Enhancing Efficacy of Peacekeeping Operations in an Uncertain Future

Major General Alok Deb, SM, VSM (Retd)[@]

Abstract

The article analyses the changing character of warfare and its profound implications for United Nations (UN) peacekeeping in an increasingly fragmented and technology-driven conflict environment. It situates contemporary conflicts—ranging from Ukraine and Gaza to Sudan and parts of Asia and Africa—within the context of 5th Generation Warfare, marked by kinetic and non-kinetic non-contact operations, blurred civilian–combatant distinctions, and multi-domain battlespaces. Against this backdrop, the article traces the evolution of the UN's peace and security mandate from its founding in 1945 through key milestones such as 'An Agenda for Peace' and the '2005 World Summit Outcome'. It highlights growing constraints on UN peacekeeping, including declining budgets, contested mandates, lack of consent, and the disruptive impact of new technologies and non-state actors. Drawing on historical cases and recent analyses, the article argues for a recalibration of future UN missions toward smaller, focused mandates emphasising monitoring, peacebuilding, and consent-based engagement. It concludes by examining implications for India, advocating a diversified, whole-of-government contribution model aligned with India's humanitarian strengths.

[@]**Major General Alok Deb, SM, VSM (Retd)** is a Distinguished Fellow with the United Service Institution of India and Asian Confluence. He is Senior Visiting Fellow with The Peninsula Foundation. A former Deputy Director General of the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (now Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses), New Delhi, he has served as a peacekeeper in United Nations Interim Force In Lebanon in 2005-06. A Kargil War veteran, he has commanded an Artillery Division. He retired from active service in Dec 2014.

Introduction

2025 is ending on a despondent note. Despite occasional flickers of hope that arise with attempts at brokering peace, the war of attrition in Ukraine drags on. A tenuous ceasefire in Gaza remains at risk, with Hamas and Israel retaliating against each other over infringements. In Sudan, the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces stand accused of genocide with the massacre of civilians in El Fasher in Darfur state[1], and the United Nations (UN) is calling for the establishment of a humanitarian corridor in that area for movement of refugees and aid.[2] Elsewhere, conflicts continue to rage across portions of Asia (including West Asia) and Africa.

Today's conflicts are witnessing the impact of new technologies, coupled with newer methods of warfighting, especially in the zone of kinetic non-contact and non-kinetic-non-contact systems. These have resulted in increased lethality and destructive power, even as lines between combatant and non-combatant, military, and civilian targets have blurred. With the emergence of new concepts like cognitive, hybrid, and grey-zone warfare, traditional notions of victory and how it is to be achieved have been turned on their heads. Multi-domain operations (or all domain operations) have similarly expanded the battlespace. Overall, war and warfare have acquired new and more dangerous dimensions. If World War II epitomised 3rd generation warfare, the battlefield of the mid-21st Century witnessed warfare in its 5th generation.

The United Nations' Evolving Concept of Preserving World Peace

The UN was founded in 1945. This new organisation, successor to the short-lived League of Nations, came about at the end of the deadliest war in human history. The focus of the UN on the imperative of preventing war and preserving world peace is illustrated in the first sentence at the beginning of the Preamble to its Charter. It reads, "We, the Peoples of the UN, determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind…".[3] This focus on maintaining peace finds expression multiple times in the Charter—Chapter I (Purpose and Principles); Chapter V (The Security Council); Chapter VI (Pacific Settlement of Disputes); Chapter VII (Action with Respect to Threats to the Peace, Breaches of the Peace, and Acts of Aggression); Chapter VIII (Regional

Arrangements); and Chapter XVII (Transitional Security Arrangements)—altogether six chapters out of a total of 17.[4]

In 1945, maintaining peace and security appears to have been the *raison d'etre* of the UN and its 51 member states. As the membership gradually increased (from 51 to 113 by 1963, and then to 189 by 2000[5]), with many newly independent states joining the world body, issues concerning the economic and social well-being of such nations impoverished by decades of colonial rule (restricted initially to Chapter IX titled International Economic and Social Cooperation) acquired greater salience. With some of these nations embroiled in internal conflicts soon after independence, especially in Africa, peacekeeping remained important to the UN. With the end of the Cold War, the UN decided to frame its objectives with relevance to the new world situation. The outcome was a seminal document produced by Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, titled *An Agenda for Peace: Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peace-keeping,* presented during the 1992 Security Council Summit Meeting. This document analysed the functioning of the UN and recommended methods for improvement in areas of peacekeeping and preventive diplomacy. In the final chapter titled 'An Agenda for Peace', the Secretary-General's prophetic remarks warrant repetition, "…peace in the largest sense cannot be accomplished by the UN system or by governments alone. Non-governmental organisations, academic institutions, parliamentarians, business and professional communities, the media, and the public at large must all be involved".[7]

