India and United Nations Peacekeeping Missions: Role, Contributions, and Strategic Significance

Dr. Yasharth Gautam, Assistant Professor
Defence and strategic studies
Bareilly College Bareilly

Abstract

United Nations peacekeeping has emerged as one of the most valuable tools for keeping international peace and security within conflict-prone areas. After gaining independence, India has been an active and year-round participant in United Nations Peacekeeping Missions (UNPKMs). Coming on board as one of the most contributing countries in terms of troops, India has shown its interest in multilateralism, global peace and world security. The Indian peacekeepers have been deployed to various operating platforms in Asia, Africa, Europe and the Middle East, where they have been deployed to perform a variety of jobs which may include ceasefire and monitoring, civilian protection, and post-conflict rebuilding. The paper will discuss the development of India in terms of its participation in the UN peacekeeping operations, its contribution to the operations, its successes and difficulties, and its implications on the foreign and defence policy of India.

Keywords: India, United Nations, Peacekeeping, UNPKMs, Indian Armed Forces, Global Security.

1. Introduction

The United Nations formulated the concept of peacekeeping as a practical solution to the conflicts that were posing threats to the stability and international peace in the post-Second World War era (Bellamy, Williams and Griffin, 2010). The concept of peacekeeping was not stated in the UN Charter, but it developed as an elastic tool of controlling conflicts without the use of coercion. In 1948, the first UN peacekeeping mission was introduced on the basis of the creation of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization that was based on the presence of unarmed military observers to oversee ceasefire agreements (Thakur, 2016).

UN peacekeeping missions go on three fundamental principles that include consent of the parties, impartiality and non-use of force except in self-defence and defence of the mandate (United Nations, 2008). These are the principles that are at the heart of ensuring the legitimacy, impartiality and efficiency of the peacekeeping operations in the tumultuous political settings. Peacekeeping has transformed tremendously since the year 1948. The traditional roles of peacekeeping missions have been confined to the observation of ceasefire and the management of inter-state conflicts, but in recent times, multidimensional missions incorporating both military and police and civilian elements have become prevalent. Civilian protection, election monitoring, promotion of human rights, rule of law, and post-conflict peacebuilding are some of the complex missions that have been handled by these missions (Diehl & Druckman, 2010; UNDPKO, 2024).

Table 1: Evolution of UN Peacekeeping and India's Role (1948–2024)

Aspect	UN Peacekeeping Framework	India's Role
Origin (1948)	Emerged as a pragmatic response to post-war conflicts through observer missions	Early supporter and participant in peacekeeping initiatives
Core Principles	Consent, impartiality, and limited use of force	India strictly adheres to these principles in deployments
Evolution of Mandates	Shift from traditional to multidimensional peacekeeping	Adapted to complex roles including protection and peacebuilding
Composition	Military, police, and civilian components	India contributes troops, police units, and medical teams
Scale of Operations	Large, long-term missions mainly in Africa	Over 250,000 Indian personnel deployed cumulatively
Normative Basis	Multilateralism and collective security	Guided by Article 51 of Indian Constitution
Contemporary Phase	Facing asymmetric threats and complex conflicts	India advocates peacekeeping reforms

Since the inception of the United Nations, India has been linked with UN peacekeeping and has emerged as one of the most consistent and stable contributors. India involves its participation based on the constitutional provisions of the country on international peace and cooperation, especially Article 51 of the Constitution of India, which underlines peaceful coexistence and international law (Government of India, 1950). The history of India's experience with colonialism has also contributed to its positive normative perspectives on settling conflicts in peaceful settings and engaging a multilateral approach (Thakur, 2016).

India is currently one of the largest troop-contributing countries in the world, having contributed over 250,000 troops to over 50 UN peacekeeping missions, a cumulative contribution of over 250,000 troops (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023; UN Peacekeeping, 2024). The Indian peacekeepers are well known to be professional, effective in their operations and also to have humanitarian outreach, especially when dealing with difficult missions in Africa and the Middle East. Therefore, the participation of India in the UN peacekeeping does not demonstrate the mere operational effort, but also its global strategic vision of ensuring world peace and security.

2. Evolution of UN Peacekeeping and India's Entry

In 1948, the United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation or UNTSO became the first peacekeeping mission of the United Nations in the Middle East, to oversee the ceasefire agreements after the Arab-Israeli War. UNTSO was the start of UN peacekeeping as a viable conflict management tool based on the use of unarmed military observers and under the agreement of the warring parties. Considering its low scale, UNTSO established the institutional and normative principles of peacekeeping such as neutrality, consent, and minimum use of force, which are still applied to the work of the UN nowadays (Bellamy, Williams and Griffin, 2010; United Nations, 2024).

