

# Mission Creep and Conceptual Drift: How ATMIS Conflates Combat and War, Undermining It's Strategic Effectiveness in Somalia

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## ABSTRACT

The African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) represents one of the most ambitious contemporary peace support operations, combining elements of peacekeeping, counterinsurgency, and state-building. Despite tactical gains against Al-Shabaab, the mission has struggled to produce sustainable strategic outcomes. This paper argues that ATMIS's limitations stem from mission creep and conceptual drift, particularly its conflation of combat and war. Drawing on Clausewitzian theory, counterinsurgency scholarship, and peacekeeping literature, the study synthesizes arguments from leading scholars to demonstrate how the erosion of conceptual clarity undermines operational coherence, legitimacy, and long-term effectiveness. By blurring the distinction between combat as a tactical activity and war as a political enterprise, ATMIS has adopted a fragmented approach that prioritizes kinetic engagements over strategic political outcomes. The paper concludes that restoring conceptual clarity and aligning military action with political objectives is essential for the mission's success.

**Keywords:** ATMIS; mission creep; conceptual drift; combat vs war; counterinsurgency; peacekeeping; political strategy; strategic effectiveness; military intervention

## INTRODUCTION

The persistence of insecurity in Somalia despite prolonged international intervention raises fundamental questions about the effectiveness of contemporary peace operations. ATMIS, which succeeded AMISOM in 2022, was designed as a transition mission aimed at transferring security responsibilities to Somali forces while consolidating gains against Al-Shabaab. However, the mission continues to face structural and strategic challenges that hinder its success.

This paper advances the argument that ATMIS's difficulties are rooted in mission creep and conceptual drift. Specifically, the mission conflates combat with war, treating tactical military engagements as substitutes for a coherent political strategy. This conflation reflects a broader trend in modern interventions, where the boundaries between peacekeeping, counterterrorism, and war-fighting have become increasingly blurred.

Building on existing scholarship, this study synthesizes theoretical and empirical insights to explain how ATMIS's hybrid mandate generates internal contradictions. The central claim is that without a clear distinction between combat and war, the mission cannot effectively translate military actions into strategic outcomes.

### Theoretical Foundations: Distinguishing Combat from War

Carl von Clausewitz's theory of war provides a foundational lens through which the strategic limitations of ATMIS can be understood. In *On War*, Clausewitz (1976) famously conceptualizes war as "the continuation of politics by other means," establishing a clear hierarchy between political purpose and military action. War, in this sense, is not synonymous with fighting; rather, it is a purposive, political enterprise in which violence is employed instrumentally to achieve defined political objectives. Combat, by contrast, constitutes the tactical execution of that violence—the physical engagements, battles, and operations through which force is applied.

The distinction is critical: combat is a means, while war is the overarching political process that gives meaning and direction to that means.

Clausewitz's insight underscores a central requirement of effective strategy: the subordination of military activity to political intent. As scholars such as Paret (2007) and Howard (1976) have elaborated, the failure to maintain this subordination results in a form of strategic incoherence in which military operations proceed without a guiding political logic. Clausewitz himself warned against the danger of "aimless violence," a condition in which combat becomes detached from political purpose and devolves into an end in itself. Under such conditions, even repeated tactical successes fail to produce meaningful or lasting outcomes because they are not embedded within a coherent vision of political change.

It is precisely this conceptual slippage that characterizes many aspects of ATMIS operations. The mission has demonstrated considerable capacity in conducting kinetic operations against Al-Shabaab, including clearing and holding territory, degrading insurgent networks, and supporting Somalia forces in offensive campaigns. These activities fall squarely within the domain of combat. However, the broader question of war—what political end state these operations are meant to achieve, how they contribute to the construction of legitimate governance, and how they transform the underlying dynamics of the Somalia conflict—remains insufficiently articulated. In effect, ATMIS risks engaging in sustained combat without engaging in war in the Clausewitzian sense. The result is a pattern of tactical activity that is intense but strategically disjointed.

