



INDIA AND INTERNATIONAL PEACE OPERATIONS

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India has been one of the largest contributors to United Nations peace operations since the 1950s.¹ Despite this, there has been little debate in the Indian strategic and academic communities about the country's political commitment to international peace operations. Discussion of the changing nature of international peace operations and its implications for India has been limited to a very small circle in the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and the Indian Army. While the MEA has in recent years seen participation in international peacekeeping as a valuable instrument in the quest for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, the military establishment has underlined the professional benefits to itself from the peace operations.

This paper looks at India's participation in peace operations from a broader strategic perspective and assesses the prospects for its future evolution. In particular, it seeks to explain the inescapable paradox of India's 'peace operations' since independence: while India has frequently used force in neighbouring states to achieve political objectives, at the global level it has stressed the importance of state sovereignty and has cautioned against military intervention in states' internal affairs. To put it another way, there is a tension between India's unilateral execution of 'peace operations' in and around the Indian subcontinent and its insistence on peace operations elsewhere being multilateral and authorized by the UN.

I. The legacy of the Raj

India's intensive participation in international peace operations, and that of other South Asian states, cannot be understood without a serious look at the military legacy of the British Raj. From the late 18th century to World War II, the armed forces of pre-partition India were at the very centre of the defence system of the British Empire, which stretched from the eastern Mediterranean to the South China Sea. From Egypt to China and from southern Africa to the Philippines, the Indian Army participated in British imperial 'stability operations' throughout the 19th century.² In the 20th century the Indian Army played a critical part in the two world wars—with more than a million Indian soldiers participating. By 1945 the Indian Army was the largest volunteer army the world had ever seen, and India's material and human

SUMMARY

● Since the earliest days of United Nations peacekeeping, India has been one of the most important troops contributors and a champion of multilateralism and state sovereignty at the global level. This emphasis on state sovereignty is at odds with India's involvement in South Asian conflicts, where it has acted unilaterally to maintain stability and protect its interests. India's approach in this regard cannot be properly understood without an appreciation of the legacy of the British rule of India (the Raj) and the first decades of independence.

As an emerging power, India's strategic interests now once again extend far beyond South Asia. India's military and economic ties with major powers and cooperation with its neighbours have expanded significantly in recent years. Simultaneously, the context and nature of international peacekeeping are changing. India needs to adapt its approach to peacekeeping in a way that reflects both the evolution of peacekeeping and India's changing international role.

¹ See Permanent Mission of India to the UN, 'India and United Nations: India's contribution to UN peacekeeping missions', [n.d.], <<http://www.un.int/india/>>.

² For an account of all Indian expeditionary operations from the late 18th to the end of the 19th centuries see Intelligence Branch, Army Headquarters, *Frontier and Overseas Expeditions from India*, vol. VI (Government of India: Simla, 1907); reissued by Mittal Publications, Delhi, 1983.



resources were of considerable value in tilting the war in favour of the victors.³ Furthermore, the Indian Army's experience in managing civil wars and rebellions against the British Empire has contributed substantially to contemporary military counterinsurgency and counterterrorism doctrines.⁴

Given the extraordinary legacy of the armed forces of undivided India, it is hardly surprising that the successor states have emerged as the biggest participants in international peacekeeping in the post-war era. However, it is not a legacy that is remembered, let alone celebrated, in South Asia, thanks to the post-colonial rejection of the imperial legacy. Furthermore, the rest of the world does not make an organic connection between South Asia's military tradition and its extensive contributions to international peace operations.

II. The military surplus

The armies of the Raj served many functions, including internal security, defence of the subcontinent's frontiers and expeditionary operations. The 1947 partition of India, creating modern India and Pakistan, broke up the centrality of India in the security system of a critical region of the world.⁵ The creation of new borders in South Asia, the unresolved territorial issues and the continuing conflict between India and Pakistan meant that the military energies of South Asia turned inwards. Besides securing its post-partition borders, India had also to contend with the entry of China into Tibet and the eventual imperative of securing a long and contested frontier with China.⁶ Nevertheless, both India and Pakistan had sufficient military forces to spare for duties beyond South Asia.⁷

The initial impulse for South Asian peacekeeping came from Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister (1947–64), who had a strong commitment to liberal internationalism and a desire to strengthen the UN. A small but influential elite of the Indian national movement was deeply influenced by the Western critique of the power politics that led to World War I, disappointed by the failures of the League of Nations and drawn to the idea of one world that shaped liberal thinking in the interwar period. Nehru envisaged an active international role for India, despite its many pressing problems at home, and lent his voice to liberal calls for international peace achieved through the UN.⁸ Insisting that India must contribute to the maintenance of international peace and security, Nehru launched India's active participation in UN peace operations. His activism in this area could be

³ For a brief overview see Marston, D. P. and C. S. Sundaram (eds), *A Military History of India and South Asia: From the East India Company to the Nuclear Era* (Praeger: London, 2007).

