

UNPKO and Military Contributions: Challenges and Opportunities for Asia-Pacific Governments

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Introduction

A number of studies have already taken place to address the challenges that plague the peacekeeping missions. Yet, nothing much has changed. To this end, one of the four essential shifts called for by the High Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) report is “*The United Nations Secretariat must become more field-focused and United Nations peace operations must be more people-centered.*”¹ This is because there is a big gap between what is preached conceptually and how it is interpreted in field. To begin with, the way the basic principles of peacekeeping are interpreted and implemented is the biggest challenge impacting all peacekeeping missions and most importantly those nations who contribute the most. The often talked of inability of the peacekeepers to implement the mandate, more specifically when it comes to saving human lives, is more because of the lack of clarity in understanding the principles of peacekeeping and the mandate, and less due to lack of will and inadequacy in their capability.

Principles of Peacekeeping

Adherence to these principles provides legitimacy to UN peacekeeping. Importance of the *principle of consent* at strategic, operational and tactical level is well understood. However, such a situation will be rare and more often than not, consent will be out of compulsion either due to threat or incentive. And when either of these is diluted, consent is recanted. The famous Bamboo Pole incident of 30 May 1992 in Cambodia is an example of withdrawal of consent at tactical level. When Khmer Rouge prevented the motorcade of the SRSG Yashushi Akashi and the Force

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Commander General Sanderson by erecting a bamboo pole from entering their area of influence, both leaders were in a dilemma. Even though it was a fit case to use force to ensure freedom of movement, the senior leaders decided against it as use of force would have antagonised the rebels resulting possible bloodshed and sabotage of the diplomatic efforts to get the party to come around. In this case, Khmer Rouge earlier consented to the peace process but later withdrew.²

Somalia can be cited as an example of how the mission leader managed to persuade the rebel leader to give his consent, which was initially denied. In April 1992, at the behest of Mohamed Sahnoun, the Head of the Mission, Mohammed Aideed, a major rebel leader, agreed to deployment of 500 UN peacekeepers in Somalia for protection of humanitarian aid convoys. But later, dismissal of Sahnoun and UN's decision to deploy 3000 peacekeepers without consulting either Sahnoun or Aideed seems to be the turning point of UN peacekeeping mission in Somalia. In Somalia there was no legitimate leader to give consent and Mohd Aideed (leader of the belligerent group) never consented to UN multinational operation. It is only after the Algerian senior diplomat Ambassador Mohamed Sahnoun was appointed as the leader of UN mission in April 1992 and he could forge a special relationship with Aideed, things started to look brighter. It was Mohamed Sahnoun who could turn a situation of disadvantage to advantage of the UN.³ Unfortunately, such an opportunity was lost by his exit. What followed thereafter in Somalia and its consequent effect on the subsequent missions elsewhere (e.g. in Rwanda) is a sad commentary in UN peacekeeping's history.

Many see the *principle of impartiality* as an active element for impartial implementation of the mandate even by use of force. However, to some, it is synonymous with neutrality, and not taking action against perpetrators of violence because of lack of understanding of the mandate is considered being impartial. There is no better example than what happened when Hutu militias came down on the Tutsis in Rwanda on 6th April 1994 and killed Prime Minister Agathe Uwlingiyimana as well as ten peacekeepers from Belgium.⁴ Even though the mission took actions to protect the civilians in defiance of the orders from UNHQ at New York, France, Italy, Belgium and the USA instructed their contingents only to evacuate their own nationals.⁵ These nations probably wanted to

remain neutral by not taking action against the perpetrators of violence. At the same time, there is also example of adhering to the principle of impartiality in the same mission. When confronted by Hutu militias who were earlier trained by French military, Brigadier General Jeau Claude Lafourcade did not hesitate to demonstrate his resolve impartially and removed Hutu's roadblock by force.⁶ Confusion over differences between impartial versus neutral roles of peacekeepers could lead to disastrous results. Massacre of thousands of innocent civilians in Srebrenica in 1995 and the very little assistance that came from the UN is another pointer to this.⁷