The holistic concept of peace and security was amplified further in the 'Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 16 Sep 2005' at the 2005 World Summit Outcome, which stated, "We acknowledge that peace and security, development, and human rights are the pillars of the UN system and the foundations for collective security and well-being. We recognise that development, peace and security, and human rights are interlinked and mutually reinforcing".[8] The major portion of the resolution deals with aspects of development (including sustainable development), global partnerships, financing, trade, education, employment, health, gender and women empowerment, and science and technology. Peacekeeping and terrorism are mentioned towards the end, indicating the priority of objectives within the overall focus on sustainable peace and development adopted by the UN.

It is likely that because of the aforesaid priorities (and not because of the decline in demand for Blue Helmets), and reluctance of nations to part with their dues towards the UN regular and peacekeeping budgets, finances for peacekeeping have seen a decline in real terms. Some nations have defaulted on their contributions. The approved peacekeeping budget for 2025-26 has fallen to USD 5.38 bn[9], as against the 2024-25 budget of USD 5.6 bn, the 2023-24 budget of USD 6.1 bn[10], and the 2020-21 budget of USD 6.58 bn.[11]

As brought out in the beginning of this article, the geopolitical, technological, and military developments around the world have significantly affected the prosecution of warfare with an inevitable fallout on peacekeeping. Earlier too, the UN peacekeeping missions have come under scrutiny on whether they have fulfilled the mission objectives. While it is difficult to lay down a comprehensive template for judging mission success[12], glaring failures like Rwanda or the inability of a potent force like UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) to effectively play a meaningful role have given rise to comments by critics that many missions have failed to carry out their intended mandates. Such views disregard the turbulent and dynamic circumstances in which such missions operate and the conflict of interests that leaves the UN hamstrung.

Implications for Future Peacekeeping

To appreciate the implications for future peacekeeping and ensure its relevance, some crystal gazing is warranted. On 01 Jan 2025, the International Crisis Group (ICG) published a commentary, titled '10 conflicts to watch in 2025'.[13] It has identified Syria, Sudan, Ukraine and Europe, Israel-Palestine, Iran-United States (US) and Israel, Haiti, the US-Mexico border, Myanmar, the Korean Peninsula, and China-US relations as the major arenas of conflict. Of these, UN peacekeepers are deployed in two regions—South Sudan (the UN Mission in South Sudan [UNMISS]) and Israel-Palestine (the UN Truce Supervision Organization, UNIFIL, and the UN Disengagement Observer Force). Another festering area is Afghanistan-Pakistan, where the situation across the Durand Line is tense, with strikes carried out by both sides.

Before proceeding further, a look at the history of an unarmed UN military mission earlier deployed in one of the areas mentioned above is instructive. Unarmed UN observers had been operationally

deployed earlier under the ambit of UN Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) in May 2012 to monitor the ceasefire between the government and rebel groups. UNSMIS deployed fast; it was established under the UN Security Council Resolution 2043 of 21 Apr 2012, and the mission deployed 300 unarmed peacekeepers in various locations in Syria by 30 May 2012. The mission faced numerous obstacles, such as limited access to incident locations, security concerns about the safety of peacekeepers, and unrealistic expectations of the civilian populace, who felt that the UN would protect them from violence. In UNSMIS's short span of less than three months, there were numerous incidents of firing in the vicinity of observer teams, with one incident on 12 Jun 2012 when UN vehicles were blocked, damaged by a crowd, and then fired upon by unknown gunmen, even as the observers attempted to reach their destination.[14] It appears that the six-point plan proposed by UN and League of Arab States, to which the warring parties had committed as a precursor to UNSMIS deployment, was either for optics or agreed to despite a lack of good faith. With UNSMIS unable to fulfil its mandate due to the aforesaid reasons, the mission was terminated on 19 Aug 2012.

The experience of UNSMIS shows that the first principle of peacekeeping—consent of parties—had been violated, putting unarmed Blue Helmets in danger. Many other lessons can be derived—the dilemma of having an inadequate mandate vis-à-vis the danger of 'Mission Creep', where peacekeepers keep on taking additional responsibilities, the feasibility of protecting large numbers of civilians, and getting involved in a conflict that has turned into an insurgency. All these issues are relevant today.

