

|                                        | Model 4a                                         | Model 4b                                         |
|----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
|                                        | All election-timed violence<br>(ln), using ACLED | All election-timed violence<br>(ln), using ACLED |
| Incident of withdrawal                 | 0.521**<br>(0.216)                               |                                                  |
| Incident of withdrawal (lag 1 month)   | 0.353*<br>(0.213)                                |                                                  |
| Incident of withdrawal (lag 2 months)  | -0.165<br>(0.215)                                |                                                  |
| Incident of withdrawal (lag 3 months)  | -0.035<br>(0.216)                                |                                                  |
| Magnitude of withdrawal                |                                                  | 0.002***<br>(0.0004)                             |
| Magnitude of withdrawal (lag 1 month)  |                                                  | 0.0003<br>(0.0004)                               |
| Magnitude of withdrawal (lag 2 months) |                                                  | 0.00000<br>(0.0004)                              |
| Magnitude of withdrawal (lag 3 months) |                                                  | -0.001<br>(0.0004)                               |
| Number of troops                       | 0.0002<br>(0.0002)                               | 0.0002<br>(0.0002)                               |
| Number of FPU's                        | -0.003**<br>(0.002)                              | -0.004**<br>(0.002)                              |
| Population (mio, ln)                   | 0.038<br>(0.087)                                 | 0.034<br>(0.087)                                 |
| Violence level (past 12 months)        | -0.009***<br>(0.003)                             | -0.010***<br>(0.003)                             |
| Violence trend (past 12 months)        | 0.014***<br>(0.005)                              | 0.017***<br>(0.005)                              |
| Administrative unit FE                 | Yes                                              | Yes                                              |
| Month FE                               | Yes                                              | Yes                                              |
| Observations                           | 3744                                             | 3744                                             |
| F Statistic                            | 3.542***                                         | 4.523***                                         |

Note: \* $p < .1$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

anti-government protests and rioting. Yet, this violence-inducing effect dissipates after a short period (i.e. after two months).

Based on the estimates in Model 4b (Table 4), we find that a subnational locality experiencing the drawdown of 100 PKO troops on average suffers from 17.32% more violence than a subnational locality experiencing continued deployment of PKO troops.<sup>104</sup> This corresponds to an average increase by 0.18 events per 100 troops or an increase by 2.65 events per 1594 troops (i.e. the average number of troops withdrawn from PKO host countries during electoral periods in our sample). Compare these figures to the impact of the trend in violence in the past 12 months: If violence increases by one event over the course of the previous year, then violence during the electoral period rises by 4.27% (compared to a completely flat trend,

<sup>104</sup>Since our dependent variable (i.e. violent events) is logged, we arrive at these figures by using the following formula  $(1 - e^{(0.002)} \times 100) \times 100$  troops.

i.e. no increase in violence over the past 12 months). Thus, the staggered withdrawal of UN military appears to create a situation that is at least four times more threatening than a situation following an increasing trend in violence by one event over the past year.

The coefficients on the control variables also reveal interesting patterns. Consistent across all models, there is a positive and significant coefficient on the *trend* in violence in the year prior to a given month during the electoral period. Thus, when violence increases over the previous period, then electoral and election-timed violence is generally higher. Conversely, the coefficient on the *level* of violence in the past 12 months is negative and significant. When the level of violence was high previously, then electoral and election-timed violence is generally lower. The number of formed police units is negatively associated with election-timed violence. The coefficient on the number of troops fails to reach significance at conventional levels, which likely stems from deployment patterns that are endogenous to violence. Finally, the coefficient on population size is negative and significant in the models of electoral violence. Given the subnational fixed effects, an over-time increase in the number of people living in a location thus correlates with less electoral violence and, conversely, an over-time decrease in population size is associated with more electoral violence. These associations point to the possibility that electoral violence forces people to leave their home and to relocate to more peaceful places.

## 6. Tests for Alternative Explanations and Robustness

We test several alternative explanations. First, while we claim that the temporary nature of the uptick in violence is due to adaptation by remaining international and domestic security forces, a theoretically plausible alternative is that UN military observers and police units or newly launched UN political missions may quickly fill the protection gap upon PKO troop withdrawals.

