

Section I:
United Nations Peace Operations and
Challenges: An Indian Perspective

India and United Nations Peacekeeping: Philosophy, Impact, and Way Forward

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“India remains a cornerstone of UN Peacekeeping and Indian women peacekeepers are redefining peacekeeping itself”¹

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Abstract

As an original founder member of the United Nations (UN), India has not hesitated to respond to the calls of the UN to contribute to its efforts for world peace. India has a long and distinguished history of contributing to UN Peacekeeping, having contributed more personnel and made more sacrifices than any other country. This has reinforced India's commitment to global peace, security, and stability. Bharat's deepening engagement with the UN is based on its unwavering commitment to multilateralism and deep faith in dialogue as a key to achieving shared universal goals and addressing common challenges.

Introduction

The idea behind peacekeeping lies in the use of military forces not to fight but to prevent fighting amongst belligerents and to maintain ceasefires. It also attempts to provide stability in a conflict zones, while peace negotiations are initiated to progress conflict resolution by peaceful means. Since their inception, peacekeeping operations have generally been received positively and helped to bolster the image of the United Nations (UN), especially at times when its credibility in other fields has been under question. However, in the late 1990s as well as in the prevailing geopolitical environment, even peacekeeping received some adverse criticism,

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mainly because of its failings in some of its dispositions in intra-state conflicts of the day and the present situation in Africa, Ukraine, and Gaza. Nevertheless, peacekeeping has proven to be one of the most effective tools available to the UN in assisting host countries navigate the difficult path from conflict to peace² and can be better leveraged to achieve sustainable peace.

It is noteworthy that the UN did not originally have a specific design for peacekeeping, nor is there any mention of peacekeeping in the UN Charter. However, it can be stated that peacekeeping actions align closely with the spirit of the Charter, as specified in Chapters VI, VII, and VIII. UN peacekeeping further received a morale boost when it received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1988 and witnessed a renaissance in facilitating the implementation of agreements on cessation of fighting and political reconciliation.

As an original founder-member of the UN, India has not hesitated to respond to the calls of the UN to contribute troops for maintaining international peace and security. India's historical engagement with the UN is based on its steadfast commitment to multilateralism and dialogue as the key for achieving shared goals and addressing common challenges. India has a long and distinguished history of contributing to UN peacekeeping, having contributed more personnel than any other country. Presently, 5,384 Indian peacekeepers, including 153 women, are deployed across 10 missions; and 20.45 per cent of its deployed Military Observers and Staff Officers are women.³ India takes pride in the fact that the Indian commitment to, and participation in, peacekeeping is unparalleled in history.

Indian Philosophy about Peacekeeping

Since ancient times, as per Indian social, cultural, and religious philosophy, Bharat has always prayed for world peace and emphasised support to people in distress. India's rich heritage of diversity in languages, and a variety of social, cultural, and religious beliefs, combined with its diverse geographical and economic conditions have resulted in the creation of a pluralistic and tolerant society. This reflects clearly in ever prevalent philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*⁴, which inculcates an understanding that the whole world and humanity is one family. This great heritage has been built into the Indian character and Indians carry it wherever they go. Thus, it highlights that the Indian contribution

towards world peace is everlasting as India has always advocated and supported betterment of humanity. Since Independence, India has consistently adhered to the principles of non-violence and peaceful settlement of disputes, which remains the central tenets of India's foreign policy. Thus, India's contribution to UN peacekeeping flows out quite naturally from the country's social and cultural heritage and ethos, and hence, Indian peacekeepers are able to quickly understand and connect with affected local population in UN mission areas, resulting in more effective peacekeeping.

India's Contribution to Peacekeeping

India's contributions to UN peacekeeping have been underscored by the professionalism and dedication of its experienced soldiers and police personals. This fact gets further validated by the UN statistics on India's contribution. So far, since the inception of UN peacekeeping missions in 1948, India has taken part in more than 50 out of 71⁵ missions, with the total contribution exceeding 2,90,000⁶ troops and a significant number of police personnel.

