

Vietnam's Considerations on Participation in UN Peacekeeping Missions

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Introduction

The UN peacekeeping started in 1948 as an important initiative during the period of East-West confrontation. At that time, after the Second World War, none of the two major powers, the United States and the Soviet Union, emerged as absolute dominant. Therefore, the two powers decided to create a “neutral” group called “peacekeepers” under the auspices of the UN. The initiative was accepted by the majority of UN members and was expected to work as a mechanism to prevent and settle conflicts without one of the two big powers taking advantage and/or to prevent war in certain strategic areas.

On the basis of reviewing the remarkable developments of the UN's 65 year-old peacekeeping operations, this paper makes recommendations to Vietnam's policy in case of joining such activities in the coming years.

Activities of the UN Peacekeeping in the Past 65 Years

At the time of drafting the UN Charter, the authors took into account the use of coercive measures to prevent the re-emergence of Nazi forces after the Second World War. However, since its inception, peacekeeping missions have not only resolved country-to-country conflicts, but, especially after the end of the Cold War, the UN has been increasingly involved in settling ethnic and religious conflicts as well as interest and resources disputes within a country. Globalisation has further spurred the need for resolution of international disputes through peacekeeping operations. The number of UN peacekeeping missions in the last 20 years has increased as many as three times compared to the previous 45 years. Peacekeeping missions have been deployed in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America.

In the beginning, UN peacekeeping missions were basically groups of military observers. But today, the strength of UN peacekeeping missions has increased manifold and these include units of “blue berets”, civilian police, civilian personnel and groups of international volunteers working in peacekeeping missions; thus making peacekeeping operations more robust and vibrant. Some of the emerging trends are enumerated in the succeeding paras.

Diversifying Peacekeeping Tasks

Apart from preventing and resolving conflicts, the UN peacekeeping missions have also undertaken measures aimed at long-term stability; for example, disarming warring parties, repatriating people separated by conflicts, demining, humanitarian activities, organising elections, reconciling governments, unifying nations, reconstructing societies and so on.

Diversifying Peacekeeping Participants

In the late 1980s, regional organisations also started their cooperation with the UN in several peacekeeping missions; for instance, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Organisation of American States (OAS) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). By joining in coercive activities during the Bosnian conflict, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) also expanded its scope of operations beyond Europe to pursue the United States' goal of a “New World Order”. Thus increased number of actors is challenging management and operation of regional organisations, multinational forces and UN agencies; not to mention if these actors are competing with the UN.

Powers Compete with Each Other and take Advantage of Peacekeeping Activities for Their Own Sake

Before 1993, it was impossible for major countries (permanent members of the UN Security Council) to contribute military personnel and staffs to peacekeeping missions. But what they were able to do, was to assist with finance and logistics. Therefore, peacekeeping missions implicitly worked as an instrument of certain powerful countries and were at the same time not open to others. After 1993, major countries also started to send troops to participate in peacekeeping missions. This resulted in an intense competition for regional influence and in an attempt to shape a new world order, benefitting those major countries. Without a counter balancing force, like during the Cold War, the US strove to play a hegemonistic role and to manipulate the Security Council for allowing coercive activities. In fact, the US preferred to resolve conflicts unilaterally in the name of the UN, but to their own advantage.

More States Contribute to UN Peacekeeping Missions

During the Cold War, there were at the most 50 countries that were sending personnel to work in coordination with UN peacekeeping missions. However, the current number of such countries has increased to 130, which is three times as many as 20 years ago. For instance, seven out of the ten ASEAN members have their troops currently working in peacekeeping operations.

Non-aligned and developing countries are the ones which have sent most of the military personnel. When a country participates in peacekeeping activities, it gains political benefits (willingness to cooperate with the international community), economic benefits (financial revenues from participation) and indirect benefits like laying the foundation for future economic relations with the countries which invited the peacekeeping mission. Besides, there are countries, which are not acting under a UN mandate, but play a very important role in peacekeeping activities. They send their troops to undertake peacekeeping missions in areas where they have national interests, even combined with coercive activities.

Vietnam and Its Participation in Peacekeeping Activities

International peacekeeping is part of external relations, consisting of both, cooperation and competition. When peacekeeping missions began, they were manipulated by the US and western countries. However, since the early 1990s, the active participation by China and other developing countries in peacekeeping missions has diminished the negative aspects and limited the influence of the US and the West.