However, in Appendix H, we show that reductions in formed police units and military observers tend to occur before the withdrawal of troops, police personnel never increase after troop withdrawal, and numbers of military observers only rarely do so. Thus, it is unlikely that the quick reduction in withdrawal-induced insecurity is driven by police or military observers taking over from PKO troops.

Moreover, UN political missions (and other follow-up instruments) rarely have the capacity to replace the functions of UN military. For example, Human Rights Watch in Darfur reports that the new political mission, the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS), was mandated to

‘support the strengthening of the protection of human rights, in particular in conflict affected areas’. But the peacekeepers’ direct mandate to protect civilians in Darfur was dropped and in practice, UNITAMS has focused more on institution-building than human rights monitoring. This is despite clear evidence of mounting violence and despite concerns raised by internally displaced communities that the peacekeepers’ departure would leave them more vulnerable to attacks.<sup>105</sup>

Second, another alternative explanation for the *short-term nature* of the withdrawal-induced increases in political violence might be that violence becomes naturally less likely towards the end of the electoral period compared to the beginning. If withdrawal of peacekeepers tends to happen more often shortly after election day, then a reduction in violence within two months after withdrawal could be due to the ‘natural’ decline in violence rather than adaptation by domestic forces and blue helmets, as we propose. Therefore, in Appendix B, we split the sample into pre-electoral periods (including election month) and post-electoral periods. As we show descriptively and others have suggested before,<sup>106</sup> the pre-electoral period experiences an increasing trend in violence and contention until election day. However, our regression results remain substantively the same in both the pre-electoral period (a phase of growing contention) and post-electoral period (a phase of declining contention) and thus speak against the proposed alternative explanation.

Third, our independent variable attempts to capture local withdrawals as *part of a larger drawdown process* by only recording those reductions in PKO troops that (i) are significant in terms of numbers (i.e. more than 150 troops withdrawn) and (ii) lead to an overall reduction in the number of troops in the host country. In Appendix C, we examine whether a withdrawal recorded in our sample occurred after the UN Security Council authorized the drawdown. We find that the majority of withdrawals in our sample are part of the mandated withdrawal process. Nevertheless, we rerun our models excluding electoral periods outside the mandated withdrawal process from our sample and we show that our results remain the same regardless.

Fourth, we rerun our main analyses using an alternative specification of PKO troop withdrawals as the *relative* reductions in the troop strength compared to the first month in the electoral period in a given subnational unit. In Appendix E, we show that direction and significance levels of our main results are the same regardless. Fifth, we replicate our main analyses in a spatial error model framework. The spatial error model accounts for the fact that observations are likely non-independent across neighboring administrative units. The results presented in Appendix F are very similar to our

<sup>105</sup>Human Rights Watch, “Sudan: New Wave of Attacks in Darfur.”

<sup>106</sup>Harish and Little, “The Political Violence Cycle.”

main results in terms of effect size, direction and significance. Sixth, we measure our dependent variable, electoral violence, using DECO and ECAV. While DECO covers events until 2017, ECAV stops in 2012. In Appendix G, we truncate the ‘DECO sample’ in 2012 and results remain the same regardless. Finally, we also test the robustness of models without monthly or subnational unit fixed effects and different sets of controls (i.e. infant mortality rate, travel time to the next bigger city, travel time to the next international border, ethnic group polarization). The results are robust to the different model specifications.

## 7. Conclusion

Recently, peacekeeping entered a period of contraction with personnel numbers declining and several large missions drawing down completely.<sup>107</sup> This article investigates the repercussions of peacekeepers’ phased withdrawal on violence during electoral periods – periods in post-war trajectories that likely experience both heightened political instability and frequent withdrawals of PKO troops.