The initial engagement in the peacekeeping by India has been highly recognised by the international community during the Korean War (1950 53). Although India was not a direct combatant, it was a very important actor with respect to diplomacy and humanitarian intervention via the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC). The commission was chaired by India and forbade the Custodian Force of India to oversee the repatriation of prisoners of war so that it would remain neutral and comply to the humanitarian principles (Thakur, 2016). This position contributed to the improved image of India as a responsible and unbiased participant in international conflict resolution and showed its inclination towards peaceful and multilateral activity.

India has, over the decades, proved to be one of the most steady and mature in completing peacekeeping missions in the UN. India has, since the 1950s, been involved in over 50 peacekeeping missions by the UN in Asia, Africa, Europe and the Middle East. By 2024, India had cumulatively deployed more than 250,000 troops to the UN, becoming one of the top-contributing countries of troops in UN history (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023; UN Peacekeeping, 2024). The Indian peacekeepers have been deployed to complex and high-risk missions in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Lebanon and Liberia.

The years of service in the UN peacekeeping missions have given the armed forces of India a wide range of operational experience under varying conflict conditions, such as civil wars, post-conflict transitions, and protection-of-civilians missions. Indian groups are commonly recognised to be very professional, disciplined, and focused on humanitarian outreach, such as medical support, infrastructure building, and community involvement (Singh, 2021). This has not only enhanced the peace operations of the UN, but also improved the international perception of India as a promoter of international peace, multilateralism, and collective security.

3. Major United Nations Peacekeeping Missions Involving India

Indian involvement in United Nations peacekeeping missions is one of the longest-term and most multi-dimensional involvements of any troop-contributing nation. The Indian intervention, as shown in the block diagram, is also helpful in various geographical locations and the contextual settings of operation, portraying the continuity aspect of history as well as the adaptive capacity. From the missions of the Cold War period to modern multidimensional operations, the Indian peacekeepers have been instrumental in stabilisation, humanitarian aid, and protection of the civilian population.
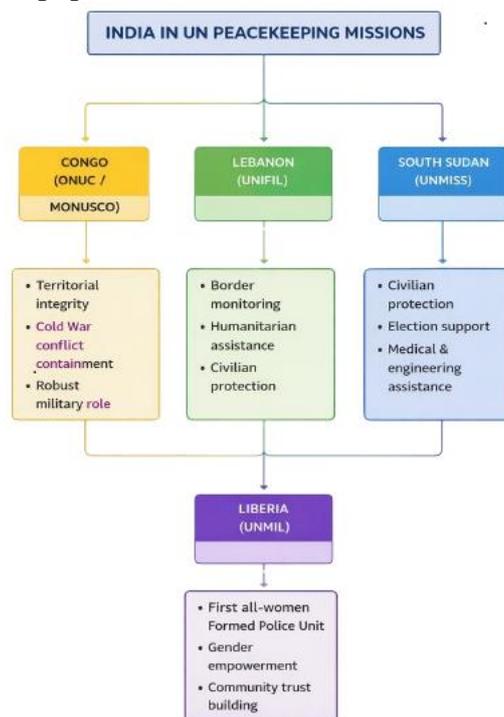
India played a very notable role in the United Nations Operation in the Congo (ONUC) in the Congo during the 1960s. The Indian forces had been given strong military duties that included the continuity of territorial integrity and the avoidance of the spillover of Cold War tensions into a regional war. According to scholars, the operations of India in Congo showed that there was an early ability to manage complicated peacekeeping missions that integrated the use of military force with political restraint (Findlay, 2011). This activity is ongoing in the current

day with MONUSCO in high-risk settings regarding the protection of civilians and the containment of armed groups (Williams, 2020).

The monitoring of the border and humanitarian assistance of a weak security environment in Lebanon by the role of India in Lebanon under the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) is a good example. Indian battalions have also played a key role in the ceasefire along the Blue Line and at the same time have been involved in reaching the locals through medical camps and repairing infrastructures, which helps in building trust between civilians and peacekeepers (Raja, 2018).

The United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) is the transformation of peacekeeping into a multidimensional structure in the case of South Sudan. During the time of internal conflict, Indian contingents have been instrumental in the protection of internally displaced persons, electoral processes, medical and engineering assistance. Howard (2019) notes that such roles emphasise the growing complexity and risk of exposure to modern peacekeepers.