By participating in UN peacekeeping missions, Vietnam will increase its opportunities to cooperate with the UN and thus have a more powerful voice when coping with regional and international issues. In addition, with appropriate approach and measures, Vietnam will have the chance to strengthen its capacity to protect national interests and to consolidate its relations with the international community, which again will help in promoting the country's interests.

The international community supports Vietnam's participation in UN peacekeeping missions due to Vietnam's international prestige and its tradition of expelling foreign invaders. Vietnam has defeated a lot of enemies and has experience in people's mobilisation as well as in reconstruction; two fields that form major tasks of peacekeeping missions. Therefore, by participating in peacekeeping activities, Vietnam will have the opportunity to improve and project the status of the Country and its armed forces on the international forum. Moreover, joining peacekeeping missions will pave the way for Vietnam to enhance its international and regional integration.

The Goal of Vietnam's Participation in UN Peacekeeping Missions

When Vietnam joins peacekeeping missions, the Country's objectives are to :-

- (a) Contribute along with the international community to a peaceful settlement of international conflicts and disputes and thereby contribute to international stability.
- (b) Enhance Vietnam's prestige in the host country and in the international community.
- (c) Build-up and promote mutual-understanding and cooperation between Vietnam's and other countries' armed forces and thereby strengthen mutual trust and coordination.
- (d) Prepare specific plans so as to timely solve conflicts; especially those occurring in neighbouring countries or in areas within Vietnam's interest.
- (e) Understand the nature of policies and activities of other nations, especially the powerful ones, in relation to the countries which invite UN peacekeeping missions. Such an understanding will also assist in the formulation of Vietnam's foreign policy.
- (f) Collect information and conduct research on other countries' experiences in training, organising rapid reaction forces for crisis situations, providing humanitarian relief, accessing information about military operations, learning (to some extent) about modern warfare, drawing practical lessons for staff development and organisation and, equipping its military forces with experience for defending and protecting the Country in newly emerging situations.

Some Principles that Must Guide Vietnam's Participation in UN Missions

Any country which wishes to send troops to join UN peacekeeping missions must comply with general rules and at the same time evolve its own guidelines. The following are the principles that Vietnam must observe when the Country decides to join peacekeeping missions of the UN :-

- (a) The involvement of Vietnamese troops in peacekeeping activities has to contribute to the promotion of the international image and prestige of Vietnam. Vietnam's forces have to stand up and work in line and in the spirit of: "Vietnam is a friend and reliable partner, a responsible member of the international community."
- (b) Vietnam's forces have to comply with the basic principles of the UN Charter; namely, the respect for national sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs of other countries. Vietnam's forces must also ensure impartial and unbiased operations.
- (c) Vietnam should only join in peacekeeping operations with the permission and on the invitation of the conflicting parties and would not join in any coercive activities (under Chapter VII of the UN Charter).
- (d) Vietnam's forces would only carry out peacekeeping tasks for a clearly specified period and consistent with its own ability. Vietnam's forces must also reserve the right to reject active participation in peacekeeping missions after a thorough examination of the prospects of such an operation. Vietnam's forces should only participate in UN peacekeeping missions taking place in countries with whom it has good relations or which invite Vietnam's forces. Vietnam's forces should not engage in complicated tasks in sensitive areas.
- (e) Vietnam's forces would only participate in peacekeeping operations directly guided by the UN and would not join in any other alliances, especially multinational missions, to avoid being isolated.
- (f) Vietnam's peacekeeping forces would not work for any other countries' interest and would not do anything harmful to friends and the host country. Vietnam's peacekeeping forces would not get involved in searching for and arresting "war criminals" in order to hand them over to the International Criminal Court (ICC)

Scope, Extent and Form of Vietnam's Participation in UN Peacekeeping Missions

In addition to Vietnam's full contribution to the UN peacekeeping fund, Vietnam should participate in peacekeeping missions which are suitable, not too sensitive and risky to Vietnam's politics and the people. Vietnam's forces should not participate in any operations resulting from religious disputes since such conflicts are rather difficult to solve and could

interfere with the sensitivity of religions in Vietnam and the region. The Country's forces should also avoid engaging in punitive and coercive measures, which are generally based on the use of force. At the beginning, the forces participating in peacekeeping operations could be of a company strength and then gradually be upgraded to battalion level; of course any expansion must be under the requirements of UN peacekeeping regulations.