⁴ Jackson, A., 'The imperial antecedents of British special forces', *RUSI Journal*, vol. 154, no. 3 (June 2009), pp. 62–68. See also Moreman, T. R., "'Small wars' and 'imperial policing': the British army and the theory and practice of colonial warfare in the British Empire, 1919–39", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1996), pp. 105–31.

⁵ For a discussion see Brobst, P. J., *The Future of the Great Game: Sir Olaf Caroe, India's Independence and the Defence of Asia* (University of Akron Press: Akron, OH, 2005).

⁶ Raghavan, S., *War and Peace in Modern India: A Strategic History of the Nehru Years* (Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2010).

⁷ At the end of Jan. 2013 Bangladesh was the top personnel contributor to UN peace operations, contributing 8781 uniformed personnel, followed by Pakistan (8216) and India (7840). Together they accounted for 27% of uniformed personnel deployed to UN peace operations worldwide.

⁸ Bhagavan, M., *The Peacemakers: India and the Quest for One World* (Harper Collins: New Delhi, 2012).



sustained because of the surplus military capability that could be deployed for the international public good. India's example was soon emulated by Pakistan and later by Bangladesh and Nepal.

Closer to home, apart from his liberal internationalist commitments, Nehru chose to continue the Indian military tradition of providing security to the smaller states of the subcontinent and thereby strengthening India's own defences.⁹ Nehru signed security treaties with Bhutan, Nepal and Sikkim during 1949–50. However, Nehru's India did not have the resources to sustain the British Raj's role as a security provider in the Indian Ocean and Asia–Pacific regions. Participation in international peace operations underlined India's inherent potential to play such a role, however, and bridged the gap between its resources and its aspirations for a larger role in the world. Given the nationalist opposition to the use of armed forces for imperial purposes, India chose to limit its participation to UN-mandated peace operations.

India was not the only South Asian state that aspired to an international role. Although it inherited only a small part of the Raj's military resources, Pakistan also developed an international strategic profile. Its military capabilities were sufficient to make it an attractive partner for the West in constructing cold war alliances like the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO).¹⁰ While these alliances did not survive for long, the Pakistani Army carved out an independent role for itself in training security forces in the Middle East and occasionally guarding the ruling families there.¹¹

Those who view India's and Pakistan's military roles primarily from the perspective of UN peace operations tend to miss the larger significance of the internationalist military tradition in the subcontinent.

Given the military legacy of undivided India, it is hardly surprising that the successor states have emerged as the biggest participants in international peacekeeping

III. The cold war and beyond

During the cold war India contributed 38 000 troops to UN operations on the Korean Peninsula, in Indochina, in the Middle East and in the Congo.¹² The end of the cold war increased both push and pull factors for India's participation in multilateral peace operations. Since that time there has been a significant increase in both UN and other, regional, multilateral peace operations. The UN has frequently turned to India and South Asia to meet the new demands for military manpower. Meanwhile, the debate on the reform and expansion of the UN Security Council at the end of the cold war provided a political incentive for the Indian Government to intensify India's participation in international peace operations, based on the hope that this

⁹ For an assessment of the continuity in defence policies between the Raj and the Nehru government see Kavic, L. J., *India's Quest for Security: Defence Policies, 1947–65* (University of California Press: Berkeley, CA, 1967).

¹⁰ SEATO was founded in 1954 and dissolved in 1977. Its members were Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan (until 1972), the Philippines, Thailand, the United Kingdom and the United States. CENTO was founded in 1955 (as the Middle East Treaty Organization) and dissolved in 1979. Its members were Iran, Iraq (until 1959), Pakistan, Turkey and the UK.

¹¹ For an early and insightful assessment see Cohen, S. P., *The Pakistan Army* (University of California Press: Berkeley, CA, 1985).

¹² Permanent Mission of India to the UN (note 1).



would increase India's chances of gaining a Security Council seat.¹³ For the leadership of the Indian Army, the more intensive participation in UN peace operations was part of the professional development of the armed forces, providing operational experience in distant lands. It has also been argued that the large-scale Indian participation in peace operations has served India's national security interests in East Asia, the Middle East and Africa.¹⁴

The post-cold war period, however, also coincided with significant change in the nature of international peace operations. More muscular forms of intervention and peace enforcement raised concerns, particularly in the non-Western world, including India, about the territorial sovereignty of states in the developing world, the risks of international intervention in internal conflicts and the temptation to use humanitarian norms as a pretext for the pursuit of national interests. Many view India's enduring positions on these matters as emblematic of India's world view, informed by the ideology of non-alignment and 'third worldism'.