Using data from 17 electoral periods in all nine Sub-Saharan African countries hosting PKOs in the period 2001–2017, our geospatial analyses show that the reduction of PKO troops in the average subnational location does not correlate with electoral violence, i.e. violence perpetrated to affect the electoral process or outcome. However, local withdrawals are associated with spikes in political violence more broadly construed, including communal violence, violent escalations of anti-government protests, or rioting by members of the domestic armed forces. The latter result is consistent with our argument: When peacekeepers exit a subnational territory, they likely leave behind security gaps that domestic and remaining international forces struggle to fill in the short run. Violence entrepreneurs can exploit these security gaps. Yet, violence-inducing effects of repatriation seem to be temporary and dissipate quickly over time. Already two months after the withdrawal, our statistical analyses show that political violence returns to pre-withdrawal levels.

For researchers, our analyses provide first evidence on the repercussions of peacekeepers’ withdrawals as local-level processes rather than a country-level singular event. In so doing, we contribute to the small but growing literature on peacekeeping exit.<sup>108</sup> While decisions on localized withdrawals seem strongly guided by security concerns, they are still associated with temporary increases in insecurity. However, withdrawal-induced insecurity is

<sup>107</sup>Coleman, “Downsizing in UN Peacekeeping.”

<sup>108</sup>E.g. Brosig and Sempijja, “What Peacekeeping Leaves Behind”; Caplan, “After Exit”; Di Salvatore and Ruggeri, “The Withdrawal of UN Peace Operations and State Capacity”; Gledhill, “The Pieces Kept after Peace is Kept”; Tansey, “Evaluating the Legacies of State-Building.”

short-lived, indicating that positive peacekeeping legacies are likely not undone completely. Furthermore, we also add to the literature on the international dimension of electoral violence.<sup>109</sup> Our null results in models of electoral violence suggest that specific electoral security-enhancing effects of peacekeeping are not threatened by local withdrawal processes, probably because of the international focus on elections.<sup>110</sup>

In addition to these theoretical contributions, the article shows that ‘going local’ is a fruitful research design strategy. It helps researchers to measure peacekeepers’ exits more precisely by capturing that these exits happen at different time points in different localities within a PKO host country. Precision is crucial for estimating the *short-term* effects of withdrawals. Moving to the subnational level also allows for isolating the effects of peacekeepers’ exit from other country-level developments. Future research can easily extend these analyses beyond electoral periods and to outcomes other than electoral violence (e.g. war-related violence, rule of law, and economic development).

For policymakers, our findings imply that twenty years after the UN Security Council’s initial discussion of exit strategies for peacekeeping,<sup>111</sup> PKOs are still partly under-prepared for preventing exit-related upticks in political violence. As our findings are limited to electoral periods (i.e. the observations in our sample), we cannot say whether troop repatriation is less (or more) harmful outside those periods. Yet, even if withdrawal-induced insecurity is confined to electoral periods, it likely influences subsequent political trajectories by diminishing legitimacy beliefs regarding the (newly) elected political administration. Elections could also exacerbate the difficulties of international-to-local security transitions because managing political transitions via elections consumes peacekeeping resources needed for exit planning.<sup>112</sup> Indeed, the differential relationships we find, i.e. null results for correlations between withdrawal and electoral violence but positive correlations between withdrawal and political violence more broadly construed, suggest that policymakers involved in planning exit strategies should take a broad view to enable PKOs to address *multiple* sources of insecurity during transitions in electoral periods, including those not explicitly related to elections. Considering pressures to cut the UN budget and planned reductions of peacekeeping personnel in the years to come,<sup>113</sup> this is an important finding for safeguarding positive legacies of peacekeeping during violence-prone and volatile electoral periods.

<sup>109</sup>E.g. Smidt, “Mitigating Election Violence Locally”; Smidt, “Keeping Electoral Peace?”; Fjelde and Smidt, “Protecting the Vote?”; Fjelde and Höglund, “Introducing the Deadly Electoral Conflict Dataset (DECO).”

<sup>110</sup>Autesserre, “Hobbes and the Congo.”

<sup>111</sup>United Nations Security Council, *No Exit Without Strategy*.

<sup>112</sup>Di Razza, *Mission in Transition*.

<sup>113</sup>Coleman, “Downsizing in UN Peacekeeping.”

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