The distinction becomes even clearer when viewed through the lens of counterinsurgency (COIN) theory, which places political primacy at the center of military operations. David Galula (1964) argued that insurgency is fundamentally a political struggle for control over the population, in which military force plays a necessary but subordinate role. Victory in such conflicts depends less on the destruction of enemy forces than on the establishment of legitimate authority and the erosion of insurgent support. Similarly, David Kilcullen (2010) emphasizes that the decisive terrain in counterinsurgency is the human domain; success hinges on securing the population, fostering governance, and aligning military actions with political objectives.

From this perspective, combat is only effective insofar as it contributes to these broader political goals. Tactical engagements must be carefully calibrated to reinforce legitimacy, protect civilians, and enable governance structures to take root. When combat is overemphasized at the expense of political engagement, it can become counterproductive, generating civilian harm, displacement, and resentment that ultimately strengthen insurgent narratives.

The experience of ATMIS reflects this imbalance. The mission has often prioritized territorial control and enemy attrition, focusing on clearing areas of Al-Shabaab presence through joint offensives with Somalia forces. While such operations may yield short-term gains, they do not automatically translate into durable political outcomes. In many cases, cleared areas lack effective governance, allowing insurgents to re-infiltrate or maintain influence through shadow administrations. This pattern illustrates a fundamental misalignment between combat activities and the political logic of war. Rather than serving as an instrument of a broader political strategy, combat risks becoming a substitute for it.

Contemporary scholarship further reinforces the importance of embedding military action within local political and social contexts. Stathis Kalyvas (2006) demonstrates that patterns of violence in civil wars are shaped by complex interactions between armed actors and civilian populations, while Jeremy Weinstein (2007) highlights how insurgent behavior is influenced by internal organizational dynamics and resource constraints. These insights suggest that purely military approaches are insufficient to address the root causes of insurgency. Instead, effective war-making requires understanding of local conditions and a strategy that integrates political, social, and military dimensions.

ATMIS's operational approach, however, often reflects a more conventional military logic, emphasizing offensive operations and measurable outputs such as territory recaptured or insurgents neutralized. These metrics, while important, do not capture the political dimensions of the conflict. As a result, there is a risk that success is defined in terms of combat performance rather than progress toward a sustainable political settlement.

This further illustrates the conflation of combat with war: the assumption that winning battles equates to winning the conflict.

The evolution of peacekeeping toward more robust mandates has compounded this conceptual ambiguity. Scholars such as Roland Paris (2004) and Thomas Tardy (2011) have documented how modern peace operations increasingly incorporate offensive capabilities, moving beyond traditional principles of neutrality and limited use of force. While these changes are intended to address the realities of complex conflicts, they also blur the line between peacekeeping and war-fighting. Missions are expected to simultaneously stabilize, combat insurgents, and support state-building, often without a clear framework for integrating these functions.

Séverine Autesserre (2014) critiques this trend by arguing that international interventions frequently rely on standardized approaches that overlook local dynamics and political complexities. In the case of ATMIS, the adoption of a hybrid mandate that combines stabilization, counterterrorism, and governance support has created a situation in which the mission operates across multiple domains without clear conceptual boundaries. This ambiguity facilitates mission creep, as new tasks are added without a corresponding refinement of strategy.

Within this hybrid framework, the distinction between combat and war becomes increasingly blurred. Offensive operations against Al-Shabaab are conducted alongside efforts to build state institutions and support political processes, yet these activities are not always coherently integrated. The danger, as Clausewitz would suggest, is that military means begin to dictate political ends rather than the reverse. When this occurs, the mission's strategic direction becomes reactive and fragmented, driven by immediate security concerns rather than a long-term vision of political transformation.

In the context of Somalia, where political authority is fragmented and state institutions remain weak, the absence of a clearly defined political end state further exacerbates this problem. Without a shared understanding of what constitutes “victory” or success, combat operations risk becoming self-perpetuating. They continue because the threat persists, but they do not fundamentally alter the conditions that sustain that threat. This is the essence of the conflation between combat and war: the substitution of continuous military activity for a coherent political project.