The deployment of the first all-women Formed Police Unit in the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) was a historic milestone by India. Not only did it strengthen domestic security and build confidence among the population, but it also supported gender empowerment in the UN peacekeeping institutions, which impacted the further design of missions on the global level (Goulding, 2017; Yuval-Davis, 2021).

4. India's Contributions to UN Peacekeeping

India has a multidimensional role in the peacekeeping of the United Nations, which includes military, police, as well as humanitarian. Through these contributions, the peacekeeping missions of the UN have become much more effective, legitimate and acceptable to the local communities of conflict prone areas.

Table 2 : India's Contributions to UN Peacekeeping

Dimension	Nature of Contribution	Key Impact
Military	Infantry, engineers, aviation, and medical units	Civilian protection, operational stability
Police	Law enforcement, training, and election security	Strengthened rule of law and governance
Humanitarian	Medical camps, infrastructure, and community projects	Local trust and mission legitimacy

4.1 Military Contributions

India is a country that offers numerous military resources to the UN peacekeeping operations, such as infantry troops, engineering detachments, air companies, and medical assistance. There are situations where Indian Army units are often assigned to high-risk and geographically difficult areas like thick forests, deserts, and conflict areas that are faced by armed militias. They can work in all possible ways in the hostile terrain, and at the same time, with high discipline and professionalism, they have gained a reputation of reliable and effective peacekeepers of Indian troops. As per the modern peacekeeping evaluations, the Indian contingents have been instrumental in the force protection, area domination patrols, and defence of the civilian population facing imminent threat (Howard, 2019; Williams, 2020).

4.2 Police Contributions

The Indian police units are very important in enhancing post-conflict governance through strengthening law enforcement and institutional capacity building. Indian Formed Police Units (FPUs) and Individual Police Officers (IPOs) help in crowd control, safeguarding of elections, criminal investigations, as well as training of local police personnel. All this is essential in the process of restoring order in society and regaining confidence between the citizens and the state structures in post-conflict societies. Research on UN policing emphasises that Indian groups of

police have played a major role in the professionalisation of local policing systems and the spread of the rule-of-law standards (Goulding, 2017; Rauta, 2021).

4.3 Humanitarian and Developmental Role

Other than security-related mandates, Indian peacekeepers are also involved in humanitarian and developmental missions that meet the short-term and long-term needs of the local people. These are medical outreach, building roads, schools, and hospitals, and community development projects which are directed towards building confidence. These activities help to increase the credibility of the UN missions because they show practical returns of peacekeeping at the grassroots level. According to scholars, these humanitarian initiatives are essential towards winning the hearts and minds and making the peace processes sustainable (Findlay, 2011; Yuval-Davis, 2021).

4.1 Military Contributions

India offers an all-around supply of military resources to the United Nations peacekeeping operations that include infantry battalions, engineering detachments, aviation units, logistics units, and medical units. The Indian Army forces are often used in a high-risk and geographically vulnerable area, e.g. in a dense forest, desert or mountainous area, or conflict zone, with armed militia. This kind of deployment demands manoeuvrability, cultural adeptness, and long-term durability, which Indian peacekeepers have proved to be able to perform continuously in missions.

Indian units are more specifically appreciated because of their previous experience in the operation of counter-insurgency and low-intensity conflict, which helps them to be more viable in the peacekeeping processes of force protection, patrol of area domination, convoy security and defence of the civilians who are facing a threat. The military peacekeeping evaluations have indicated that Indian soldiers have demonstrated a good capacity to exercise firm mandate execution against discipline and impartiality, and as such, the validity of the UN actions remains in place (Bellamy, 2015; Morris, 2020). Their professionalism and disciplined behaviour have helped to save the lives of more civilians and enhanced operational stability in unstable areas of missions.

Moreover, Indian military engineers and medical departments have a very important enabling role. Construction and maintenance of roads, bridges, airstrips, and mission infrastructure is done by engineering contingents, and emergency care, disease prevention, and humanitarian medical outreach are done by medical teams. These initiatives largely improve the sustainability of missions and improve relationships between peacekeepers and host communities (Nambiar, 2018; Singh, 2021).

4.2 Police Contributions

Indian police units are also critical in enhancing post-conflict governance by aiding law enforcement, control of the law and order and building institutional capacity. The peacekeeping missions involve the presence of Indian Formed Police Units (FPUs) and Individual Police Officers (IPO) to help in managing crowds, securing elections, conducting criminal investigations, and training the local police to do their duties. The activities play a critical role in regaining national trust in state institutions as well as avoiding the recurrence of war in weak post-war societies.

