

**Section II:**  
**Multilateralism and United Nations**  
**Peace Operations**



# Preserving United Nations Peacekeeping for a Multilateral World

Colonel (Dr) Ali Ahmed (Retd)<sup>@</sup>

*“We recognise that the multilateral system and its institutions, with the United Nations and its Charter at the centre, must be strengthened to keep pace with a changing world”*

– Pact for the Future

## Abstract

*The article posits that United Nations (UN) peacekeeping is under an eclipse due to the polarisation in international affairs. This may deepen in the case of a retreat to isolationism of a significant supporter of UN peace operations, the United States. To ensure peacekeeping remains fit for purpose in an emerging multilateral world order, the aspirant pole countries must individually and collectively step up to shoulder a heavier peace operations’ burden, not only in terms of troop contribution but also logistics support, doctrinal input, and increased proportion of financing. This will not only preserve peacekeeping as the foremost multilateral instrument of choice for the international community but will also usher in such a world order.*

## Introduction

United Nations (UN) peacekeeping is at a critical juncture in its chequered history. There have been no UN peacekeeping missions<sup>1</sup> authorised over the past decade. The mission in Mali has pulled out after withdrawal of consent by the government. The mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo, though amid drawdown at the request of the government, has been managing yet another upheaval in eastern Congo. The African Union (AU) is coming into its own on peacekeeping under Charter Chapter VIII in partnership with the UN<sup>2</sup>, with the modalities of the financing of its missions being worked out, its mission in Somalia likely to

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<sup>@</sup>Colonel (Dr) Ali Ahmed (Retd) is a strategic affairs analyst. A former infantry colonel, he has served in four United Nations peacekeeping missions.

serve as prototype. The return of President Trump to the White House has begun impacting the UN on the humanitarian and development front<sup>3</sup>, and could also affect the peace and security dimension through attitudes the United States (US) adopts to the UN and to peacekeeping.<sup>4</sup>

It would appear that UN peacekeeping is no longer a ready instrument of choice for the international community. However, the hold up on peacekeeping deployments does not have any marked deficiency in peacekeeping practice at its core. Instead, the UN Security Council (UNSC) dynamics are at its root. The geopolitical positioning of the US, Russia, and China—three of the significant Permanent Five (P5)—has been impacted UNSC readiness to use its peacekeeping option. Whereas there is precedent of the General Assembly deploying peace missions under the Uniting for Peace mechanism, it has not stepped up. Polarisation effects peacekeeping.<sup>5</sup>

The major phenomenon in international affairs is the transition from a post-Cold War unipolar world to a multipolar world. The rise of China led by President Xi Jinping and the return of Russia under President Putin to active involvement in international developments has put the US-led West on notice. While Russian actions in Ukraine have set back Russia-US relations, US-China relations are subject to the inevitable wariness between a hegemonic power and a rising challenger. Adversarial relations imply a return to the Cold War practices, in which the P5 privilege respective interests, restricting UN actions to where these do not impact such interests. Alongside, the US is retreating from liberal internationalism, which had driven its post-Cold War engagement with peacekeeping, with no guarantee other powers might step into the void.

The last decade-long hiatus in UN peacekeeping deployments was in the 1980s, when the resurgence of the Cold War in wake of the Soviet Union intervention in Afghanistan made the UNSC yet another site of the competition. It is no coincidence the last UN mission deployed—to Central African Republic—was in 2014, the year when the Russians wrested Crimea from Ukraine. The situation in Ukraine having only worsened with a war on since 2022, the effect has been on co-operation within the UNSC.

Last time, it took an outbreak of détente with the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan for a resurgence in peacekeeping. The present international situation does not show signs of any such light at the end of the tunnel. Resuscitation of the instrument of peacekeeping cannot be reliant solely on the UNSC, in particular its feuding P5. The international community would be deprived of a potent option to address the myriad conflicts, ongoing and latent, if the peacekeeping instrument is not kept in good repair.<sup>6</sup>

This article argues that with geopolitical positioning potentially impacting the delivery of the UNSC mandate adversely, there is a need for the emerging powers to step up and play a proactive role. This will demonstrate their efficacy and create space for multilateralism in line with the theme of the recent UN Summit of the Future: ‘Multilateral solutions for a better tomorrow’. The benefit for the UN is that it would retain its credentials as the principle multilateral forum<sup>7</sup>, while resuscitating its premier multilateral innovation, peacekeeping.