However, an empirical look at India's use of force suggests that its views on non-intervention are not absolute. India has intervened several times in the internal affairs of its South Asian neighbours, most notably in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in 1971 and in Sri Lanka in 1987–90. India's emphasis on territorial sovereignty was born out of a specific set of political circumstances. During the cold war, India had to fend off a Western tilt towards Pakistan in the dispute over Jammu and Kashmir by relying on the Soviet veto in the UN Security Council. After the cold war, US diplomatic activism on the Kashmir question during the presidency of Bill Clinton raised real concerns in India that the new agenda of humanitarian intervention might set a precedent for Western meddling in India's internal affairs.¹⁵ Overall, the 1990s was a turbulent decade for India, during which it had to cope with multiple insurgencies even as it was under pressure to reorient its economy.

In the post-cold war international debates, the question for India was not about an abstract defence of territorial sovereignty as an absolute principle but about limiting the danger of external intervention on its own territory. India's neighbourhood policy was not framed in terms of intervention versus sovereignty. Instead, it was framed in terms of the pursuit of two legacies of the Raj: a desire to continue India's role in promoting order and stability in the region, and a policy, similar to that of the Raj, of maintaining India's primacy in the subcontinent and preventing other great powers from encroaching on its neighbourhood.

While the idea of non-intervention has strong support within and outside the government, a small section of realists in India see little to gain from framing the debate as being between the seemingly irreconcilable principles of territorial sovereignty and humanitarian imperatives calling for international intervention, like the 'responsibility to protect'. They believe that a change in the overall political relationship with the United States and

¹³ For an historical account see Bellamy, A. J., Williams, P. and Griffin, S., *Understanding Peacekeeping*, 2nd ed. (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2010). On the changing logic of India's role see Bullion, A., 'India and UN peacekeeping operations', *International Peacekeeping*, vol. 4, no. 1 (1997), pp. 98–114.

¹⁴ Nambiar, S., 'India and United Nations peacekeeping: a 2020 perspective', eds K. Venkatashamy and P. George, *Grand Strategy for India: 2020 and Beyond* (Pentagon Press: New Delhi, 2012), p. 267.

¹⁵ For an account of US diplomatic interventions in Kashmir see Schaffer, H. B., *The Limits of Influence: America's Role in Kashmir* (Brookings Institution Press: Washington, DC, 2009).



the West will significantly reduce the prospects of their meddling in India's internal affairs. They argue that the silence of the US administration of President George W. Bush on the Kashmir question was related to the new strategy of befriending India and building a strategic partnership with it. The realists suggest that the Indian debate can move towards discussion of the inherent merits of intervention rather than continuing to be shaped by apprehensions about setting precedents for Kashmir.

The changing international context of peace operations provides a new basis for productive engagement in this area between India and the West. The high point of the post-cold war Western enthusiasm for the use of force to achieve political and humanitarian objectives, even without the consent of the host state, may have passed, given the recent experiences of interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. Declining domestic public support for such operations and the difficulty of sustaining a high level of military expenditure in the prolonged financial crisis have inevitably eroded Western readiness to bear the burden of interventionist operations. US President Barack Obama, throughout his first term and in the election campaign of 2012, insisted on the importance of 'nation building at home'.¹⁶ At the inauguration of his second term in January 2013, Obama emphasized the needs to avoid 'perpetual war' and focus on domestic policy.¹⁷ Furthermore, there has been increasing resistance from China and Russia in the UN Security Council to Western-proposed peace-enforcement operations. The record of UN peace operations in achieving their proclaimed objectives has also been mixed.

The question, then, is not about the absoluteness of the principles of sovereignty and humanitarianism but about building a new understanding of when, where and how the international community can use force either collectively, at the international or regional level, or through coalitions. The focus must necessarily be on judicious and responsible use of force in situations where they do no harm and have a reasonable chance of success.

IV. Rising India, changing role

There is much inertia in the Indian discourse on questions relating to peace operations. However, a number of factors are likely to change the debate if not the policy in the coming years.¹⁸ The first is that a rising India's security interests are no longer limited to the subcontinent. As an emerging trading nation—more than 40 per cent of India's gross domestic product is now linked to imports and exports¹⁹—India is dependent on imports of natural resources and export markets to sustain its recent high economic growth rates and improve the living standards of its population.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that India is expanding its security perimeter. Much like the Raj, emerging India has declared that its interests now

¹⁶ White House, 'A new chapter in Afghanistan', 5 May 2012, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/05/weekly-address-new-chapter-afghanistan>>.

