# Peacekeeping as Diplomacy: India's Strategic Future in Global Politics

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## Abstract

*This article argues that India's peacekeeping engagements, from United Nations Operation in the Congo in the 1960s to United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the present day, should be understood not only as operational commitments but as deliberate forms of peace diplomacy. Drawing on theories of soft power, strategic narratives, and middle-power diplomacy, the article examines how India's peacekeeping legacy can be reframed as a strategic asset—supporting its aspirations for global leadership. Simultaneously, the article critically interrogates the reputational, structural, and policy challenges that may inhibit India's ability to leverage peacekeeping into lasting diplomatic capital. By repositioning peacekeeping as a site of normative statecraft, the article contributes to a growing body of scholarship that explores how emerging powers engage with and reshape the global governance architecture.*

## Introduction

India has established itself as one of the most consistent and substantial contributors to United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations, with a history that traces back to the formative years of the UN's peace enforcement mandate. From the deployment of Indian medical and diplomatic support in Korea during the 1950s to its continued presence in more recent missions such as United

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Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (MONUSCO) and UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), India has cultivated a reputation as a reliable and principled actor in international security governance.[1] While traditionally framed through lenses of humanitarian commitment, non-alignment, and moral responsibility, India's peacekeeping engagements have increasingly been recognised as a strategic asset, a tool to assert normative claims and enhance diplomatic leverage on the global stage.[2]

As the global order transitions toward multipolarity, characterised by shifting alliances and contested multilateral frameworks, India is recalibrating its foreign policy orientation. No longer content to operate solely as a regional actor, India now seeks to redefine its international identity as a normative global power, committed to reforming multilateral institutions, strengthening Global South solidarity, and asserting its candidature for permanent membership in the UN Security Council (UNSC).[3] Within this evolving context, peacekeeping provides a high-impact diplomatic platform through which India can project soft power, foster bilateral and regional partnerships, and craft a self-image as a responsible and pragmatic international actor.[4]

This article contends that India's long-standing and ongoing participation in UN peacekeeping must be understood not only as an operational or altruistic commitment, but as a form of peace diplomacy, a strategic intervention aimed at securing long-term diplomatic capital, and international legitimacy. By reframing peacekeeping through a foreign policy lens, the article explores how India might better integrate this legacy into its broader global ambitions, including multilateral leadership, strategic partnerships, and South-South cooperation. At the same time, it critically interrogates the tensions and contradictions inherent in this strategy: the reputational risks, institutional incoherence, and policy under investment that may undermine its effectiveness.

In doing so, the analysis situates India's peacekeeping trajectory within key debates in international relations, especially those concerning global governance, middle-power diplomacy, and the performative dimensions of international legitimacy.

## Peacekeeping as a Diplomatic Asset: A Theoretical Lens

Reconceptualising peacekeeping as a diplomatic tool necessitates a shift away from purely security-centric interpretations toward frameworks that account for its symbolic, normative, and strategic dimensions. Traditionally, peacekeeping has been analysed within the field of security studies, primarily in relation to conflict mitigation, force deployment, and civilian protection.[5] However, a growing body of scholarship has begun to reposition peacekeeping within the theoretical terrain of soft power diplomacy, norm entrepreneurship, and strategic narrative construction.[6]

For India, a state situated at the intersection of postcolonial legacy and rising power status, peacekeeping offers a unique mechanism for the projection of soft power, defined by Joseph Nye as the ability to shape preferences through attraction rather than coercion.[7] India's contributions to peacekeeping, largely undertaken without explicit political or economic preconditions, facilitate the construction of a strategic narrative of India as a principled, inclusive, and multilateral actor. This image aligns with India's long-standing self-positioning as a non-aligned, anti-colonial voice committed to international justice and cooperative security.

Moreover, peacekeeping can be interpreted as a form of performative diplomacy, in which the act of participation serves to perform and reaffirm India's identity as a responsible stakeholder in the global governance architecture.[8] These performances are not merely symbolic; they carry material and reputational implications, particularly in Africa, where India's peacekeeping presence intersects with historical ties, economic cooperation, and South-South development rhetoric.[9] In this way, peacekeeping becomes an instrumental practice for cultivating regional trust, enhancing bilateral relationships, and reinforcing India's leadership credentials in the Global South.