With respect to another of the conflict areas mentioned above—the ongoing Ukraine War—a detailed analysis by an Indian general with extensive peacekeeping experience has recently been published. The article discusses the viability of deploying peacekeepers in Ukraine to oversee a negotiated peace, should parties to the conflict agree to the presence of the UN.[15] The author has outlined various challenges—how to control non-state actors who might not adhere to a ceasefire or work as proxies for interested parties, how to find Troop Contributing Countries (TCCs) acceptable to both sides, and the force structuring of this mission. The article concludes with the suggestion that a multidimensional observer mission comprising civilian, military, and police forces is

the best combination. Considering the devastation wrought in Ukraine and the multifarious challenges that any monitoring force would face, including from the erstwhile belligerents, this would likely be the optimal solution.

With uncertainty over the peace process, skewed mandates, and a multiplicity of actors with access to new technologies (state, non-state, mercenaries, criminal gangs, proxies, and civilians actively aiding their sides, with many working at cross purposes), it is debatable whether the UN should consider enforcing the peace as a viable option in the conflict regions identified by the ICG. Is it possible to have Chapter VII missions like the UN Command in 1950 during the Korean War? Current Chapter VII missions like UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo have been operating for over 15 years. Another Chapter VII mission, UNMISS in South Sudan, has been operating since 2011. Even a large Chapter VI mission like UNIFIL in Lebanon, with enough heavy equipment like howitzers and tanks, finds itself unable to perform its role. Given the hesitation of TCCs to place their troops in harm's way, the repercussions of even minor negative incidents on the UN's reputation, a mandate that seems increasingly challenging to carry out, and the effects of a diminished peacekeeping budget, peace enforcement in any of the volatile areas highlighted by the ICG is unlikely to succeed.

Overall, what should be the shape of future UN missions? A summary of opinions regarding future prospects for peacekeeping has been collated by the UN's Future of Peacekeeping Operations project. This study, available on the UN Peacekeeping website[16], explores different themes and analyses key conflict trends by a host of subject experts. An important observation of Adam Day states, "Rather than continue to saddle peacekeeping with sprawling mandates covering national reforms, security sector transformation, capacity building, and extension of state authority, the UN may need to consider a much smaller set of tasks for tomorrow's missions".[17] Similarly, the independent UN study on 'The Future of Peacekeeping, New Models, and Related Capabilities', published in Oct 2024, has presented an exhaustive list of 30 models for future peacekeeping, catering to various scenarios that might arise.[18] Provided that there is consent (even conditional) of the parties involved, a suitable mandate incorporating

reservations of both sides could still be arrived at in respect to the peacekeeping missions in the conflict areas mentioned earlier.

With the UN being made aware daily of its limitations about peacekeeping, the viable alternative is monitoring the peace with elements of peacebuilding. This would entail employment of unarmed observers or troops lightly armed for self-protection. With focused mandates, these uniformed personnel would be complemented by other components, who would assist in peacebuilding activities, where cooperation of belligerents is likely to be more forthcoming. Here too, given the UN's financial limitations (and the fund crunch faced by allied organisations like the UN Foundation), it must start small. Small infrastructure projects, governance, education, gender empowerment, training of non-governmental organisations, and its likes are topics that must be chosen from. Investing in some of them would produce results on the ground and restore the credibility of the world body, even while reducing the scope of its work.

Implications for India

Considering the above, what should India, as a supporter of UN initiatives and major TCC, plan for? Should the Centre for UN Peacekeeping , currently under the military, widen the scope of its training and envisage multiple specific roles as suggested above to include policing, governance, and capacity building in conflict regions? The performance of non-military Indian contingents, such as all woman police units that have garnered praise internationally, is a pointer in this direction. Given India's vast capacities in these fields, it is possible to incorporate a variety of specialists—civilian technical experts, engineers, educators, medical and public health experts, and others, as required by a particular mission mandate. This would require an all-of-government approach, with greater interaction and interfacing with new stakeholders, in addition to the Ministry of External Affairs. Other government ministries and even private Indian players could be incorporated on 'As Required Basis' if such a proposal is accepted.

Conclusion

India's core strength has been its humanitarian approach and outreach to the afflicted. Contributing to UN missions in this manner would play to Indian strengths and buttress its credibility in the

organisation and other world fora. More so, when in terms of troop contribution, India has slipped to fourth place with a marked decline in numbers—5,384 personnel of all categories including police on 31 Dec 2024—as against third place on 31 Dec 2015 with 7,798 personnel[19], even as numbers of TCCs have plateaued. This comprehensive approach would enhance India's relevance as a major contributor towards world peace, not just by deploying troops but by contributing towards the comprehensive national security of the country in question.

