

The Evolving Character of Conflict: Implications for United Nations Peacekeeping

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Abstract

This article explores the evolving character of conflict and its implications for United Nations (UN) Peacekeeping in an era marked by technological advancements and shifting geopolitical dynamics. Modern conflicts, such as the Ukraine-Russia war and maritime disputes in the South China Sea, demonstrate the increasing use of drones, artificial intelligence, and hybrid warfare tactics, involving state and non-state actors across multiple domains. Traditional drivers of conflict—geopolitical rivalries, resource competition, and socio-economic disparities—persist while emerging threats, such as transnational crime and technological coercion, reshape the nature of warfare. This article emphasises the need for the UN to rethink peacekeeping doctrines, mandates, and capabilities. Clear mandates, modular mission structures, and specialised personnel equipped to counter cyber threats and drones are essential. By incorporating new conflict management approaches, such as mediation and multi-domain strategies, this article highlights how the UN can adapt its peacekeeping framework to sustain international peace and security in a volatile world.

Introduction

In Dec 2024, Ukraine mounted an attack on Russian positions in the village of Lyptsi in the Kharkiv region. A novelty of this operation was the employment of large numbers of Uncrewed

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Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CLV, No. 639, January-March 2025.

Ground Combat Vehicles (UGV) and First Person View (FPV) drones. As reported by The Kyiv Independent, an English language online Ukrainian newspaper, “Ukrainian forces successfully attacked Russian positions using only ground and FPV drones instead of infantry...”¹ According to Australian military strategist Major General Mick Ryan (Retd), the ground vehicles used during the assault were employed in various roles including surveillance, mine clearing, and direct firing with machine guns. He further clarifies that “UGVs were apparently supported throughout the activity by FPV drones...”. While this does not make the attack fully autonomous—the vehicles need human operators—it is one of the most significant examples of drone combat in this war. This combination of ground and aerial reconnaissance—attack capabilities—means that the operation was in effect an air-land operation...’²

Dec 2024 also witnessed a different kind of exchange between a China Coast Guard (CCG) ship and a Philippine vessel. Video footage showed the CCG ship firing a water cannon at other’s navigational antennae before crashing into it, during a maritime patrol near the disputed Scarborough Shoal.³ In an initial statement, China’s coast guard said that the Philippine ships ‘Came dangerously close’ and that its crew’s actions had been ‘In accordance with the law’. Subsequently, it accused Manila of making ‘Bogus accusations in an attempt to mislead international understanding’.⁴ Even as Philippine sources described the Chinese manoeuvres as blocking, shadowing, and dangerous, China’s coast guard said that its actions were professionally standardised, legitimate, and lawful.⁵

Ingredients of the Character of Modern Conflict

The above examples highlight two of the numerous facets of the character of conflict in the current era. This character continues to evolve, aided by circumstances that provide fertile ground for rising conflict across the world. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program at Uppsala University records that the number of active state-based conflicts has increased from 37 in 2011 to 59 in 2023⁶; there are separate numbers for non-state violence and one-sided violence.

What is driving this upsurge in violence? Traditional drivers of conflict, such as geopolitical contestation, remain as potent as ever. Post World War II, this has led to the Cold War, wars in

Korea and Vietnam, and more recently, proxy wars in Africa and Asia, through which rival players attempt to change the existing order and establish a new balance of power. Safeguarding against this has resulted in rising defence budgets that conversely add to growing militarisation and reduced expenditure on other essentials, increasing inequity in poorer nations. Competition over resources (mineral wealth including rare minerals, water, and land) and the impact of climate change (where South Asia will be hugely affected) is getting more acute and shall inevitably lead to conflict. Further, the economic situation arising from these and numerous other issues is forcing a change of mindsets in liberal democracies, making them insular and susceptible to extreme ideologies. This has resulted in aggressive attitudes that demand action for perceived wrongs while lauding strong leadership that promises to provide the same—attitudes conducive to conflict. Equally responsible is an ethno-nationalistic mindset which demands the restoration of past glories, including lost territories. The Balkans are a good example.