India has been at the forefront of dispute resolution in the 1950s and 1960s with peacekeepers like Major General (Maj Gen) Indarjit Rikhye, Lieutenant General (Lt Gen) Dewan Prem Chand, Lt Gen PS Gyani and General (Gen) KM Kariappa. Besides two Special Representatives of the Secretary-General (SRSG) and a Deputy SRSG, India also has the honour of contributing 15 Force Commanders⁷, two Divisional Commanders, and seven Deputy Force Commanders till date. In addition, India provided two Military Advisors, two (including one woman) Police Advisers, and one Deputy Military Advisor to the UN Secretary-General. India has a long tradition of sending women as Military Observers and Staff Officers, apart from them forming a part of medical units deployed in UN peacekeeping missions. The first all-women contingent for a peacekeeping mission, a Formed Police Unit, was deployed by India in 2007, in Liberia under the ambit of UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), which earned incredible goodwill of locals to the extent that at the time of deinduction of the unit in Feb 2016, the Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf said, "We see you as family, If I had my will, I would have recommended for another unit of the UNMIL to leave, so that the Indian Formed Police Unit would continue its stay in the country for the time being".⁸ This was

followed by sending an all-women Army contingent to the Abyei mission in Jan 2023. In an interview ahead of his attending the conference on 'Enhancing the Role of Women in Peacekeeping: A Global South Experience' organised by India on 24-25 Feb 2025, Jean-Pierre Lacroix, Under-Secretary-General, UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO), said, "More women in peacekeeping means a more effective peacekeeping. India has long been a leader in advancing women, peace, and security in peacekeeping missions—not only as a top troop and police contributor but also as a pioneer in advancing gender parity, its leadership in training and capacity building, and its commitment to increasing women's participation in missions".⁹

Medical care is among the many services Indian peacekeepers provide to the communities in which they serve. They also perform specialised tasks, such as veterinary support and engineering services. Indian veterinarians serving with the UN Mission in South Sudan stepped up to help cattle herders, who were losing much of their stock to malnutrition and disease in the war-torn nation. Indian engineers helped to rehabilitate roads as part of the UN Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea. Similarly in South Sudan, Indian engineers and peacekeepers saved a large number of displaced local population from savages of calamity from flood by repairing dikes and subsequently road rehabilitation in Unity region.¹⁰ India was the first country to contribute to the Trust Fund in Support of Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, which was set up in 2016. Indian peacekeepers have also brought the ancient practice of yoga to UN missions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, India provided made-in-India vaccines to vaccinate field personnel. Thus, India continues to contribute in many ways to strengthen UN peacekeeping.

However, India's longstanding service has not come without cost. 180 Indian peacekeepers have paid the ultimate price while serving with the UN.¹¹ Bharat has lost more peacekeepers than any other member state and that itself speaks of the Indian peacekeepers' commitment to the UN cause. India's participation in UN peacekeeping remains unparalleled.

Impact of India's Contributions to the United Nations Peacekeeping

India's sustained contributions to UN peacekeeping have not only strengthened its commitment to fulfilling the UN mandate but have also provided valuable learning experiences. The origin of India's UN peacekeeping policy can be traced back to its humanitarian contribution in the Korean conflict from 1950 to 1953. India learned from the mistakes made by major member states and the global organisations, for e.g., limitations of relying on great power interventions that employ coercive force to maintain peace. Whereas, India has consistently advocated the systematic use of moderation and mediation as meaningful methods for maintaining international peace and evolved technique of peacekeeping on a case-by-case basis. As a result, India successfully demonstrated an alternative approach—effectively utilising non-coercive methods to establish lasting peace, e.g., across the Korean Demilitarised Zone, Indo-China, Namibia, Angola, Cambodia, Liberia, etc.

Over the years, many lessons have emerged, most of which have been incorporated into the development of India's peacekeeping ethos in alignment with India's civilisational values. Some of these are:

- **Strict Adherence to the Principles of Peacekeeping.** India has followed the three basic principles of UN peacekeeping—'Consent of the parties, Impartiality, and Non-use of force except in self-defence and defence of the mandate'; in letter and spirit and has made its peacekeepers accountable for any deviation. India's peacekeeping efforts in Korea, Indo-China, Golan Heights, and Lebanon are the perfect examples.
- **Professionalism.** Professionalism is a hallmark of the Indian Armed Forces ecosystem, who have a first-hand on-ground experience of counterinsurgency and counter-terrorism operations. India follows a performance-based deep selection of peacekeepers, thus, enabling selected peacekeepers to handle all assigned tasks of a mandate, even beyond, effectively and with maturity. Their outstanding professionalism has been displayed in extremely complex operations in Korea, Congo, Somalia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and South Sudan.