### **The Continuing Validity of Peacekeeping**

For now, some conflicts are being addressed by the UN through the medium of Special Political Missions (SPMs).<sup>8</sup> A peacekeeping option on the table helps make for the success of SPMs’ peacemaking endeavours by offering peacekeeping as a means to ensure and support implementation of agreements arrived at. A peacekeeping mission, by definition, creates and sustains a secure environment that, to begin with, helps with humanitarian relief, and over time helps sustain a peaceable environment for furthering peacebuilding. Early peacebuilding—known in theory as structural peacebuilding—is enabled by multidimensional peace operations. This is necessary to lay the foundation for prevention of relapse into conflict, setting the stage for development and cultural peacebuilding.<sup>9</sup>

UN peacekeeping, having traversed much ground across multiple conflict zones, now has a thoroughly practiced repertoire.<sup>10</sup> Peacekeeping has come a long way since its beginning at the cusp of the Cold War, in what has come to be known as traditional peacekeeping. It has since traversed into second generation or wider peacekeeping at the end of the Cold War and, this century has been engaged in integrated, multidimensional peace

operations. This owed to the shift in the types of conflict from inter-state to internal conflict. However, lately, inter-state conflicts appear to have rekindled, which alongside continuing internal conflict puts a premium on UN's operational expertise.

To be sure, peacekeeping has had its troughs but has a credible record of learning alongside.<sup>11</sup> In fact, it was its setback in the mid-90s that led up to the progressive professionalisation of peacekeeping<sup>12</sup>, beginning with the Brahimi report. Training infrastructure and networks are now highly evolved and variegated.<sup>13</sup> Though the last official doctrinal product is some 15 years old, doctrinal evolution has kept the UN peacekeeping doctrine contemporary and adaptable. The command-and-control aspect, at both strategic and operational levels, has come a long way. Gender balance, geographic representation, and enhancing quality of leadership are a continuing focus. Technology and best practices absorption are key areas of upgrades. The civilian component, both substantive and support, now has both expertise and depth. The Troop Contributing Countries (TCCs) are conscious of the quality of capability offered.<sup>14</sup> China—a P5 member—is upping its game as a TCC.

A challenge foreseen is the financing of operations.<sup>15</sup> This is attenuated by the fresh approaches that the new US administration may take as it settles in. However, the UN has faced financial troughs earlier, such as in the mid-60s, over the costs of the Congo mission. In President Trump's second term, there may be financing issues that unsettle peacekeeping. This could prove as an opportunity for the Chinese to up their act. Since, opening up space for China might not be in the US' interest, it is possible that peacekeeping may not see the financial turbulence apprehended. Instead, a competition to stay engaged by both the powers so as not to concede space to the other could benefit peacekeeping. Even so, developing countries with adequate financial muscle, such as India, could increase their contribution on a non-reimbursable basis in the form of transportation, supplies, and personnel contributions beyond their assessed share.

Even as the unipolar moment is decisively over, fresh winds buoy multilateralism. That a multipolar world is on the horizon is visible in the effervescence of the Global South, in the G20 and the expanding footprint of groupings, such as Brazil, Russia, India,

China, and South Africa (BRICS). Peacekeeping offers scope for multipolarity advocating countries to show their salience in their peacekeeping presence and contribution.

The UN is looking for enablers and the latest in technology. This is an area for emerging powers to displace the UN leaning on western countries for niche subunits. This would not only be reflective of a multipolar world but also usher in the reality. It would help fill in any vacuum that possible US disengagement might create. A case to point is equipment such as surveillance drones, mine clearing innovations<sup>16</sup>, and soft-skinned and armoured vehicles from its *Atmanirbhar* (Self-reliant) program could be offered to the UN or its agencies for service in the UN missions.

Making peacekeeping fit-for-purpose in a multipolar world is a potential site for contenders for a permanent seat in the UNSC to make their mark. The UN Charter requires that those selected for the UNSC are distinguished by their contribution. Countries such as India could then make credible demands at the intergovernmental negotiations in the General Assembly to move to text-based negotiations. Power dynamics, that otherwise mostly have the Western bloc to the fore, will shift to privilege the interests of the non-West. Getting to the horseshoe table needs such fresh pathways.

### **Ushering in Multilateralism**

Peacekeeping has demonstrated its flexibility and relevance through all phases of contemporary history. Lately, inter-state conflicts have also been witnessed. Peacekeeping, particularly its preventive deployment variant, calls out for a relook in such circumstance. The grievous damage that recent conflicts have wrought makes recovery and reconstruction, and peacebuilding even more necessary. The increased involvement of other states in conflict zones is making peacemaking more complex, putting to naught years of efforts by successive mediators. Cumulatively, the interplay between peacekeeping, peace-making, and peacebuilding has got more complex.<sup>17</sup> A wider ideational engagement than the hitherto reliance on western sources for doctrinal next steps is required.