Endnotes

[1] Al Jazeera Staff, "Sudan medics accuse RSF of burning, burying bodies to conceal 'genocide'", *Al Jazeera*, 09 Nov 2025, accessed 27 Nov 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/11/9/sudan-medics-accuse-rsf-of-burning-burying-bodies-to-conceal-genocide

[2] Jillian Kestler-D'Amours, "UN urges humanitarian corridor to help civilians stuck in Sudan's el-Fasher", *Al Jazeera*, 12 Nov 2025, accessed 26 Nov 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/11/12/un-urges-humanitarian-corridor-to-help-civilians-stuck-in-sudans-el-fasher

[3] "Welcome to the United Nations – Full Text", *United Nations Charter*, accessed 25 Nov 2025, https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text

[4] Ibid.

[5] "Growth in United Nations membership – Welcome to the United Nations", *United Nations Charter*, accessed 25 Nov 2025, https://www.un.org/en/about-us/growth-in-un-membership

[6] Boutros Boutros-Ghali, "An agenda for Peace : Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peace-keeping", Report of the Secretary-General pursuant to the statement adopted by the Summit Meeting of the Security Council on 31 Jan 1992, accessed 27 Nov 2025, https://www.iri.edu.ar/publicaciones_iri/manual/Doc.Naciones%20Unidas/Secretar%EDa%20General/An%20Agenda%20for%20Peace.pdf

[7] Ibid.

[8] "Outcome, Values, and Principles, Paragraph 9", Report A/RES/60/1 of the *United Nations General Assembly* at the 2005 World Summit, 24 Oct 2005, accessed 25 Nov 2025, https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_60_1.pdf

[9] Vibhu Mishra, "General Assembly approves $5.4 billion UN peacekeeping budget for 2025-2026", *UN News*, 01 Jul 2025, accessed 27 Nov 2025, https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/07/1165191

[10] "How are we funded", *UN Peacekeeping*, accessed 25 Nov 2025, https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/how-we-are-funded#:~:text=The%202024%2D2025%20budget%20(about,2024%20(about%206.1%20bllion)

[11] Linda J Bilmes, VS Ibanez, Yahya Chaudhry, and Jonathan R Hakim, "Strengthening Management of UN Peacekeeping Operations: A Review of UN Peacekeeping Operations Audits", *Harvard Kennedy School*, John F Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Dec 2021, accessed 22 Nov 2025, https://www.hks.harvard.edu/publications/strengthening-management-un-peacekeeping-operations-review-un-peacekeeping-operations

[12] Daniel Druckman and Paul Stern, "Perspectives on Evaluating Peacekeeping Missions", *The International Journal of Peace Studies*, Volume 4, Number 1, Jan 1999, accessed 24 Nov 2025, https://www3.gmu.edu/programs/icar/ijps/vol4_1/druckman.htm

[13] "10 Conflicts to Watch in 2025", *International Crisis Group* commentary, 01 Jan 2025, accessed 20 Nov 2025, https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/10-conflicts-watch-2025

[14] "Background", *United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria,* accessed 21 Nov 2025, https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/past/unsmis/background.shtml

[15] Major General (Dr) AK Bardalai, VSM (Retd), "United Nations Peacekeeping in Ukraine: Is it a Possibility?", *Journal of the United Service Institution of India*, Vol. CLV, No. 640, Apr-Jun 2025, accessed 25 Nov 2025, https://usiofindia.org/pdf/file_68872628a6cedApril-June2025-61-68.pdf

[16] "Future of Peacekeeping", *UN Peacekeeping*, accessed 01 Dec 2025, https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/future-of-peacekeeping

[17] Adam Day, "The Future of UN Peace Operations in a Changing Conflict Environment", *United Nations Peacekeeping*, Policy Paper, accessed 30 Nov 2025, https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/future-of-peacekeeping

[18] "The Future of Peacekeeping, New Models, and Related Capabilities", *UN Peacekeeping*, Oct 2024, accessed 30 Nov 2025, https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/the_future_of_peacekeeping_new_models_and_related_capabilities_-_nov1.pdf

[19] "Troop and Police Contributors", *United Nations Peacekeeping*, accessed 30 Nov 2025, https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors?date_filter%5Bvalue%5D%5Bmonth%5D=&date_filter_1%5Bvalue%5D%5Byear%5D=2024