An unstable domestic polity resulting in the disenchantment of the populace with the ruling dispensation (see Pakistan and Bangladesh) is another factor. Finally, there is the nexus between transnational crime and terrorism (in Myanmar, the United Nations [UN] Office on Drugs and Crime records exploitation of fleeing Rohingya refugees by the Arakan Army to smuggle synthetic drugs into Bangladesh in exchange for money used for arms purchases. From drug smuggling to working for Jihadist networks is only a small step).

Many drivers of conflict are traditional, as are the participants—states, non-state actors, and combinations thereof. However, it is the policy objectives of the belligerents and, additionally, the geography, individual characteristics, and ingredients of the conflict that differentiate its overall character. While the Soviet Union had been fighting insurgents in its Caucasian republics for years (and later in Afghanistan) to restore primacy of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the United States (US) relearned counter-insurgency operations to fight Islamist terrorism in distant and unfamiliar societies in Iraq and Afghanistan, aiming to create a democratic system in traditional cultures unused to such arrangements. This effort, when translated into objectives at the operational level, met with failure. The Soviets,

with a more limited objective, achieved a greater measure of success.

In Ukraine, too, geopolitics, geography, and individual capacities have majorly impacted the character of the conflict. With western weapon systems at Russia's doorstep, ostensibly to halt Russian expansionism and Russia's concerted push to capture Ukrainian territory for securing a buffer on its western border, both sides have resorted to conventional operations, unlike their earlier conflict in 2014. The outcome, thus far, has made the West rethink its military strategy, the US in particular realising the need to move away from counter insurgency to conventional operations. Today, the US Training and Doctrine Command advocates training for large-scale combat operations that will increasingly involve multiple interconnected domains and dimensions.⁷ Even as Ukraine heralds a return to conventional wars, the ongoing Gaza War illustrates another distinction—militaries will have to prepare for both conventional wars and insurgencies against multiple adversaries that could involve pitting armies against combinations of state and non-state actors. Israel's air strikes against Iran in Oct 2024⁸, while concurrently battling Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon, are one example; another canvas is possibly waiting to unfold in Syria.

The second aspect pertains to the use of coercion—using threat of force to achieve strategic objectives. One example is 'Operation Restore Democracy' in 1994, wherein the US mobilised 23,000 troops to sail for Haiti to restore an elected leader to power, forcing the Haitian junta to succumb, even as former President Carter carried out negotiations.⁹ 21st Century tools for employing coercive force are many—posturing, a show of force, trade embargoes, sanctions, and diplomatic isolation. Another example pertains to China and the Philippines in 2012, when in 2012 China tightened quality controls on Philippine fruit exports, resulting in a ban on imports while reducing tourist visas. Coercion is aided by technology—tomorrow, by deploying newer systems like unmanned maritime drones, a nation might attempt to obstruct shipping lanes or harass commercial vessels of an adversary, exerting pressure on that state without resorting to use of direct force.

Allied forms of coercion include denial of technology, not guaranteeing the viability of a vital supply chain, imposing tariff and non-tariff barriers, and similar tactics. China leads in this domain, having originated terminology such as 'Grey Zone Warfare', 'Three Warfares Strategy', and the theory of 'Unrestricted Warfare', advocating an all-of-nation approach.¹⁰ Another phrase is 'Hybrid Warfare'¹¹, where adversaries (again combinations of state and non-state) select from an array of tools ranging from multidomain military operations (including the sub-conventional, space, electronic warfare, cyber, and informational) to terrorist acts and insurrections that are fused as necessary with other elements of national power—technological prowess, industrial capacity, economic, diplomatic, and informational resources—to achieve national goals. The alleged action by a Chinese cargo ship in Dec 2024 of severing subsea communications cables in the Baltic Sea connecting Germany and Finland, Lithuania and Sweden, respectively, can be viewed in this light.¹²

Though the world has witnessed elements of such forms of warfare earlier, these terms gain salience because modern technology enables real-time synergy of these elements, creating highly disruptive and devastating effects at tactical, operational, and strategic levels. The impact is exemplified in current conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, with the latter conflict serving as an eye-opener of how technology can transform warfighting. Innovative use of technology has synergised the impact of multiple sensor systems, automation, massed fires, and precision weaponry. In other words, conflict is now a battle of sensors, munitions, digital signals, and radio waves, creating immense transparency, resulting in greater lethality, even as the other side constantly innovates to counter these advancements. New terms like 'Cyber kinetic warfare' have been introduced, after the Sep 2024 incidents with exploding pagers in Lebanon.¹³

