

UN Peacekeeping and Conflict Management: Is there an Option for Ukraine?#

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Abstract

Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, five months back, but there hasn't been any de-escalation yet. From February 2021 until the actual invasion in February 2022, there was an opportunity for the world leaders including the Secretary-General UN to prevent the conflict by using the art of peace-making and possibly preventive deployment with the consent of the parties. Despite the lost opportunity, taking a cue from some of the traditional peace operations which were established during the cold war, there is an idea to use the model of a current traditional peace operation in the context of the of the Ukraine conflict. This article aims to examine this idea.

Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has entered the fifth month but there is no sign of a ceasefire yet. The US and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) strengthen their military presence in Europe along with the supply of arms to Ukraine and the threat of more economic sanctions continues. While President Zelensky shouts about a defunct UN and continues to plead for more armament to get back the lost territory, there are speculations about President Putin's aim and how far would he go. Friedman

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concluded in more simple words that the US worries about the threat to the Atlantic if Russia expands further west and Poland though is worried about its sovereignty.¹ Therefore, it appears that to the US, if Russia cannot be defeated, the continuation of the conflict serves its interest by keeping Russia at a distance. Poland, however, is worried and wants an end to the conflict. It is in this context that Poland had earlier suggested a kind of peace mission as an interim measure. Gowan, the UN Director of Crisis Group, even though has not outrightly rejected the Polish 'Peace Mission', rightly pointed out that, "There is a natural tendency in moments of crisis to raise the idea of 'peacekeeping' in a vague way, much as Poland has done". Gowan observed that such an idea of using Blue Helmets came up earlier also in 2015 and Putin was open to the idea. Comparing the starting points for a peacekeeping mission in 2015 and now, it had a better chance in 2015 because Putin was at least open to the idea.² That the Blue Helmets would be able to do something is making rounds again. Even a former Canadian foreign minister and a professor of law at the University of Ottawa Axworthy and Rock believe that the UN can use Blue Helmets to save Ukrainian lives.³ Gowan reaffirmed his views during his intervention in the "Multilateralism and the state of the international order after Russia's invasion of Ukraine", at Finish Institute of International Affairs. He believed that as and when there is a ceasefire, the UN can play a role in the form of peacekeeping (and various other forms) for conflict termination.⁴ His observation was in the context of a post ceasefire agreement between Russia and Ukraine.

In this regard, Dr Novosseloff has, while referring to the role of cold war era peacekeeping missions, reflected that if the UN peacekeeping mission is called to help to monitor and implement the eventual agreement, it will be an observer mission.⁵ Without being prejudiced against the probability of success, such optimism of UN peace operation can be analysed in the context of firstly, the kind of role the UN peacekeeping can play, and secondly, the probability of its success in the face of several security challenges. Before that, it would be worthwhile to see if the UN could have done something to prevent the Ukraine conflict.

What the UN could do?

The world is cursing Russia for the suffering of Ukraine. But there was one year time for the UN (Secretary-General) and the world

leaders, when Russia dropped paratroopers near the Ukraine border on 21 February 2021 and until the actual invasion on 24 February 2022, to initiate preventive diplomacy and may even consider preventive deployment to prevent the conflict.⁶ Intriguingly, that window was lost either deliberately or out of ignorance. It is difficult to believe that it can be out of ignorance. The world kept talking about the invasion much before the actual invasion. But nothing was done to prevent it other than threatening and asking Russia to respect the sovereignty of Ukraine. Ukraine too believed that the West would come to its rescue. A few European leaders tried but, after all, Russia looks at Europe with suspicion. There was a chance that Russia would have listened to its close friends like China (they have come very close recently and maybe united against a common rival). Sadly, neither the UN nor the West did anything to seize the initiative to assure Russia and convince Ukraine that neutrality of Ukraine is important to avoid war and can be arranged using ways other than war. The international community, thus, lost out on the theory of 'Preventive Diplomacy' as introduced by the then Secretary-General Butros Ghali in Agenda for Peace.⁷ The Secretary-General is best suited to begin preventive diplomacy.

There are at least two earlier similar, if not the same, situations involving the permanent member of the Security Council when the security situation created a decision dilemma for the Security Council. The first one was when Egypt nationalised the Suez Canal when US and UK refused to fund the Aswan Dam project after the British had handed over the canal to Egypt in June 1956.⁸ Based on a secret agreement between Israel, the UK and France, Israel invaded Egypt on 29 October 1956. The plan was for Israel to invade Egypt first, followed by an intervention by the UK and France forcing Israel to withdraw, but they would stay back and wrest full control of the canal.⁹ A situation like that involving two permanent members was not in the interest of either the US or the USSR. Besides, UK and France would have surely vetoed any move by the Security Council asking them to pull back their troops. Recognising the situation that the Security Council was almost paralysed, the Security Council adopted a resolution calling for an emergency meeting of the General Assembly to address the issue.¹⁰ Since a collective enforcement action became politically impossible, on 02 November, the UN General Assembly

passed a resolution calling for a ceasefire and withdrawal of forces.¹¹ The strategy and the composition of the force were left to the Secretary-General and United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) came into being.