This diplomatic utility is further underscored by the concept of strategic narratives, the use of communicative actions to shape international understandings of a state's identity, intentions, and role.[10] India's sustained presence in missions often neglected by major western powers allows it to frame itself as a defender of global justice, postcolonial solidarity, and ethical interventionism. Such narratives bolster India's claim to multilateral leadership and lend normative weight to its calls for UNSC reform.[11]

Also, the middle power theory posits that states that are neither hegemonic nor marginal can still exert influence by facilitating cooperation, mediating conflict, and shaping norms.[12] India's peacekeeping diplomacy, when viewed through this lens, emerges as a means of accumulating moral capital and symbolic authority, compensating for its historical exclusion from the core decision-making structures of global governance, despite its demographic and military scale.

By synthesising insights from soft power theory, narrative diplomacy, and middle power scholarship, this article repositions peacekeeping as a deliberate and underexploited instrument of Indian foreign policy, a site where global visibility, moral authority, and diplomatic strategy converge.

## India's Historical Role in United Nations Peacekeeping

Having participated in over 50 of the UN's 71 peacekeeping operations[13], India stands as one of the most significant Troop-Contributing Countries (TCCs) globally. Its role in shaping the architecture of post-World War II peacekeeping cannot be overstated, having contributed not only personnel but also ideological legitimacy and institutional leadership.

India's involvement began with the UN Command in Korea (1950–54), where it provided a medical unit, signalling its early commitment to humanitarian principles. However, it was the UN Operation in the Congo (1960–64) that marked a turning point. India's military engagement during the Katanga crisis demonstrated its capacity to undertake complex, high-risk missions in postcolonial conflict zones. The performance of Indian officers, such as Major General Indar Jit Rikhye and Rajeshwar Dayal, highlighted India's capacity to contribute not just manpower but also strategic leadership.

During the Cold War, India's peacekeeping footprint expanded across Cyprus (UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus), Lebanon (UN Interim Force in Lebanon), and Namibia (UN Transition Assistance Group), where its reputation as a non-aligned, neutral actor enabled it to mediate tensions in ideologically polarised environments.[14] These deployments reinforced India's diplomatic identity within the Non-Aligned Movement, illustrating a form of global engagement rooted in solidarity with newly independent or conflict-affected states.

Post-Cold War, India's involvement intensified with deployments in Rwanda (UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda), Sierra Leone (UN Mission in Sierra Leone), and the DRC (UN Organization Mission in the DRC and MONUSCO). These missions exemplified a shift from traditional peacekeeping to multidimensional operations encompassing humanitarian aid, civilian protection, and institutional rebuilding. Indian medical and engineering contingents were pivotal in restoring critical infrastructure, offering a template for integrated peacebuilding interventions.

Equally significant has been India's gender-inclusive approach to peacekeeping. The deployment of the first all-female Formed Police Unit in Liberia (2007-16) represented a paradigmatic shift, aligning India with the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda under UNSC Resolution 1325.[15] These contributions were both symbolic and strategic, enhancing India's normative credentials within the UN system.

India's peacekeeping strategy may be characterised by three core principles: sustained scale of deployment, emphasis on South-South solidarity, and minimal political conditionality. Despite these contributions, however, India's peacekeeping legacy has not been systematically translated into diplomatic capital, an underutilisation, the author argues, must be redressed to advance India's aspirations for global leadership.

## Contemporary Diplomatic Benefits of Peacekeeping

In the evolving geopolitical landscape, UN peacekeeping functions as a strategic conduit for diplomatic signalling, soft power projection, and multilateral engagement. As India seeks to transition from a regional actor to a global leader, its robust peacekeeping legacy offers both symbolic capital and strategic leverage to support its aspirations.

India has consistently outperformed several current permanent members in terms of troop contributions and mission engagement, particularly in protracted and high-risk theatres such as the DRC (MONUSCO).[16] These deployments not only exemplify India's operational reliability but also affirm its willingness to assume substantive responsibility in global security affairs. The country's sustained involvement in such missions strengthens its normative

argument for institutional reform by highlighting its commitment to collective peace and burden-sharing within the UN system.