In studies about UN policing, it is noted that Indian police groups have contributed greatly to the professionalisation of the local policing systems by means of training programs involving human rights, community policing, and rule-of-law norms (Caparini, 2014; Varma, 2019). Their involvement helps in reducing the gap between the provision of security and the trust of the civilians, especially in societies that have been formed because of a long history of violence. Besides that, with the introduction of Indian women police officers, access to vulnerable groups has also improved, as well as gender-sensitive policing, which has led to inclusive peacebuilding results (Aoláin, 2020; Zürcher, 2022).

4.3 Humanitarian and Developmental Roles

In addition to the security-related duties, Indian peacekeepers also serve an important humanitarian and developmental role in the United Nations peacekeeping missions. These programs respond to the urgent humanitarian requirements of the populations impacted by the conflict and long-term targets of the recovery and peacebuilding in post-conflict. Medical outreach Indian contingents also run regular medical outreach, such as emergency care, maternal health, child health, vaccination, and disease-prevention initiatives in remote and underserved regions with poor or no state capacity (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023).

The Indian peacekeepers also play big roles in the development of infrastructure. The construction and repair of roads, bridges, schools, hospitals, and water supply systems is actively done by engineering units. These projects enhance transport, access to markets and government services and assist humanitarian relief efforts. Recent UN evaluations indicate that the infrastructure assistance of peacekeepers is a direct source of stabilisation through the connection of security supply with socio-economic development (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2024).

Another important aspect of the peacekeeping effort of India lies in community building and the development of confidence. Indian peacekeepers interact on a close scale with the local people via educational programs, vocational training programs, youth development activities, sports and cultural events. These engagements allow the alleviation of mistrust between security forces and civilians, as well as creating social cohesion within societies that have formed after a long conflict. The existing research on peacebuilding has pointed out that these people-centred strategies promote the local ownership of the processes of peacebuilding and minimise the possibility of a relapse of the conflict (Zurcher, 2022; Morris, 2023).

The credibility and legitimacy of UN missions have been boosted massively by the humanitarian behaviour of the Indian peacekeepers. Peacekeepers can capture the hearts and minds of local people by providing them with visible and tangible benefits at the grassroots level, which is the key to civilian cooperation, information-sharing, and the ability to execute the mission. According to the recent reports on UN reform, it is essential to incorporate humanitarian action with protection-of-civilians mandates as the key to the sustainability of the modern peacekeeping operation (United Nations Department of Peace Operations, 2023; Howard, 2024).

5. Strategic Significance of Peacekeeping for India

The strategic value of India being involved in the United Nations peacekeeping operations over a long period of time is beyond the conflict management of the present day. Among the most evident positive factors, one can single out the enhancement of the global vision of India as a good and responsible international actor. India, through its frequent use of force, officers and human aid, enhances its wish to ensure that the world remains at peace, multilateralism and regulation by the rule of law in this world. Peacekeeping is believed to have become a prominent channel, based on which India demonstrates normative leadership and responsible behaviour in power within international governance (Acharya, 2018; Malone, 2020).

Another significant instrument of military diplomacy is peacekeeping. Multinational missions enable the Indian Armed Forces to collaborate with the forces of other countries in addition to interoperability, adapting to commands and being conversant with the UN working processes. This type of exposure enhances the military capability of the service and the defence relationship with the partner states. It was found out that peacekeeping deployments are confidence-building tools, thanks to which military-to-military collaboration can be achieved at the long-term and strategic levels (Biswas, 2019; Narang, 2021).

The other important dimension is the soft power projection. The Indian peacekeepers are more inclined to work with the locals by direct means of humanitarian practices, medical clinics, and infrastructural assistance. These activities lead to a good will being formed and positive

perception of India developing in the conflict areas particularly in Africa and some parts of Middle East. This people-based strategy, as analysts put it, solidifies the existence of India both diplomatically and culturally without necessarily involving the implementation of coercive power (Chatterjee, 2017; Sen, 2022).

The long history of peacekeeping of India also puts India in a strategic position to argue that it should be allowed more leadership roles in the multilateral institutions, such as permanent membership in the UN Security Council. The recurrent discussion by India is that its extended history of providing peacekeeping services is evidence of its ability and aspiration to take the position of world security. The scholars who support the idea of reforming the UN mention that the voice of such countries as India, which bring troops to the events, should be more influential in the process of making mandates and decisions (Weiss, 2018; Zakaria, 2023).