The second instance was when the Security Council was caught in the power play between the West and the Soviet Union soon after Belgium, the colonial master of Congo, announced Congo's independence on 30 June 1960 and Moise Tshombe, the head of the provincial government of Katanga, declared the independence of Katanga on 10 July 1960. Following this, when Congo's new leaders President Joseph Kasavubu and Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba appealed to the UN on 12 July for assistance citing Belgium's involvement in inciting the secessionist movement of Katanga, Dag Hammarskjöld, the then Secretary-General, exercising his power under Article 99 of UN Charter XV, called for an immediate meeting of the Security Council.¹² On 14 July 1960, the Security Council adopted resolution 143 calling for the withdrawal of Belgium troops and authorising the Secretary-General 'to take all necessary steps' to provide the government with 'such military assistance as may be necessary' until the national security forces are able 'to meet fully their tasks'.¹³

In both cases, the UN, namely the Secretary-General, took the initiative to force the General Assembly and the permanent members of the Security Council to decide to prevent a war. The role played by Secretary-General in finding a solution that satisfies both sides is an example of an innovative leader.¹⁴ It, therefore, is puzzling why such an initiative was not taken to prevent the invasion of Ukraine. It is obvious that by not doing anything, for whatever reasons, it might be the UN has failed the people of Ukraine. Who gains from the conflict? Russia and Ukraine are suffering and to a large extent, the global economy. We are yet to see the worse. NATO's survival is based on the presence of threats from the East. Therefore, NATO is regaining its lost relevance. And finally, those nations that have profited from the arms sale unless these are for free. Hence, were they sincere in preventing the conflict, or is it the other way around?

Those who make the decisions are the same since the inception of the UN. If the UN and the world are still sincere in bringing a quick end to the suffering of innocent people, measures

outside the political rivalry between the West and the East will have to be considered, including seeking help from countries like China, or maybe even India, to play a constructive role to defuse the situation and work out a ceasefire plan.¹⁵ Despite the challenges of the internal organisational dynamics of the UN, it was possible for the Secretary-General to comprise a high-level delegation (that may or may not include a representative from the West) to find an escape route for both President Putin and President Zelenskyy to come out from out of their political trap.¹⁶ In his interview with the Time, President Zelenskyy has talked of making compromises.¹⁷ Great leaders are known to have made compromises for the sake of their people. It depends on how far President Zelensky is prepared to go to save Ukraine and where does President Putin want to draw his line to make him feel secure against threats from the West. It brings us to the likely role of UN peacekeeping in the Ukraine conflict.

What Next Then?

Even though an opportunity for preventive diplomacy has been lost due to inaction on part of the UN from February 2021 until the beginning of the invasion in February 2022, the latest initiative of the Secretary-General to meet both President Putin and President Zelensky has brought in some hope. As it appears, Russia has agreed in principle to a UN role and Red Cross in evacuations from Mariupol.¹⁸ It was only about the evacuation of the civilians. But it might also open the way for more involvement of the UN in the future, in case both sides agree to end the conflict and ceasefire. If that happens, there will be a need for some neutral organisation to see that the ceasefire is holding on by observing, monitoring, and deconflicting instability because of animosity and lack of trust between the opposing sides. UN peacekeeping is one of the options. But the question is how and in what form? For this, it will be good to visit our experiences of United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), the only traditional peace operation which was established during the cold war in the context of the inter-state conflict between Israel and Lebanon and is still in place.¹⁹

The mission has a strong force structure with three European Troop Contributing Countries (TCCs) deploying their soldiers who are equipped with heavy armaments which are rare in the UN peace operations. But the mandate, in general, is that of conflict

management by a peacekeeping mission under Chapter VI of the UN Charter. The presence of UNIFIL signifies the presence of the threat from Hezbollah to Israel and justification for Hezbollah to hold on to its military wing to defend the sovereignty of Lebanon against Israel. So far, the mission's quick response, combined with its liaison and coordination mechanism and not the robust structure, has helped to prevent the incidents near the Blue Line (BL) from escalating into a major conflict and bringing stability to the region and ushering in negative peace.²⁰ In UNIFIL, the presence of armed contingents was accepted by the parties to the conflict due to political reasons even though this has not contributed to deconflicting the situation. With this background, to explore the role and structure of a peace operation for Ukraine, the probability of the success of a peacekeeping mission in the context of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, should be examined first. It will be discussed next.

Can UN Peacekeeping succeed in Ukraine?

At this stage, when exploring the feasibility of peacekeeping as a conflict management tool is only an idea, it is difficult to comment on its effectiveness in Ukraine. There can be several reasons why peace operations either succeed or fail.²¹ However, presuming both Russia and Ukraine may be amenable to a role in UN peacekeeping, such an option can be examined in the context of the basic conditions that peace operations must fulfil to succeed. One of the primary conditions is the need to adhere to the principles of peacekeeping.²² It is always not easy to strictly adhere to the principles because of the inherent ambiguity in their interpretation. At the minimum, deploying peacekeepers without the consent of the parties to the conflict is against the first cardinal principle of UN peacekeeping – *Consent*.²³ Even if both Russia and Ukraine agree to the UN's intervention to monitor a ceasefire, the consent may not be absolute, but conditional. Some of the conditions can even be implied.