Beyond multilateral forums, peacekeeping has emerged as a significant vector of India's South-South diplomacy, particularly in its relations with Africa. Through deployments in Liberia, Sudan, South Sudan, and the DRC, India has cultivated goodwill, legitimacy, and trust across a continent central to its multilateral strategy. These missions complement broader diplomatic overtures, such as the India-Africa Forum Summits, by grounding political rhetoric in tangible on-the-ground engagements. In contrast to extractive models of foreign engagement often pursued by other powers, India's peacekeeping presence resonates with narratives of postcolonial solidarity, mutual development, and ethical partnership.[17]

In the context of an increasingly competitive and militarised Asia, where China's foreign policy's assertiveness dominates regional discourse, India's long-standing and ideologically rooted peacekeeping commitments provide an alternative narrative of peaceful leadership and ethical statecraft. Unlike China's more recent and strategically calculated engagement in peace operations, India's contributions are perceived as authentic and principled, enhancing its normative credibility. This positioning is particularly salient in forums, such as Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, where India's peacekeeping identity supports its broader soft power agenda.

India has also adapted to the evolving nature of peace operations, which now encompass institution-building, humanitarian relief, and post-conflict reconstruction. Its deployments of engineering units, medical staff, and administrative personnel reflect a shift toward developmental diplomacy—one that reinforces bilateral ties and projects a more holistic image of India as a stabilising force. These engagements not only bolster India's humanitarian credentials but also build operational trust in the Indian military, fostering pathways for defence cooperation, training partnerships, and regional security collaboration.

A particularly distinctive feature of India's peacekeeping diplomacy is its emphasis on gender sensitivity, as discussed in the previous section. These contributions are not merely symbolic; they advance the global WPS agenda and reinforce India's image

as a progressive international actor committed to inclusive peacebuilding.

Taken together, India's peacekeeping diplomacy functions at the intersection of pragmatism and normativity—projecting a state identity grounded in stability, developmental ethics, and multilateral cooperation. However, the long-term efficacy of this diplomatic tool depends on its strategic integration within India's broader foreign policy objectives. Without deliberate alignment, peacekeeping risks remaining an underutilised asset rather than a cornerstone of India's global diplomatic identity.

## Strategic Limitations and Risks

Despite the apparent benefits, India's peacekeeping diplomacy is constrained by a series of strategic and structural limitations that, if left unaddressed, risk diminishing its global influence. Following are some key limitations and risks seeking proper addressing:

- **Fragmented Institutional Coordination**. A fundamental challenge lies in the absence of an integrated policy linking India's peacekeeping operations with its foreign policy objectives. Unlike China, which coordinates peacekeeping with economic statecraft and infrastructure diplomacy, India's efforts remain largely siloed within the Ministry of Defence (MoD), with insufficient synchronisation with the Ministry of External Affairs or India's Permanent Mission to the UN. This lack of strategic messaging has prevented India from converting operational contributions into diplomatic capital. The underutilisation of peacekeeping in strategic forums, public diplomacy, and leadership training programmes reflects a broader issue of institutional incoherence.

- **Reputational Vulnerabilities**. UN peacekeeping has increasingly come under scrutiny due to allegations of misconduct, sexual exploitation, and civilian harm.[18] While India's record remains relatively strong, reputational risks are collective; the failures of one contingent can undermine the credibility of the entire peacekeeping architecture. India's limited transparent disciplinary mechanisms may exacerbate these risks, eroding the ethical legitimacy that it seeks to project.

● **Domestic Apathy and Narrative Deficit**. Peacekeeping remains marginal in India's domestic political and media discourses. Unlike other aspects of strategic policy, such as defence procurement or diaspora engagement, it lacks electoral salience and public resonance. This narrative deficit limits its mobilisation as a soft power instrument and hampers efforts to link peacekeeping with national identity or developmental aspirations.

● **Operational Overstretch and Human Costs**. India's peacekeeping deployments, though diplomatically beneficial, impose a human and logistical burden. With over 180 fatalities till date, India has borne some of the heaviest casualties among TCCs.[19] Concurrent military commitments in the Kashmir Valley and along the Sino-Indian border add further strain, raising questions about sustainability and strategic prioritisation.

● **Competitive Diplomatic Terrain in Africa**: While India's peacekeeping record in Africa has generated goodwill, it must navigate the optics of a former colony deploying troops in other postcolonial states. Moreover, India faces stiff competition from China, Turkey, and the Gulf states, who offer extensive economic incentives, infrastructure projects, and media engagement. In this context, peacekeeping, if not situated within a larger ecosystem of economic and cultural diplomacy, may struggle to sustain influence.