Use of force – the third principle, which is intractably connected to other two principles perhaps, is the most controversial of the three when it comes to its interpretation. There is either intentional or perceived misunderstanding that force can be used only under Chapter VII, whereas even a peacekeeping operation under Chapter VI can use force in self-defence. Even though guidelines for use of force come in the form of Rules of Engagement (RoE), there is confusion in their interpretation. Therefore, the truth that every time force is used is retaliated resulting in fatality probably is the primary factor dwelled upon by the commander whether to use force or not. For instance, use of UN Peacekeepers as human shield against NATO air strikes in former Yugoslavia in April 1994 and Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels taking UN peacekeepers as hostage in Sierra Leone in 2000 are a few such examples.

Mandate

Different interpretation of principles of peacekeeping are inter-related and directly linked to the mandate itself. Very often a vague mandate has been quoted as the root cause of the problem. Then the question arises why the mandate cannot be absolutely clear. It is because mandates continue to be a product of political manipulation after what transpires in the back room discussions amongst a few powerful members of the UN. However, unlike pre-2000, mandates of most of the contemporary peacekeeping missions have become more clear and stronger, with detailed and multifarious tasking to the peacekeepers. What however not clear is 'how' to implement the mandate. While broad objectives of the mandate are laid down, the essential part of the 'how' remains to be defined.⁸ One of the reasons is that UN HQs don't want to

micro manage day to day activities of the peacekeeping missions which are better left to the leaders in the field. Another reason for lack of clarity on the method of implementation is because it provides flexibility to the main parties to the conflict to consent to the peace agreement. For instance, in context of Somalia, presence of the mission and implementation of the mandated task for protecting the personnel, installations and equipment of the United Nations and its agencies as well as of NGOs providing humanitarian and reconstruction assistance was a clear threat and obstruction to the power struggle to main rivals – Ali Mahdi and Mohammed Aideed. But the political leaders desperately needed the UN to get economic aid even though remaining suspicious of UN's probable hidden agenda. Later in a disastrous episode, when the UN troops tried to disarm Aideed's forces, it responded by killing twenty-four Pakistani peacekeepers and eighteen American Rangers after one of their helicopters was shot down by Aideed's forces in 1993.⁹ On the other hand, absence of a framework (outlining the mode for implementation) and uncertainty always gives enough latitude to the main parties to the conflict to derail the peace process. Mandate of United Nations Interim Forces in Lebanon (UNIFIL) is a case in point where some of the mandated tasks such as "to take all necessary actions in areas of deployment of its forces and as it deems within its capabilities, to ensure that its area of operations is not utilized for hostile activities of any kind" imply taking action against any armed activity by either Hezbollah or other group. But how to implement this was not defined.¹⁰ This was and still is a predicament for UNIFIL. For, firstly without Hezbollah's unwritten consent, SCR 1701 could not have been adopted and hence any action against this outfit won't be acceptable to them. And, any retaliation consequent to use of force by UNIFIL to implement the mandate will not be acceptable to even to the Troop Contributing Countries (TCCs). Secondly, UNIFIL's operational activity like patrolling in its area of operation is seen as intruding into the privacy of the locals (mostly Shiites population which is in majority in South Lebanon). Resultant effect is that the mission's sincere approach to implement the mandated task is always viewed negatively by the population.

As long as there is ambiguity, principles of peacekeeping will continue to be the victims of the UN bureaucracy. Innocent civilians suffer the most when peacekeeping missions are unable to protect them because there is no clarity on how to provide such protection.