Ultimately, distinguishing between combat and war is not merely an academic exercise; it is a strategic imperative. For ATMIS, restoring this distinction would require reasserting the primacy of political objectives, ensuring that all military actions are explicitly linked to those objectives, and prioritizing governance and legitimacy alongside security operations. Without such a reorientation, the mission is likely to remain trapped in a cycle of tactical engagement without strategic resolution, achieving success in combat while falling short in war.

### **Mission Creep in ATMIS: Expanding Mandates and Shrinking Clarity**

Mission creep refers to the gradual expansion of a mission's objectives beyond its original mandate, often without corresponding adjustments in resources or strategy. In the case of ATMIS, mission creep manifests in several ways.

First, the mission has evolved from a peace support operation into a de facto counterterrorism force. While AMISOM initially focused on stabilizing key urban centers, ATMIS has expanded its operations to include offensive campaigns in rural areas. This shift reflects an increasing emphasis on combat rather than stabilization.

Second, ATMIS has taken on responsibilities related to governance, institution-building, and humanitarian support. While these tasks are essential for long-term stability, they require expertise and resources that extend beyond the mission's core competencies.

Scholars such as Paul Williams (2018) and Ken Menkhaus (2014) have highlighted the challenges of balancing these diverse roles. Williams argues that AMISOM—and by extension ATMIS—has been “overburdened” by competing expectations, while Menkhaus emphasizes the fragility of Somali state institutions.

The result is a mission that attempts to do too much without a coherent strategy, leading to fragmentation and inefficiency.

### **From Stabilization to War-Fighting: Conceptual Drift and the Strategy Gap in ATMIS**

One of the most significant challenges confronting ATMIS is the phenomenon of conceptual drift, whereby the mission has gradually shifted away from its original stabilization mandate toward a more pronounced war-fighting posture. Conceptual drift does not typically occur through formal doctrinal changes or explicit policy decisions; rather, it unfolds incrementally, as operational priorities evolve in response to immediate threats and pressures on the ground. In the case of ATMIS, this drift is evident in the increasing centrality of combat operations, which have come to dominate the mission's activities and define its measure of success.

Initially conceived as a transition mission aimed at stabilizing Somalia and facilitating the gradual transfer of security responsibilities to Somali forces, ATMIS was expected to operate within a framework that balanced security provision with political support and institution-building. Stabilization, in this sense, implies a comprehensive approach that integrates military, political, and developmental efforts to create conditions for sustainable peace. However, over time, the mission's operational focus has narrowed, with increasing emphasis placed on kinetic engagements against Al-Shabaab. This shift reflects a broader reorientation from stabilization toward war-fighting, where the immediate objective becomes the defeat or degradation of an adversary rather than the construction of a viable political order.

To be sure, ATMIS has recorded notable tactical successes. Joint operations with Somali forces have led to the recapture of key territories and the disruption of insurgent networks, demonstrating the mission's operational capability and effectiveness at the level of combat. These achievements, however, highlight a critical distinction between tactical success and strategic effectiveness. As David Kilcullen (2010) argues, particularly in the context of counterinsurgency, tactical victories are ultimately inconsequential if they do not contribute to a broader political strategy. Clearing territory of insurgents is only meaningful if it is followed by the establishment of legitimate governance structures, the provision of security and services to local populations, and the consolidation of state authority.

In the absence of these follow-on processes, tactical gains risk becoming ephemeral. Areas that are cleared of insurgent presence may relapse into insecurity if governance vacuums persist, allowing insurgents to re-establish influence through coercion, persuasion, or the provision of alternative forms of order. This cyclical pattern underscores the limitations of a combat-centric approach and illustrates the dangers of conceptual drift. When combat becomes the primary focus, it can overshadow the political and institutional dimensions that are essential for long-term stability.