## The Future: Peacekeeping and India's Global Political Aspirations

As the international system transitions toward a multipolar order, India stands at a pivotal moment in its diplomatic trajectory, negotiating the tension between its historical commitments to non-alignment and its aspirations for a more pronounced role in global governance. In this reconfigured geopolitical environment, UN peacekeeping offers India a versatile and underleveraged platform to amplify its diplomatic presence, consolidate its normative identity, and assert its credentials as a responsible stakeholder in global affairs. However, to realise the full strategic utility of peacekeeping, India must reconceptualise it not as a subsidiary military or humanitarian endeavour, but as a central pillar of its foreign policy and soft power infrastructure.

A future-facing strategy must begin with the recasting of peacekeeping as strategic diplomacy. India's continued participation in UN missions should be informed by a deliberate alignment with broader foreign policy objectives, ranging from its Indo-Pacific vision and South-South cooperation to its longstanding advocacy for UNSC reform. This necessitates a coordinated inter-ministerial architecture involving the Ministry of External Affairs, MoD, and India's Permanent Mission to the UN, ensuring coherence in narrative construction, mission selection, and diplomatic follow-up. Moreover, India could elevate its influence by focusing on missions that align with thematic priorities, such as gender inclusion, post-conflict development, and regional solidarity, particularly in Africa and the Caribbean. By adopting a mission-driven, ideationally consistent approach, India can move peacekeeping from the margins of its strategic discourse to its centre.

Parallel to strategic deployment is the imperative of narrative construction and visibility. Transforming India's legacy in peacekeeping into diplomatic capital requires active storytelling through military memoirs, cultural diplomacy, oral history archives, and peacekeeping exhibitions. Institutions such as the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, the Military Literature Festival, and Indian cultural centres abroad could serve as platforms for narrating peacekeeping as part of India's evolving identity as a humane, peace-oriented power. Public diplomacy initiatives must move beyond numbers and medals to foreground the lived experiences of peacekeepers, the ethical dilemmas they navigate, and the communities they serve.

Further, to sustain and scale its peacekeeping diplomacy, India must invest in institutionalising peacekeeping leadership and knowledge. This involves developing inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms, peacekeeping-focused policy cells, and interdisciplinary training modules that integrate tactical preparation with cultural competence, ethical reasoning, and diplomatic literacy. More importantly, India must maximise creating leadership pipelines that allow military personnel returning from UN missions to transition into policymaking, diplomatic training, or academic research roles, thus, embedding operational experience into strategic statecraft.

India must capitalise on initiating a multilateral mechanism that could facilitate peer learning on ethical challenges, peacekeeper welfare, and accountability frameworks, while advancing a collective voice on reforming the UN's approach to peace operations. By shaping not just practice but the norms governing peacekeeping, India can expand its influence from a participant to a country that redefines how peacekeeping is understood and governed.

Finally, India must ensure that its peacekeeping engagements are intimately connected to its larger agenda of global governance reform. Being one of the largest contributors to UN peacekeeping, India possesses the moral authority to critique and reshape multilateral institutions.

## Conclusion

India's contributions to UN peacekeeping are among the most substantial and sustained in the history of the organisation. Peacekeeping offers India a multi-faceted diplomatic instrument: it is at once a vehicle for strategic visibility, a site of normative contestation, and a platform for reimagining multilateralism. However, this potential will remain unrealised unless peacekeeping is embedded within India's long-term foreign policy vision, supported by narrative infrastructure, institutional coherence, and leadership investment.

This article has argued that India must transition from viewing peacekeeping as a subsidiary obligation to understanding it as a cornerstone of its foreign policy toolkit. Through a combination of strategic mission selection, narrative amplification, institutional reform, and multilateral coalition-building, India can leverage peacekeeping as a soft power resource and a platform for global leadership. Such a transformation would not only support India's aspirations for a permanent UNSC seat and greater influence in global governance institutions but also reaffirm its identity as a postcolonial state committed to ethical engagement and inclusive multilateralism.

In an era where legitimacy, narrative, and normative capital are as important as material power, peacekeeping presents India not only with a proud past to commemorate, but also with a powerful future to shape. Whether India will seize this opportunity

may well determine the trajectory of its global role in the decades to come.

## Endnotes

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