6. Challenges Faced by Indian Peacekeepers

Although India has a long history of successful experience in the United Nations peacekeeping missions that has been recognised globally, the Indian peacekeepers encounter a wide array of challenges that are changing and making it harder to ensure missions and safety in the field. The transition to stronger mandates, especially missions sanctioned by Chapter VII of the UN Charter, is one of the most notable challenges. Such mandates usually compel the peacekeepers to deploy force beyond the conventional self-defence, which may involve attacking armed forces. The academics claim that these types of mandates confuse the line between peacekeeping and peace enforcement, making Indian troops vulnerable to political pressures and operationally hazardous (Durch & Berkman, 2018).

The other significant issue is the threat to the safety of the peacekeepers, which is increasing. The modern missions are often conducted in the surroundings of asymmetric warfare, non-governmental armed militia forces, terrorism, and criminal networks. Indian peacekeepers stationed in places like Central Africa and South Sudan are ambushed, targeted and attacked with improvised explosives, hence more people are becoming casualties. The literature on peacekeeper security points out that these risks are further amplified by poor intelligence and limited mobility, as well as difficult terrain (Cunliffe, 2020; Karlsrud, 2019).

The Indian peacekeepers are also faced with political restrictions that are placed by the host states, and they may limit the freedom to move and the effective implementation of the mandate. Host governments might be opposed to some of the areas where the peacekeeping has to be monitored, like human rights monitoring or civilian protection, which can result in a stalemate of the operations. According to the analysts, this kind of political interference compromises the credibility of the mission and puts the troop-contributing nations, such as India, in awkward diplomatic situations (Autoscore, 2014).

One of the structural challenges that has remained unresolved is the low level of influence wielded by India in the formulation of mandates and in the strategic decision-making process, even though India has been one of the biggest troop-contributing nations. The UN Security Council, of which India is not a permanent member, dominates in decisions concerning mission mandates, allocation of resources, and rules of engagement. According to scholars, such an imbalance diminishes accountability and effectiveness because the contributors of troops are not contributing enough to the planning of operations (Smith & Boutellis, 2021).

7. India's Perspective on UN Peacekeeping Reforms

India has continuously expressed its view of reform-based arguments about United Nations peacekeeping, with the vast experience of its operation and the long-term engagement as a significant troop-contributing nation. One of the key pillars of the India reform agenda is the need to have improved consultations with troop- and police-contributing countries (TCCs/PCCs) in the process of formulating, modifying and renewing peacekeeping mandates. Indian policymakers believe that countries which contribute personnel on the ground have

important information on operational procedures and thus should have a significant say in decisions made by the UN Security Council (Sidhu, 2020; Mahajan, 2022).

The other important issue for India is the necessity to have transparent, realistic and attainable mandates. Peacekeeping operations in recent years have been assigned broad and sometimes vague missions such as civilian protection, combating armed forces, and state-building, sometimes without sufficient political goodwill or even resources. According to scholars, India has sounded this alarm on numerous occasions and claimed that a lack of clarity on objectives worsens the effectiveness of the mission and exposes peacekeepers to unnecessary dangers (Puri, 2017; Novosel, 2019).

The other issue that is strongly promoted by India is proper equipment, logistical support, and resources to conduct a peacekeeping mission. The disparity between mandates and capabilities, as assessed by Indians, has increased particularly in high-risk missions that are designed to be conducted under hostile environments. The prompt delivery of the equipment, intelligence, mobility, and medical evacuation facilities is considered the key to the success of missions and the safety of the peacekeepers (Brosig, 2021; Malik, 2023).

Another reform agenda is the accountability of attacks on peacekeepers. India has strongly stressed over and over again that the assault on UN personnel is a gross violation of international law and should be treated by a viable inquiry and prosecution. Analysts point to the Indian effort to advocate more effective legal measures and political coercion of host countries to stop impunity and increase deterrence (Zwaneburg, 2018; Tardy, 2022).

Lastly, there is the idea of India that peacekeeping needs to be reinforced under the umbrella of broader peace prevention and peacebuilding efforts because military actions cannot guarantee permanent peace. The concept of sustainable peace as understood by India involves the incorporation of peacekeeping and political dialogue, developmental aid, institution-building, and ownership by the locals. It is a holistic way that makes peacekeeping in line with the long-term stability and human security goals (Raghavan, 2021; Weissman, 2024).

8. Conclusion

The years of service by India in the United Nations Peacekeeping Missions are evidence of its commitment to global peace and security. India has played a major role in influencing the performance and the credibility of the UN peacekeeping through long term commitment of troops, humanitarian intervention and leadership programs. Although the reforms and adaptation are needed due to the continuously evolving security challenges, the involvement of India cannot be overlooked in the future of the UN peace operations. Enhancing the presence of India in the governance of peacekeeping operations will not only add to the effectiveness of the mission but also contribute to the strengthening of the global security architecture that is more inclusive and representative.

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