This dynamic is closely related to what Hew Strachan (2007) describes as the "strategy gap," a condition in which military actions are insufficiently connected to political objectives. The strategy gap emerges when there is a failure to translate political goals into coherent military strategies, or conversely, when military operations proceed without clear political guidance. In such situations, the use of force becomes reactive and fragmented, driven by immediate operational considerations rather than a deliberate plan to achieve a defined end state.

ATMIS's increasing emphasis on combat exacerbates this gap. By prioritizing short-term military gains such as territory recaptured or insurgents neutralized. This way, the mission risks losing sight of its broader objective. The metrics of success become narrowly defined in military terms, sidelining questions of governance, legitimacy, and political reconciliation. This not only undermines strategic coherence but also creates a disconnect between what the mission does and what it is ultimately meant to achieve.

At the heart of this problem lies the absence of a clearly articulated political end state. In Clausewitzian terms, war-making requires a vision of the desired political outcome that guides the application of military force. Without such a vision, military operations lack direction and purpose, reducing them to a series of disconnected engagements. In the Somali context, the articulation of a political end state is particularly challenging due to the fragmented nature of authority and the weakness of state institutions. The federal government's limited reach

beyond major urban centers constrains its ability to define and implement a unified national strategy, leaving external actors such as ATMIS to operate in a complex and often fragile political landscape.

This fragmentation has profound implications for the mission's effectiveness. Without a coherent political framework, it becomes difficult to align military operations with broader objectives. Efforts to stabilize regions or support local administrations may be undermined by competing political interests, clan dynamics, or weak institutional capacity. As a result, military gains are not consolidated into durable political outcomes, reinforcing the cycle of instability.

Roland Paris (2004) offers a critical perspective on this issue, arguing that state-building efforts must be grounded in local political realities rather than imposed through external templates. Interventions that fail to account for complexities of local contexts risk creating institutions that lack legitimacy and resilience. In the case of ATMIS, the reliance on military force as the primary tool of engagement reflects a tendency to prioritize security over politics, even though the two are inextricably linked. By focusing on combat operations without sufficient attention to political processes, the mission risks reinforcing the very conditions that sustain conflict.

### **Integrating Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives on ATMIS's Strategic Limitations**

A comprehensive understanding of the challenges confronting ATMIS emerges most clearly through a synthesis of diverse but complementary strands of scholarship. Across classical strategic theory, counterinsurgency doctrine, peacekeeping literature, and Somalia-specific analyses, a consistent insight becomes evident: the mission's shortcomings are rooted in its failure to maintain a clear distinction between combat as a tactical activity and war as a political enterprise. By integrating these perspectives, it is possible to situate ATMIS's difficulties within a broader intellectual and empirical context, revealing the structural and conceptual sources of its strategic incoherence.

At the foundation of this analysis lies Clausewitzian theory, as developed by Carl von Clausewitz and further interpreted by scholars such as Michael Howard and Peter Paret. This body of work underscores the primacy of politics in war, insisting that military force must always remain subordinate to political objectives. War, in this framework, is not defined by the mere application of violence but by its purposive use in pursuit of a clearly articulated political end state. Combat, therefore, is only meaningful insofar as it serves this broader purpose. When this hierarchy is disrupted, when military operations proceed without clear political direction, strategy collapses into a series of disconnected tactical actions. In the case of ATMIS, the failure to consistently align combat operations with a coherent political vision has resulted in precisely such a condition. Tactical engagements against Al-Shabaab, however effective in isolation, do not cumulatively advance a defined political outcome, thereby generating strategic incoherence.

Counterinsurgency scholarship reinforces and deepens this insight by emphasizing the inherently political nature of insurgent conflicts. The works of David Galula, David Kilcullen, and Stathis Kalyvas collectively highlight that insurgencies are not simply military phenomena but contests over legitimacy, authority, and population allegiance. Within this framework, the decisive terrain is not physical but human, and the center of gravity lies in the perceptions and loyalties of the population. Military force plays a necessary role, but it is fundamentally instrumental, designed to create conditions under which political solutions can take hold. An overreliance on combat, particularly one that prioritizes enemy attrition and territorial control, risks undermining these objectives by alienating civilians, disrupting local governance, and reinforcing insurgent narratives. ATMIS's operational approach, which has often privileged kinetic engagements, reflects a partial and imbalanced application of counterinsurgency principles. By elevating combat above its proper role, the mission inadvertently weakens the very foundations of legitimacy and governance a condition upon which successful counterinsurgency depends.