Precedence of peacekeeping's flexibility and resilience indicates that it can adapt to the challenges of the times<sup>18</sup>, such as from new domains as information and challenges, therein, of

mis/disinformation and hate speech. It has been able to draw on regional capabilities in sequential, parallel and hybrid operations, such as those of the AU and the African regional communities in Southern and Western Africa. It has adjusted to out-of-area interventions by bodies such as the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). It has managed transitions, taking on an interim administrative role. It has been relied on by UN-authorized and arbitrary coalitions, as in Afghanistan and Iraq respectively, and by the NATO in Kosovo, to oversee the aftermath of the peace enforcement. The pragmatism that underpins peacekeeping keeps it resilient and responsive to the nuances of the discrete challenges thrown up over the years. Its record suggests that it must be retained as an instrument of choice in a multilateral world.

Multilateral engagement will bring fresh thinking and innovation, especially from the hitherto under-represented ones, such as Africa and Latin America. Since multilateralism-enthused countries are also rising in economic stature, the financing aspect can be revisited so as to balance the onus that is currently on developed countries. The adage 'He who pays the piper calls the tune' is also applicable to the UN. Greater voice for a wider cross-section of powers allows for a larger peacekeeping budget to insulate against financial vagaries.

A greater sense of ownership in the developing world will revitalise the C-34 forum. This can potentially dispel reservations that Russia and China have regards peacekeeping. Their fuller support in the UNSC will then be forthcoming. It would also balance the perceived asymmetry in the UNSC, in which three of the P5 belong to the Western bloc. It would rekindle the UN's credibility, which has taken a beating during Israel's war in Gaza.

Mutually empowering engagement of rising powers with peacekeeping helps with democratising of global governance, even as the structures catch up through UNSC reforms in their own good time. Such engagement distances peacekeeping from the perception that is seemingly an instrument of the West, making it proximate to the developing world and its concerns. This would have a positive tactical-level effect on the security of peacekeepers, who may otherwise unwittingly be taken as proximate to the West and liable to be targeted by forces inimical to the West. A broad



basing of support in a larger body of 'Friends of Peacekeeping' will ensure that it makes for easier accorded host state consent to missions. Host states will be more sanguine that they are not subject to a re-colonising agenda. They would prove less obstructive in terms of imposing movement restrictions on missions or be more forthcoming with consent.

### **Keeping Peacekeeping Ticking**

Upcoming forums must be appropriated by multilateralism-persuaded countries. The Pact for the Future adopted at last year's Summit of the Future has mandated a review of peace operations.<sup>19</sup> There has been a decade since the last comprehensive report on peacekeeping was published, that of the high-level panel, popularly known as the 'Hippo Report'.<sup>20</sup> It reviews the interested countries, in which the number of principal TCCs can participate in the exercise both individually as well as as part of collectives. Placing peacekeeping renaissance on the agenda of collective forums will create momentum and critical mass for broad-basing international peace and security ownership away from being held hostage by powerplay in the UNSC. This will enhance the outcome of the forthcoming biennial Ministerial in Berlin.<sup>21</sup>

A recent think-piece from the Department of Peace Operations, *The Future of Peacekeeping, New Models, and Related Capabilities*<sup>22</sup>, lends direction to the reforms ahead, as do publications from think tanks, such as *Future of the Pact*.<sup>23</sup> The former study shows the versatility of peace operations in the listed range of the 30 functional capabilities of peace operations. While multidimensional peace operations undertook these functions as mandated, the thrust appears to be to make operations manageable by niche interventions, such as electoral support, security sector reform or disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration assistance. This will keep operations modular, nimble, smaller, and so, less costly.

However, multidimensional peace operations with a large footprint must not be thrown out with the bathwater. With countrywide presence and visibility, these serve a purpose in stabilisation and extension of state authority. By deterring spoilers, they help with the protection of civilians. They serve as an embarrassing witness, helping prevent atrocity crimes. A heavier

footprint is necessary to access and survey remote areas and reduce the extent of ungoverned spaces. Peacebuilding activity is given an incidental security cover by their very presence and humanitarian protection assured. The peacebuilding architecture is also due for an upgrade, a timely opportunity to rethink the relationship between the two.