The Soviet leader Joseph Stalin is famously quoted as saying, 'Quantity has a quality of its own'. This was true for major conflicts until the first Gulf War, which saw large-scale use of precision munitions, giving rise to the theory of the 'Diminution' of mass. However, today's technology has aided generation of mass. Proliferation of numbers of drones is one example; Germany alone is supplying Ukraine with 4000 Artificial Intelligence (AI)-enabled drones.¹⁴ Technology has also provided these mass munitions

with precision capabilities. Cheap commercial drones fitted with sensors, surveillance, and smaller weapon packages, costing as little as USD 500 or less, are highly effective force multipliers and can be deployed at scale. The concepts of mass and precision have merged, giving rise to a new term, 'Precise Mass'.¹⁵

Availability of cheap technology by states, non-states, and individuals has resulted in a phenomenon described as the 'Democratisation of warfighting', aided by innovative means of funding, such as crowdsourcing, in the case of Ukraine.¹⁶ This democratisation empowers non-state actors and militias that operate within and across national borders—Houthis, Hamas, or others—to openly confront established powers, be it western armed forces or national governments, despite the asymmetry in combat power. Other non-state actors could be professional private military companies hired by business enterprises, military contractors fighting each other as proxies for states, or armed drug cartels vying for territorial control. Such wars might be limited or restricted in scale or escalate beyond borders. Also, post-COVID, the vulnerability of global supply chains has made them prime targets for disruption. These asymmetrical wars can be couched in conceptual terms as a contest between western 'Shock and awe' strategies and the attrition mindset of a non-state actor.

Use of newer technologies such as AI in military systems has exponential benefits—improved decision-making and targeting, greater precision, better surveillance, improved deception, and information ops.¹⁷ Although AI inherently introduces objectivity into decision making, it is essential to ensure human oversight. Lack of the same can lead to failure, as witnessed by the breaching of Israel's Iron Wall in Gaza in Oct 2023.¹⁸ Equally important as government control over AI development is the necessity to control developments in space; in Ukraine, Starlink and SpaceX have shown how space technology can significantly assist terrestrial battles. As private corporations end the monopoly of governments, regulation becomes imperative to prevent the space domain from becoming another tool of hybrid warfare. All of this raises critical questions—how do you begin to categorise total war today? How fine is the distinction between total, limited, and grey zone? Has the distinction between traditional war and conflict disappeared?

Implications for Peacekeeping

Despite criticism of the UN as an institution and the imperfect functioning of certain peacekeeping missions, statistics show that since its first mission in 1948, the UN has deployed over two million peacekeepers to 71 missions in more than 40 states, in the process projecting more military power in terms of troop deployment than any other country, except the US, in the current century.¹⁹ Since the character of conflict, as outlined earlier, continues to evolve, it stands to reason that peacekeeping policies, doctrines, strategies, organisations, and implementation must adapt accordingly.

The first prerequisite for successful peacekeeping, namely a clear, unambiguous mandate, acquires even greater salience today. With geopolitics in flux and competing national interests, there are differing views on conflicts, especially when initiated by major power proxies. The outcome is fissures in the Security Council and other UN agencies, preventing formulation of a balanced, holistic mandate.²⁰ This further manifests in fragmented political and financial support for the mission, particularly when the mandate is ambitious and requires a specific force structure and appropriate equipping. As Adam Day, Head of the Geneva Office of the United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, suggests: “Rather than continue to saddle peacekeeping with sprawling mandates covering national reforms, security sector transformation, capacity building, and the extension of state authority, the UN may need to consider a much smaller set of tasks for tomorrow’s missions”. In the process, mandates may become more focused but stand a better chance of success. They must be realistic and, if necessary, subject to review based on the mission’s capabilities and the tactics employed by the belligerents.