As regards the use of force, given the kind of violence that the peacekeepers would be exposed to (including the threat to peacekeepers), the biggest challenge will come from the mercenaries that are fighting for both sides. These are loose organisations and easily get out of control of their handlers. To some extent, these groups may even continue to operate with

tacit support from the main parties to the conflict. Therefore, unless there is sincerity on part of Russia and Ukraine to restrain these irregular fighters, the ceasefire is not likely to hold. Another challenge is finding the TCCs that would be willing to participate in such a mission. The member states from the West, who have the desired capability, are not inclined to take part in difficult peace operations and those nations from the global South who have the capability, may not be inclined to make political and military sacrifices by getting caught in between the Russian and Ukrainian armed forces and the mercenaries whose ownership does not have any legitimacy. Given the cause and the ferocity of the conflict, Russia and Ukraine's context is far removed from UNIFIL's. It is, therefore, unlikely that other than an unarmed (or may be lightly armed) monitoring role, the presence of any armed foreign troops would be acceptable to either of them.

In this context, it would be worthwhile to note that there appears to be a rethinking of the relevance of traditional peace operations (including unarmed observers and formed armed contingents) in the observer role. This was discussed in a round table conference organised by the Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network (EPON) at the UN HQs on 12 May 2022 where the author was also one of the panellists.²⁴ There was a consensus that while the traditional peace operations of the cold war era have become status quo, these are still relevant and can be considered as an option in conflict management tools in inter-state conflict.²⁵ But as explained in the earlier section, an armed peacekeeping force is not likely to be accepted by both Russia and Ukraine. Hence, rather than an armed observer mission, an observer verification mission comprising peacekeepers from neutral countries supported by a liaison and coordination mechanism is likely to be more suitable to facilitate a ceasefire. This thought is not looking at peace enforcement in Ukraine since the intention is not to tangle in the fight between Russia and Ukraine. It is opting for a less violent option, i.e., monitoring/peacekeeping in response to Novosseloff's comments on the feasibility of an observers' mission if the UN peacekeeping is called for. However, the role, composition and size of the mission, and modalities will have to be worked out only after deliberations with the stakeholders (including Russia and Ukraine) and the field visit by the technical teams. If acceptable to the main parties to the conflict, even a UN civilian observers' mission in the line of the Organisation of Security

and Cooperation in Europe's Special Monitoring Mission (OSCE SMM) is another option worth considering. So far, these observers have performed well.²⁶

Why civilian peacekeepers? Military peacekeepers would find it easy to deal with foreign militaries in a hostile environment because of their familiarity with the common and basic military culture. When military personnel act in a particular manner because of their training, military peacekeepers can anticipate such actions with more ease than their civilian counterparts. However, given proper military training and their availability in adequate numbers, there is potential for civilians to participate in UN observer missions either independently, or better, by complementing the military peacekeepers in an integrated UN observer mission. Even though the civilians are generally not comfortable working alongside the military, there were earlier instances of both military and civilians working together. During the UN-supervised Angola general election in September 1992, the unarmed military observers were asked to provide only logistic support like transportation (that too only if required) to the electoral teams. But because of the uncertain security situation, several electoral teams were forced to stay on the military observer's bases during the period of the election. Staying together in difficult times brought both military and civilians together, respecting each other's space.²⁷ Besides, as military peacekeepers find it easy to relate to military activities because of their familiarity with military culture, civilians can also bring with them certain nuances of peacekeeping that may go unnoticed by the military peacekeepers in the normal course.

Conclusion

UN peacekeeping as a tool for conflict management serves the best when there is consent from the parties to the conflict. Given the suffering, there are chances that Ukraine might agree to a peacekeeping mission just to alleviate the suffering of the civilians. As noted earlier, President Putin was also open to the idea in 2015, possibly with the hope that the Minsk Agreement could be implemented in letter and spirit. Using statistical analysis and selected case studies, Doyle and Sambanis studied several complex peace operations since 1960 and concluded that UN peace operations can also be effective by supporting new actors who are sincere in their commitment to peace.²⁸ Regardless of the form, the peacekeeping mission should take place only post a

ceasefire agreement and there is peace to keep. Putting it differently, unless there is a reasonable chance of even partial success, it would be futile to invest in deploying a peacekeeping mission in Ukraine. If a non-violent international intervention is either not acceptable or not considered workable, a solution to the conflict will have to be found by Russia and Ukraine themselves with support from those nations who are working behind the scenes in support of the continuation of the conflict. The Ukraine conflict has given rise to the renewed possibility of large inter-state conflicts. Therefore, the idea put forward in this article needs to be examined further as one possible model.

Endnotes

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- ¹¹ The UN General Assembly, A/RES/997 (ES-1), November 2, 1956
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²⁴ Please see <https://effectivepeaceops.net/> for more about EPON.

²⁵ Please also see for details about the round table conference <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1zU1jsPvrWurUhaj7MNYJ5dgB-jHr0U28/view?usp=sharing>

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