### **Imagining Counterfactual Possibilities**

Continued resort to peacekeeping over the past decade could have made a constructive difference to the conflict and their outcomes. To be sure, peacekeeping could not have been applicable in tackling the Islamic State episode, requiring as it did peace enforcement. However, though a counterfactual, it can be argued that the drawdown and departure from both Iraq and Afghanistan of the coalitions could have witnessed successor peacekeeping operations. If a peace operation in Syria had got off the ground after the brief three-month-long SPM there, it could have created a new reality supportive of the several rounds of talks as part of the peace process. The long-running conflicts in Libya and Yemen could also have been suitably addressed, with a preventive impact on current-day turmoil in Sahel and in the Red Sea, respectively.

If peace operations were not held in abeyance in the UNSC, it was possible to visualise a pre-war insertion also in eastern Ukraine in a preventive deployment mode.<sup>24</sup> Even at this juncture, Ukraine is a candidate location for a peace intervention, as the prospects of a ceasefire have increased lately.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, today, Syria, Yemen, and Sudan could benefit from deployment of a multidimensional peacekeeping operation to help recoup their broken societies and polities.

An illustrative case is of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS).<sup>26</sup> Six years of relative peace since signing of the peace agreement have witnessed a power-sharing in the government, with consensual extensions in the interim period till elections at the end of 2026. This is a plausible response to the financial crisis brought about by the stoppage of oil flows owing to the civil war in neighbouring Sudan. Since the government is balancing the geopolitical extant in Africa, it is pressurised by western countries over the election timeline. This makes an already fragile security situation more tenuous. Increased engagement with peacekeeping

in its operational detail by a larger set of countries persuaded by the multilateral principle would prevent such use of peacekeeping operations by powerful states for their foreign policy purposes by, for instance, weaponising criticism of the interim government.<sup>27</sup> It will give South Sudan greater breathing space and the UNMISS a modified mandate of state capacity building support, arguably more relevant to its current circumstance.

Under the circumstance of a deadlock in the UNSC and the inattention to peacekeeping as a viable and desirable instrument over the past decade, it is possible to visualise the impunity of Israel's actions in the areas of operation of the UN inter-positioning operations along the Blue Line and on the Golan Heights. It also explains in part the nonchalance with which the Rwandese trespassed into the area of operations of the stabilisation mission in Congo, in close and direct support of the M23 rebel outfit. It would be a fair assessment that the dwindling of the UN's clout has been an enabling condition for such blatant actions. The corollary is stark: the UN needs revitalisation.

### **Conclusion**

Peacekeeping is an efficacious peace intervention in conflict environments. It must be preserved from the vagaries of geopolitics reflected in the UNSC dynamics. Emerging powers could step up to preserve it as a desirable practice in forthcoming multilateral world. Doing so will not only see further evolution of peacekeeping but also help construct such a multilateral world. India, as a leading advocate for the UN, peacekeeping, and a multilateral future, has a significant role to play in mobilising support on these lines.<sup>28</sup> It must use the multilateral forums it is part of to energise support for peacekeeping with other like-minded actors. Alongside, it must increase its contribution in all dimensions of peacekeeping beyond its forte of boots on ground. The downswing in UN peace interventions must be taken as an opportunity to forge a desired future.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> The terms 'peacekeeping missions' and 'peace operations' are used interchangeably here.

<sup>2</sup> UN, 'Resolution 2719 (2023)', adopted by the Security Council at its 9518th meeting, on 21 Dec 2023, accessed 20 Jan 2025 <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4031070?v=pdf&ln=en>

<sup>3</sup> Richard Gowan, 'Stefanik's Senate Confirmation Hearings', 15 Jan 2025, accessed 25 Jan 2025 <https://www.justsecurity.org/106397/stefanik-confirmation-hearing/>

<sup>4</sup> World Politics Review, 'The Trump Administration's Approach Could Make or Break UN Reform', accessed 21 Jan 2025 <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/trump-administrations-approach-could-make-or-break-un-reform>

<sup>5</sup> Security Council Report (SCR), 'In Hindsight: The Security Council in 2024 and Looking Ahead to 2025', 30 Dec 2024, accessed 22 Jan 2025 <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2025-01/in-hindsight-the-security-council-in-2024-and-looking-ahead-to-2025.php#:~:text=30%20December%202024-,In%20Hindsight%3A%20The%20Security%20Council%20in%202024%20and%20Looking%20Ahead,the%20political%20situation%20in%20Syria>

<sup>6</sup> Richard Gowan, 'The UN May Regret Getting Out of the Peacekeeping Business', *World Politics Review*, 16 Jan 2025, accessed 24 Jan 2025 <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/un-may-regret-getting-out-peacekeeping-business>