The evolution of peacekeeping doctrine further complicates this dynamic. Scholars such as Roland Paris, Thomas Tardy, and Séverine Autesserre have critically examined the shift toward robust peacekeeping mandates, which increasingly incorporate offensive military capabilities and ambitious state-building objectives. While these mandates are designed to address the complexities of contemporary conflicts, they also blur the conceptual boundaries between peacekeeping, stabilization, and war-fighting. This blurring introduces a form of structural ambiguity, as missions are tasked with simultaneously performing roles that may be inherently in

tension with one another. In particular, the combination of coercive military action with the expectation of political neutrality and legitimacy creates a paradox that is difficult to resolve in practice. ATMIS exemplifies this challenge. Its hybrid mandate, which encompasses counterterrorism, stabilization, and institutional support, reflects the ambitions of modern intervention but also exposes the risks identified in the literature. Without a clear conceptual framework to integrate these functions, the mission becomes susceptible to mission creep, as new tasks are layered onto existing responsibilities without a corresponding refinement of strategic priorities.

Empirical analyses focused specifically on Somalia provide an essential grounding for these theoretical insights. Scholars such as Paul Williams and Ken Menkhaus have documented the profound complexities of the Somali context, including the weakness of central state institutions, the salience of clan dynamics, and the adaptive resilience of Al-Shabaab. These factors create a highly fluid and fragmented political environment in which external interventions face significant constraints. In such a context, the success of any mission depends not only on military effectiveness but also on its ability to navigate local political realities and support the gradual consolidation of legitimate authority. ATMIS's emphasis on combat operations, however, often operates at a level removed from these dynamics, focusing on immediate security outcomes rather than the deeper political processes that sustain or undermine stability. This disconnect further illustrates the consequences of conflating combat with war: the assumption that military pressure alone can reshape a fundamentally political conflict.

Taken together, these scholarly perspectives converge on a central conclusion. The challenges facing ATMIS are not merely the product of operational difficulties or resource constraints but are rooted in a deeper conceptual failure. By failing to clearly distinguish between combat and war, the mission has adopted an approach that prioritizes tactical effectiveness over strategic coherence. Combat operations, rather than being integrated into a broader political strategy, have increasingly become the dominant mode of engagement. This shift has led to a pattern of short-term gains that are not consolidated into lasting outcomes, perpetuating a cycle of instability and intervention.

Moreover, this conflation produces unintended consequences that further undermine the mission's objectives. The emphasis on kinetic action can erode local legitimacy, strain relations with civilian populations, and hinder the development of accountable and effective Somalia institutions. At the same time, the absence of a clearly defined political end state leaves the mission without a coherent measure of success, making it difficult to assess progress or adjust strategy. In this sense, the failure to distinguish between combat and war is not simply a theoretical oversight but a practical problem with tangible implications for the mission's effectiveness.

### **Strategic Consequences of Conflating Combat and War in ATMIS Operations**

The conflation of combat and war within ATMIS has far-reaching implications for its overall strategic effectiveness. These consequences extend beyond the immediate battlefield, shaping issues of legitimacy, institutional development, and regional stability. By privileging kinetic operations over political strategy, the mission not only limits its ability to achieve sustainable outcomes within Somalia but also risks exacerbating the very conditions it seeks to resolve.