The forces should only join peacekeeping activities which are appropriate to Vietnam's foreign policy and the Country's capacity (it is not necessary to join in every peacekeeping mission). To begin with, Vietnam should start by participating in a few missions and provide military observers, election observers, civilian police, mission protection, patrol guards at UN offices, emergency medical aid and humanitarian relief as well as assist in mine clearance and providing assistance to local people in how to deal with the mines left over from previous conflicts. The forces should also participate in the processes of reconstruction and facilitate repair and reconstruction of infrastructure. Later, on the basis of experience gained in several peacekeeping operations, the forces may adjust the scale and extent of its activities.

Opportunities and Challenges for Vietnam in UN Peacekeeping Missions

Opportunities. Vietnam joins UN peacekeeping missions at a time when the international environment provides favourable conditions. Some of these are mentioned below :-

- (a) Peace, cooperation and development constitute the trend of our times; every country is keen to maintain peace, stability and resolve disputes peacefully. Countries also desire the UN to promote its central role of addressing global peace and security.
- (b) The participation in peacekeeping missions is a voluntary-based activity. Vietnam has the right to decide the time, size, scope and type of participation, and can even withdraw its troops if it finds the conditions unfavourable. In addition, operational costs are paid by the UN, which means that the country does not need to use its national defence budget for such operations.
- (c) The Vietnamese People's Army (and Police) is disciplined, well-trained, full of experience as "a working army", and ready to undertake and fulfill its missions. Vietnam intends to send troops only to such areas where its forces are familiar with and professionally trained for. Therefore, Vietnam's forces will require only short orientation courses to meet UN standards.
- (d) The international community expects and is willing to cooperate with Vietnam in peacekeeping missions.

Challenges. However, there are also some challenges that Vietnam has to face as a country joining UN peacekeeping missions. These are :-

- (a) Peacekeeping activities are taking place in areas with a high risk of casualties due to harsh climates and differences in geographical conditions.
- (b) Vietnam does not have sufficient experience in international peacekeeping and in collaborating with foreign forces.
- (c) The advanced payments are restricted for training, logistics and technical equipment. Moreover, the language proficiency of Vietnamese troops is another challenge. Hence, traditions and customs of the host country must be studied carefully before troops are sent.

Preparations for Joining UN Peacekeeping Missions

Vietnam must actively prepare and pay attention to the following matters :-

- (a) Public relations is important to raise the awareness of Vietnamese people of the country's obligations towards the international community, especially to those countries which supported and helped Vietnam during its struggle for national independence and are now calling for Vietnam's help.
- (b) Vietnam has to complete its domestic legal framework, including preferential regulations and policies concerning international peacekeeping, consistent with Vietnamese law and the principles of the UN.
- (c) The Government should - related to Vietnam's forces working overseas - improve the operating mechanisms, the coordination between agencies and local units, formulate and negotiate a mechanism for coordination, register and join the UN permanent system of settlement. A specialised agency, which is in charge of monitoring the activities of peacekeeping forces as well as focusing on training the forces, should be established. Vietnam should also locally and internationally express its views concerning international peace and security issues.
- (d) Specialised forces for UN peacekeeping missions should be established and trained. To begin with, Vietnam should prepare and train some officers and have them deployed in ongoing peacekeeping missions.
- (e) Regarding financial issues, Vietnam should prepare such matters well in advance and in accordance with the agreement between Vietnam and the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, and should pay due attention to equipment, logistics, and finance for its forces joining a UN peacekeeping mission.
- (f) Vietnam should strengthen its international cooperation with other countries which have joined UN peacekeeping missions before and conduct research on their experiences in organising, training and deploying technical and logistical staffs and equipment. Vietnam should also facilitate the transit of UN peacekeeping forces through Vietnam, as this is not only a responsibility of all UN members (article 43, UN Charter) but also a good preparation for Vietnam's peacekeeping troops should they have to transit through a third country in the future.

Conclusion

For the past 65 years, UN peacekeeping missions have contributed to the noble goal of maintaining international peace and security. The 1998 Nobel Prize which was awarded to the UN peacekeepers is an evidence of these great contributions. As a member of the United Nations, Vietnam maintains close and effective relations with this largest international organisation. Coordinating with the UN is part of the Country's foreign policy, taking advantage of all international favourable conditions which are helpful for the construction and defence of the country. Participating in UN peacekeeping missions could be one measure to strengthen Vietnam's relations with the international community in furtherance of Vietnam's national interests and international prestige. Apart from adhering to the basic principles of the UN Charter and the above mentioned national principles, Vietnam's involvement in UN peacekeeping missions has to be based on the Country's actual capabilities.

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