● **Faith in Indian Leadership.** Faith in Indian leadership in peacekeeping missions has been built over the years since they provide direction with clear vision and political courage. India's selection process of peacekeepers ensures leadership is balanced in their act as well as directions, and they prove their worth at the assigned appointment. Veteran committed peacekeepers like Lt Gen Dewan Prem Chand, Lt Gen PS Gyani, Maj Gen Indarjit Rikhye, and Gen KS Thimayya are examples of transformative leadership. They all devoted long services at the strategic and operational levels under the UN in support of peacekeeping, peacebuilding as well as peace enforcement. Maj Gen Rikhye operated continuously for over 17 years on various UN appointments, as a head of a few missions and as military adviser to two UN Secretary-Generals. Lt Gen Chand headed the Congo (Katanga) UN Force during a critical period, a peacekeeping force in Cyprus during a major conflict, and as a negotiator during the conversion of Rhodesia to Zambia and Zimbabwe. Due to his exemplary reputation, he was called back even after his retirement, designated as a Force Commander in 1980 for UN Transition Assistance Group (Namibia) and the UN Secretary-General kept him waiting, allowing him to negotiate and prepare for the mission till 1989 when the mission was finally established. Gen Thimayya served as the Chairman of the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission and later as a Force Commander in Cyprus. Lt Gen Satish Nambiar, first Force Commander and head of mission in Yugoslavia, established this difficult and complex mission and provided a resolute operational leadership to the diverse forces under his command, with a noteworthy depth of understanding and vision. Lt Gen JS Lidder was the Force Commander when the first mission in Sudan was established, and after retirement, he was again entrusted with a critical role by the UN as a Deputy SRS (Political) in Sudan. He meaningfully contributed to political reconciliation, peace, and stability, and played a major role in the South Sudan Referendum, leading to it becoming an independent country. Later, he successfully headed the liquidation mission in Sudan, under a challenging political and security environment. India has also contributed its best leaders to the two ongoing largest and most complex missions, a force commander, and a divisional commander

in Congo, and three force commanders and a deputy force commander in Sudan/South Sudan.

- **Conflict Management.** The fact that force can be legally used does not always mean that it should be used. India's stand has always been that the use of force should only be considered after all other options have been exhausted. A case in light is when on 11 Jan 1963, then Maj Gen (later Lt Gen) Dewan Prem Chand, Katanga Sector Commander in Congo, rolled down an armoured UN force to open the road from Elisabethville to Rhodesia (present day Zambia and Zimbabwe) and threatened to use force against any obstruction. Moise Tshombe (self-appointed president of the secessionist African state of Katanga, and premier of the United Congo Republic, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo [DRC]) rushed ahead. In fact, he led the UN force and kept ordering all villagers enroute not to attack the UN force to avoid heavy casualties to his rebel forces.¹² This final step led to the stabilisation of the overall situation in Congo and the peaceful settlement of a conflict after many bitter skirmishes.

- **Empathy for the Local population.** Due to a lack of development, poor connectivity, and continuous exploitation, conditions of the local population in host countries resonate with our peacekeepers. Our soldiers from rural background relate to the same, as India after its independence resembled a similar landscape. Thus, our peacekeepers can connect and empathise better with the affected population and earn their respect. Indian medical professionals, especially the veterinarians, have addressed local medical problems on the spot, and were welcomed in Somalia, Ethiopia-Eretria missions, and current Congo and South Sudan missions. Indian peacekeepers' humane approach to connect with affected populations in the host country and adapt to their needs is so reflective that they are quickly accepted by the local population. An apt example is the mutual learning of languages and singing of the Indian national anthem and songs by the children and local population.

- **Protection of Civilians and Gender Sensitivity.** India is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-religious society. Indian troops understand the differences and serve the nation without any consideration for the differences. This enables them to adapt to the local communities in an unfamiliar territory. It is generally seen that when the local population needs support, some countries are indifferent but Indian peacekeepers rush in with an extended hand of humanitarian support. This has been evident in all UN peace operations, where Indian peacekeepers have operated. Taking a cue from the UN efforts to increase women peacekeepers, India was the first country to deploy a Female Police Unit in Liberia. Jean-Pierre Lacroix, Under-Secretary-General, DPO, UN, said that the present Indian Engagement Platoons in Abyei and Congo 'Exemplify' the impact of women in peacekeeping. He also quoted that Captain Seema Gowdar, Deputy Commander of the Female Engagement Team in Abyei, has strengthened civilian protection and community trust.¹³ Another example of Indian women leadership in peacekeeping is Maj Radhika Sen, whose 'Outstanding Work' in Congo (UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC) earned her the 2023 UN Military Gender Advocate of the Year award. This allows Indian contingents to understand and adhere to gender sensitivity in the mission areas. Despite internal human resource challenges, there is a sincere effort to increase the women peacekeepers' contribution, as per the laid down norm of the UN.