One of the most immediate and significant consequences of this conflation is the erosion of legitimacy and the deterioration of local perceptions. In counterinsurgency environments, legitimacy constitutes a central pillar of success, as it determines the extent to which local populations support or resist state and external actors. When combat operations are conducted without sufficient integration into a broader political strategy, they often result in unintended civilian harm, displacement, and disruption of livelihoods. Such outcomes can foster resentment among local communities and reinforce insurgent narratives that portray external forces as occupiers rather than partners in stabilization. In the case of ATMIS, the increasing emphasis on offensive military operations risks deepening this perception, particularly in areas where the presence of foreign troops is already viewed with suspicion. As local support diminishes, the mission's ability to gather intelligence, build trust, and facilitate governance is correspondingly weakened, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of insecurity.

Closely linked to the issue of legitimacy is the impact of ATMIS's operational approach on the development of Somalia security institutions. A combat-centric strategy inevitably shapes the priorities and capabilities of the forces it trains and supports. In emphasizing kinetic effectiveness such as offensive operations, territorial control,

and enemy attrition, ATMIS contributes to the cultivation of security forces that are oriented toward war-fighting rather than governance. While such capabilities are undoubtedly necessary in confronting insurgent threats, they are insufficient for the broader aim of state-building, which require accountability, professionalism and integration with civilian authority. The relative neglect of these dimensions can result in security institutions that are operationally capable but institutionally weak, lacking the legitimacy and resilience needed for long-term sustainability. This imbalance undermines the very objective of the transition mission, which is to enable Somalia forces to assume full responsibility for national security in a manner that is both effective and accountable.

Beyond the national level, the strategic limitations of ATMIS also carry significant implications for regional stability. Somalia occupies a critical position in the Horn of Africa, and persistent insecurity within its borders has ripple effects across neighboring states. The inability to achieve lasting stability creates space for transnational extremist networks to operate, recruit and project influence beyond Somalia's border. Groups such as Al-Shabaab have demonstrated the capacity to conduct attacks in neighboring countries, underscoring the regional dimension of the conflict. By focusing predominantly on combat operations without addressing the underlying political drivers of instability, ATMIS risks perpetuating a cycle in which insurgent groups are weakened but not decisively defeated. This enduring instability complicates regional security cooperation and places additional burdens on neighboring states, which must contend with the spillover effects of Somalia's protracted conflict.

Moreover, the perception of strategic stagnation within ATMIS can undermine broader international and regional efforts to promote peace and security in the Horn of Africa. Prolonged military engagement without clear progress toward a political settlement may lead to donor fatigue, reduced political will, and competing priorities among international actors. In this sense, the conflation of combat and war not only affects the internal dynamics of the mission but also shapes its external environment, influencing the level of support and cooperation it receives

## CONCLUSION

ATMIS's challenges are not merely operational but conceptual. The mission's conflation of combat and war reflects a deeper problem of mission creep and conceptual drift, which undermines its strategic effectiveness.

By synthesizing insights from Clausewitzian theory, counterinsurgency scholarship, and peacekeeping literature, this paper has demonstrated that effective war-making requires the integration of military and political efforts. ATMIS's failure to maintain this integration results in a fragmented approach that prioritizes tactical success over strategic outcomes.

The conflation of combat and war within ATMIS undermines legitimacy, weakens institutional development, and prolongs regional instability. A practical way forward requires rebalancing military action with political strategy. First, ATMIS should adopt a **"clear–hold–build–transfer"** approach more rigorously. Combat operations (clear) must immediately be followed by stabilization efforts (hold), local governance support (build), and rapid handover to Somalia authorities (transfer). This ensures tactical gains translate into political outcomes.

Second, civilian protection and community engagement must be operational priorities. Embedding civil-military coordination teams and working closely with local leaders can reduce civilian harm, improve intelligence, and rebuild trust which is key to counterinsurgency success.

Third, training of Somali security forces should shift from purely combat readiness to include accountability, rule of law, and civil oversight. This produces forces capable not just of fighting, but of governing security sustainably.

Finally, ATMIS must align operations with a clearly defined political end state, jointly articulated with the Somalia government and regional actors. Without this, military efforts will remain reactive. By integrating

combat within a broader political framework, ATMIS can move from short-term battlefield success to long-term strategic effectiveness.

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