The second aspect follows from the first, relating essentially to the capabilities that a mission must have to implement the mandate, considering the means that belligerents might employ. Israel has come in for criticism for using AI programs like ‘Gospel’, ‘Lavender’ and ‘Where’s Daddy’ in Gaza, resulting in the most concentrated and devastating bombing of the current century with huge casualties.²¹ Considering the multifarious tasks that future missions could undertake²², specialist peacekeepers should be capable of monitoring the electronic and cyber spectrums to combat

grey zone warfare—detect likelihood of unethical usage of AI programs, prevent spread of disinformation or alternative reality through information operations, hacking of UN and other civilian infrastructure, and so on. The mission might also require specialists from fields like intelligence, bio weapons, communications, negotiation, policing, governance, reconstruction, and the like; essentially a tailor-made modular structure for a mission whose mandate accurately reflects the character of the conflict on ground. Finally, since ‘Protection of Civilians’ will invariably be part of the mandate vide Action 14 of the Pact of the Future²³, capability for this must be provided based on geography, spread of population, boots on ground, and logistic sustainability.

The third issue pertains to ‘Non-use of force except in self-defence and defence of the mandate’, the third tenet of peacekeeping (and extremely difficult to follow in a conflict situation as many peacekeepers will testify), and the ability of peacekeepers to respond effectively to threats to life. At times, Troop Contributing Countries (TCCs) have been known to issue caveats directly to their troops, bypassing the chain of command and restricting their activities for reasons of personal safety.

Given the easy access of belligerents to sophisticated weaponry and tendency to coerce UN peacekeepers towards a certain line of action²⁴, ‘Blue Helmets’ in this context need to be adequately equipped and trained. One example could be of the deployment of counter-drone systems, and utilising drones for surveillance, logistics, and other tasks. Another is to enhance counter improvised explosive devices’ capabilities. Using technology to assist in tactical tasks, such as keeping supply routes open, ensuring access to water, and medical facilities, is a third. TCCs must ensure the deployment of sufficient skilled personnel for such tasks to ensure freedom of action and safety of their contingents (safety was again endangered in South Lebanon in 2024 during the war between Israel and Hezbollah, with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon personnel suffering casualties²⁵). Thus, the use of force in self-defence has to be a ‘Sine qua non’ in peacekeeping doctrine; also new tactics have to be wargamed to prevent situations where peacekeepers are rendered ineffective and cannot implement a given mandate.

The fourth issue pertains to the doctrine itself. Several new studies on UN Peacekeeping have been authored in recent years, with recommendations ranging from future peacekeeping models to challenges currently faced and those anticipated in the future. The document 'United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Principles and Guidelines', also known as the Capstone Doctrine, was approved over 16 years ago in 2008. Given that peacekeeping has become more complex with the world itself and the world becoming far more unpredictable and volatile, it would be prudent to update the doctrine and produce a more contemporary one to meet peacekeeping requirements for the short to medium term, i.e., for another 10 to 15 years or so. This doctrine would also incorporate approaches to conflict management, such as mediation; while 33.3 per cent of all peacekeeping operations had mediation mandates in 1991-2000, it increased to 40 per cent and 60 per cent in 2001-2010 and 2011-2020, respectively.²⁶

Concluding Thoughts

The 2025 Peacebuilding Architecture Review is scheduled this year. The review encompasses an appraisal of the three offices, i.e., the Peacebuilding Commission, the Secretary-General's Peacebuilding Fund, and the Peacebuilding Support Office. As per its terms of reference endorsed on 30 Apr 2024, "The review should take stock of the work done by the UN on peacebuilding and sustaining peace in the implementation of all resolutions on the peacebuilding architecture. The review should also be forward-looking, aiming at further improving the work of the UN on peacebuilding and sustaining peace, with appropriate emphasis on implementation and impact at the field level, encompassing activities aimed at supporting national and regional efforts to prevent the outbreak, escalation, continuation, and recurrence of conflict, and supporting the UN Peacebuilding Architecture".²⁷ Given such a comprehensive mandate, developing an updated peacekeeping doctrine as part of this review would positively impact the efficacy of UN peace operations, which, in turn, would enhance the stature of the UN. Because finally, as Richard Holbrooke, former US Ambassador to the UN, has been quoted as saying, '...The UN will ultimately be judged by its peacekeeping scorecard more than anything else...'.²⁸

Endnotes

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