<sup>7</sup> SCR, 'Multilateralism', 30 Jan 2025, accessed 31 Jan 2025 <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/multilateralism-and-the-un-charter/>

<sup>8</sup> Department of Political Affairs and Peacebuilding, 'Special Political Missions and Good Offices Engagements', accessed 21 Jan 2025 <https://dppa.un.org/en/dppa-around-world>

<sup>9</sup> 'The 2025 Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture', *UN*, accessed 18 Jan 2025 <https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/content/2025-review-un-peacebuilding-architecture>

<sup>10</sup> 'Our history', *UN*, accessed 15 Jan 2025 <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/our-history>

<sup>11</sup> 'A4P: Highlights of key achievements', *UN*, accessed 12 Jan 2025 [https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/191101\\_a4p\\_achievements\\_one\\_pager.pdf](https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/191101_a4p_achievements_one_pager.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> 'Reforming peacekeeping', *UN*, accessed 14 Jan 2025 <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/reforming-peacekeeping>

<sup>13</sup> Koops et. al., 'Peacekeeping in the Twenty-First Century' in eds. Koops et. al., *The Oxford Handbook UN Peacekeeping Operations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp 608-613, accessed 10 Jan 2025

<sup>14</sup> UN, 'Our Common Agenda: A New Agenda for Peace', *Policy Brief*, 09 Jul 2023, accessed 02 Jan 2025 <https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/default/>

files/document/files/2024/08/our-common-agenda-policy-brief-new-agenda-peace-en.pdf

<sup>15</sup> 'How we are funded', *UN*, accessed 11 Jan 2025 <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/how-we-are-funded>

<sup>16</sup> UNISFA, 'Mine clearing bot', *Blue Sentinels*, Vol. 3 (09 Nov 2024), accessed 12 Jan 2025 <https://unisfa.unmissions.org/beacon-0>

<sup>17</sup> Ban Ki-moon, *Resolved: UN in a Divided World* (Noida: Harper Collins, 2021), pp 315-328, accessed 10 Jan 2025

<sup>18</sup> Berma Goldewijk and J Soeters, 'Peace operations and 'no peace to keep'', in *Routledge Handbook of Defence Studies* [New York: Routledge, 2020], pp 265-68, accessed 15 Jan 2025

<sup>19</sup> 'Pact for the Future', *UN*, accessed 11 Jan 2025 <https://www.un.org/en/summit-of-the-future/pact-for-the-future>

<sup>20</sup> 'Report of the Independent High-level Panel on Peace Operations', *UN*, 19 Jun 2015, accessed 19 Jan 2025 [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp)

<sup>21</sup> 'United Nations Peacekeeping Ministerial 2025', *UN*, accessed 20 Jan 2025 <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/united-nations-peacekeeping-ministerial-2025>

<sup>22</sup> Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 'The Future of Peacekeeping, New Models, and Related Capabilities', 01 Nov 2024, accessed 13 Jan 2025 <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/study-on-future-of-peacekeeping-new-models-and-related-capabilities>

<sup>23</sup> SCR, 'Future of the Pact: Recommendations for Security Council Action', 20 Dec 2024, accessed 10 Jan 2025 <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/research-reports/future-of-the-pact-recommendations-for-security-council-action.php>

<sup>24</sup> Ali Ahmed, 'Conflict Prevention-Peacemaking-Preventive Deployment: A triangle whose time has come?', accessed 13 Jan 2025 [https://aliahd66.substack.com/p/conflict-prevention-peacemaking-preventive?utm\\_source=publication-search](https://aliahd66.substack.com/p/conflict-prevention-peacemaking-preventive?utm_source=publication-search)

<sup>25</sup> The Hindu, 'Russia opposes Western peacekeepers in Ukraine', 30 Dec 2024, accessed 18 Jan 2025 <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/russia-opposes-western-peacekeepers-in-ukraine/article69044434.ece>

<sup>26</sup> Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC), 'South Sudan: RJMEC Quarterly Report: December 2024', 20 Jan 2025, accessed 25 Jan 2025 <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/rjmec->

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<sup>27</sup> 'Troika Statement', *US Embassy*, accessed 21 Jan 2025 <https://ss.usembassy.gov/troikastate-103024/#:~:text=The%20leaders%20of%20South%20Sudan,the%20people%20of%20South%20Sudan>

<sup>28</sup> 'Letter dated 25 November 2022 from the Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council', *UN*, 25 Nov 2022, accessed 20 Jan 2025 <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3996440?v=pdf>