- **Micro-Level Development and Nation Building.** Indian peacekeeping efforts are based on bringing lasting peace to a war-torn country and then helping in nation building. The local population needs necessities of life, for which Indian peacekeepers have been using integral resources to provide humanitarian assistance, infrastructure development, and capacity building. These micro-level quick-impact projects lead to the long-term efforts of the UN agencies. At the government level, it is peace-building and national development of the host country through development partnerships, e.g., Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation programmes, agricultural support, and building major infrastructure.

- **Indian innovation.** Indians are exceptionally innovative in their own way and adapt in employing *jugaad* (unconventional ways) to resolve problems in hand. This is practised extensively in various mission areas. During the Korean War, the Indian 60 Para Field Ambulance, when faced with a lack of transport in face of advancing enemy, famously used an abandoned train to transport its vital equipment and medical supplies. The unit formed a human chain with buckets from the river to fill the boilers of steam engine, thus, earning the nickname 'The Bucket Brigade'¹⁴, and drove this small train in time to cross the Han River Bridge to Seoul, hours before it was demolished by Communist forces. Refurbishing of schools, playfields, and many dried wells by Indian peacekeepers are all part of quick thinking and innovation with local material. Provision of 'Jaipur Foot' to local mine casualties in Congo and Lebanon¹⁵ missions, and effective fuel-contaminated water management at unit level in South Sudan are some examples.

India and United Nations Peacekeeping: Way Forward

India's role in UN peacekeeping will continue to evolve from its past experiences. It has evolved from being an observer in the early days to an active stabiliser in conflict zones worldwide. From monitoring ceasefires in Korea and Indo-China to Cambodia and Gaza, Namibia to Bosnia and multidimensional peace enforcement missions in Africa, Indian peacekeepers have demonstrated professionalism, courage, dedication, and a humanitarian approach, which has left a mark and is universally applauded. India has not only demonstrated its capacity and capability to make large and simultaneous troop commitments in many of the peace operations but has also proven itself as a reliable troop and police contributing country, by taking considerable risks to sustain its commitment in hazardous operations for prolonged periods.

India's continued involvement and steadfast commitment to the principles of the UN Charter will be vital in ensuring the ongoing effectiveness and success of critical missions in the years to come. As brought out earlier, India's strength lies in its capacity to undertake peacekeeping operations in any terrain, social milieu, or adverse situations. Consequently, India can play a more prominent role by strategically utilising its field experiences for more structured and strategic approach to peacekeeping. India's

future peacekeeping approach should enhance its global standing and diplomatic influence by linking peacekeeping activities to its wider foreign policy objectives and showing the world that peace is not just about security but also development, trust-building, and a shared commitment to a stable world. For this, the focus should be to concentrate its efforts in a few key areas/missions for a lasting impact, strengthening peacekeeping capabilities by integrating new technology, and encouraging innovation and incentivise, rather than merely maintaining the status quo.

Conclusion

As a founder member, India has always responded to the calls of the UN to contribute to its efforts for world peace. India has a distinguished history of contributing to the UN peacekeeping, having contributed more personnel and made more sacrifices than any other country. The philosophy of India's commitment revolves around its basic ethos and ancient traditions. This has reinforced India's commitment to global peace, security, and stability. India's deepening engagement with the UN is based on its unwavering commitment to multilateralism and deep faith in dialogue as a key to achieving shared universal goals and addressing common challenges.

Due to evolving geopolitics and its impact on international relations, collective endeavours by the UN will continue to face many challenges. India's future model must keep pace with fast-changing world order and play a greater role in global governance by fine-tuning its approach to peacekeeping, strengthening humanitarian and peacebuilding efforts, and claiming its rightful place. India can shape the future of global peacekeeping not only as a participant, but as a leader. India, with its vast repository of experience, best practices, and renewed approach, will continue to navigate through such challenges and play a crucial role in shaping UN peacekeeping efforts worldwide.

Endnotes

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