For example; Is it to be done simply by providing a perimeter defence waiting for the perpetrators of the violence to come closer to the camp or moving out of the camp to deter them at a distance either by patrolling or for that matter whether laying ambushes would be a better option? Further, how does one provide protection when one of the parties responsible for the violence is state sponsored? What happened in the civilian camp in Malaka in South Sudan in February 2016 amplifies such a predicament. The civilian camp, co-located with the UN base, housed more than 37,000 people mainly from Dinkar and Nuer communities. When the fighting broke out between these two groups, a large number of civilians rushed towards to the UN base for shelter. Fearing a situation which could go out of control and possible entry of armed rogue elements along with the fleeing crowd, orders were not to open the gate of the UN base, which is only one third size of the civilian camp. Indian peacekeepers defied the orders and opened the gate but managed to save hundreds of lives.¹¹ They also had to resort to use of force by opening fire. Action of the Indian peacekeepers in Malaka was guided by their belief in ethics and not on legality of the matter, because they are trained that way and there is no caveat from Indian government. Since defiance of orders resulted in a positive outcome, no question was asked. The United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and the peacekeepers who were manning the main gate came under criticism from a few scholars who did not appreciate what was achieved or enquire how illegal arms were smuggled inside the camp in the first place.

These challenges add up to a skewed perception of the peacekeeping missions. It happens because there is no framework, which can be generally accepted for evaluation of the peacekeeping missions. And this provides oxygen to a few commentators not even remotely connected to the reality in field but keen to pass judgement on performance of peacekeeping operations based only on second hand information.

Terrorist Violence

There are many other challenges that impact day to day operations of the field missions. The most complex one is the threat of extreme violence. Inter-State conflicts are mostly bygone and so also the traditional or first generation peacekeeping missions. Out of eleven nations which are most affected by terrorism, seven nations host

peacekeeping missions. When extreme violence is part of the threat landscape, *firstly* it will be difficult to find willing nations to participate because of the likelihood of increased fatality and *secondly*, lack of sustenance by cash strapped United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations (UNDPKO) will result in mission creep. In Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), 33 percent peacekeepers are still housed under tents and the mission lacks 50 percent ablution units. *Thirdly*, such threat compels the peacekeepers to emphasise more on force protection resulting in *bunkerisation*, use of force even when not required and as a result distancing from the same population who is meant to be saved. In such a situation, interpretation of principles gets more complicated. Even the contribution of other substantive elements of the UN – the civilian staff members, who are generally responsible for some important peace building tasks, fall short. In addition, there are some other common challenges :-

- (a) There is improvement in standard of training and personal equipment but most of the contingents lack organisational and logistical capability except for a few developed nations.
- (b) While there is will to participate in complex and difficult missions by nations from Asia and Asia Pacific regions, advanced nations that have the capability rarely participate in such missions.
- (c) In peacekeeping missions with balanced multinational participation, there is a lack of interoperability and disparity in mission profile.
- (d) Rapid deployment capability is limited only to a few nations, who are very selective in picking up missions which can provide maximum political leverage.
- (e) Poor road communication network in a few conflict zones is a hindrance to effective response by the peacekeepers.
- (f) In most difficult missions, ratio of the peacekeepers to task is very poor. For example, in DRC less than 4000 Indian peacekeepers have to cover an area of approximately 80,000 sq km.
- (g) Incentive for participation in complex missions is badly lacking—representation at senior level leaders is negligible

and rates of reimbursement have not been adequately revised for a long time. Present rates of reimbursement are rather low.

(h) Many smaller nations who are willing to participate find it difficult to meet the UN standard of Contingent Owned Equipment (COE) and Self – Sustainment.

(j) Lack of coordination amongst the major participating nations results in monopoly of non-participating nations on important policy decisions of the UN.

Opportunities

While there are challenges, there are also opportunities for the nations who are willing to participate and are participating in difficult missions. In order to enhance their contribution, first and foremost will be the need for a congruence of thought in developing individual national and collective capability for peacekeeping by communicating, consulting, cooperating, coordinating, supporting, sharing and synergising (C4S3) individual national capacities and important UN policy matters. Some areas for such cooperation are :-

- (a) Increase in participation by military and police contingents in individual national capacity under UN mandate.
- (b) Increased participation by women peacekeepers. It will make the missions more population centred.
- (c) Participation under partnership program for those countries who find it difficult to field bigger contingents with either full or part COEs and unable to meet the UN standard of self-sustainment.
- (d) Increased contribution by force enablers like medical units, engineering construction units, aviation assets (both armed and logistic assets) and de-mining units.
- (e) Develop a regional framework for intelligence sharing and assessment of the security dynamics.
- (f) Building consensus for mandate formulation, review of UN reimbursement for COE and, contingent and staff officers' allowances.

- (g) Undertake study to review important UN documents. Analysis of the HIPPO report was a good opportunity.
- (h) Encourage research and publication on UN-related subjects and sharing these in public domain.
- (i) Consider taking up specific study such as *“Formulation of assessment criteria for evaluation of peacekeeping operation”* as a subset of a main study. Such study would help to analyse the reasons for success or failure of peacekeeping mission and enhance regional capability.
- (j) Joint training of staff and peacekeeping contingents to improve interoperability.
- (k) Develop civilian peacekeeping capability within the region for peacebuilding tasks including NGOs.

Conclusion

Asia-Pacific region stands to benefit when we are able to pool their hard and soft skills. However, they need to iron out their differences in their national opinions with respect to issues like principles of peacekeeping and these should be in sync with collective capacity building. Otherwise, peacekeeping missions will continue to be plagued by criticism for their shortcomings. Because, when it comes to delivery, correct understanding and interpretation of principles of peacekeeping and nuances of mandate formulation will matter more than the force structure itself. Reason for varying interpretation is more because of national policy and less for misinterpretation by the leaders in field. In this regard, a deeper understanding of wide ranging security related subjects amongst nations would be necessary. This can begin with non-peacekeeping subjects and thereafter graduating to specific peacekeeping policies. By nature, people from Asia-Pacific Region are known to have empathy and ability to discern the grey between the black and white. This gives them the capacity to field competent candidates to lead difficult and complex missions. Currently, there is a crisis because of uneven distribution of mission leadership, with a focus on a peace agreement and ceasefire, and not beyond.

There is no doubt that challenges will continue to face the UN and the region's collective endeavour in peacekeeping. One should be optimistic of substantive and positive contribution in making the

Asia-Pacific's presence in UN Peacekeeping more visible and valued. It will help to bridge the existing gap between the policy makers and the practitioners, and in making UN peacekeeping operations more effective than what is today.

Endnotes

¹ UN Document, Report of the High level Independent Panel on the United Nations Peace Operations, 16 June 2015.

² Bardalai AK, Changing Security Scenario: Implications for UN Peacekeeping (New Delhi: Knowledge World), 2006, pp.24-25.

³ Pouligny Beatrice, Peace Operations seen from Below (London: Kumairan Press Inc), 2006, p.104; Howard, Lise Morje. UN Peacekeeping in Civil Wars (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2008, pp.21-28.

⁴ The UN, *Blue Helmet: A Review of United Nations Peace-Keeping*. (New York: The United Nations Department of Public Information), 1996, p.346.

⁵ Howard, Lise Morje, UN Peacekeeping in Civil Wars (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2008, p.32.

⁶ Connaughton, Richard, Rwanda-Tropical Nazism, *Military Intervention and Peacekeeping: The Reality* (Hampshire: Ashgate), 2001, pp.167-169.

⁷ Human Rights Watch, *The Fall of Srebrenica and the Failure of UN Peacekeeping: Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Vol.7, No 13, October 1995; Jett, Dennis C, *Why Peacekeeping Fails* (New York: Palgrave), 2001, p.44.

⁸ Pouligny, Beatrice, Peace Operations seen from Below (London: Kumairan Press Inc), 2006, p.104.

⁹ Howard, Lise Morje, UN Peacekeeping in Civil Wars (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2008, pp.21-28.

¹⁰ UNSCR 1701, 2006; Pouligny, Beatrice, Peace Operations Seen from Below (London: Kumairan Press Inc), 2006, p.104.

¹¹ UN News Center (2014, February 19), South Sudan on 'verge of fragmenting,' UN officials warn Security Council (Online). Available at : <http://www.un.org>. Accessed on 16 Feb 2017; Kennedy, Merrit. (2016, February 23). *UN Defends Its Role During South Sudan Attack That Killed 18 Civilians* (Online). Available at : <http://www.npr.org>. Accessed on 16 February 2017.