¹⁷ White House, Inaugural address by President Barack Obama, 21 Jan. 2013, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/01/21/inaugural-address-president-barack-obama>>.

¹⁸ For a sense of the unfolding debate in India and South Asia see Avezov, X., 'The new geopolitics of peace operations: a dialogue with emerging powers', Workshop report, SIPRI, 2012, <http://www.sipri.org/research/conflict/pko/other_publications/NGP%20South%20Asia%20.pdf>.

¹⁹ World Bank, World Development Indicators, <<http://databank.worldbank.org/>>.



extend from the Suez Canal to the South China Sea. The past decade has seen the frequent deployment of the Indian military to evacuate Indian citizens from crisis zones (e.g. nearly 15 000 Indians were moved out of Libya during the 2011 crisis in an operation involving the Indian Navy).²⁰ The expanding sphere of interest for Indian security could break down the traditional distinction between India's approach to peace operations in its own neighbourhood and those beyond. The idea of expeditionary operations, which had long been taboo in independent India's defence discourse, is now being given a closer look by some in the strategic community.²¹ However, India does not have the military resources to secure all its emerging interests in its extended neighbourhood on its own. It stands to reason, therefore, that India must configure a broad-based approach to these challenges, including potential participation in ad hoc coalitions.

Also, India has begun to consider the deployment of its forces in international operations outside the UN framework and in coalition missions. In 2002, during the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, the Indian Navy escorted high-value US military vessels passing through the Strait of Malacca. In 2003 India seriously considered deploying a division of its army to Iraq, although the government eventually decided against it.

The Indian military has also been deployed outside the UN framework for humanitarian missions, for example in relief work in Indonesia, the Maldives and Sri Lanka following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, when India coordinated its relief activity with Australia, Japan and the USA.²² Furthermore, the Indian-US framework agreement on defence cooperation signed in June 2005 explicitly refers to joint military operations outside the UN framework by affirming that the defence establishments of the two countries shall 'collaborate in multinational operations when it is in their common interest'.²³ Although this provision of the agreement created controversy at home, the Indian Government chose to stick with it.²⁴ There is much ambivalence in India towards military coalition operations with the USA or other powers. At the same time, there is no denying that India's long period of military isolationism (apart from participation in UN peacekeeping) is coming to an end. India's military engagement with the major powers and regional actors—at the bilateral, minilateral (involving a small number of countries) and multilateral levels—has steadily expanded in recent years.²⁵

²⁰ Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 'Operation "Safe Homecoming" successfully drawing towards a close', Press release, 10 Mar. 2011, <<http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/662/>>.

²¹ See e.g. Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, *Net Security Provider: India's Out-of-area Contingency Operations* (Magnum: New Delhi, 2012); and Singh, A., *The Indian Navy's New 'Expeditionary' Outlook*, Observer Research Foundation (ORF) Occasional Paper no. 37 (ORF: New Delhi, Oct. 2012).

²² Jaishankar, S., '2004 tsunami disaster—consequences for regional cooperation', Presentation at the 26th Annual Pacific Symposium, 8–10 June 2005, <<http://www.ndu.edu/inss/symposia/Pacific2005/jaishankar.pdf>>. Dr Jaishankar was joint secretary of the Americas Division in the MEA in this period.

²³ New Framework for the US–India Defense Relationship, signed 28 June 2005, <http://merln.ndu.edu/merln/mipal/reports/US_India_Defense_Framework.doc>.

²⁴ On the agreement and the controversy surrounding it see Mohan, C. R., *Impossible Allies: Nuclear India, United States and the Global Order* (India Research Press: New Delhi, 2006).

²⁵ Fair, C. C., 'US–Indian army-to-army relations: prospects for future coalition operations', *Asian Security*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Apr. 2005), pp. 157–73; and Mohan, C. R., 'From isolation to partnership: the evolution of India's military diplomacy', National University of Singapore, Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), ISAS Working Paper no. 144, Feb. 2012.



India's approach to security regionalism, too, is beginning to evolve. While in the past India has been internationalist at the global level and unilateralist within the subcontinent, it is now beginning to take the initiative to promote regional security cooperation. Since the early 1990s it has run the 'Milan' series of biennial regional naval exercises in the Andaman Sea and joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum. In the past decade it has taken the lead in promoting the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, a consultative conference gathering senior naval officers from states around the Indian Ocean. In 2011–12 India signalled its commitment to revitalizing the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) and was quite eager to inject a security dimension into regional cooperation.²⁶ This contrasts with its active discouragement during the 1990s of all attempts to foster a regional security dialogue within the IOR-ARC framework. More broadly, bilateral and multilateral security cooperation with the major powers as well as regional actors has become an important priority for India in the Indian Ocean region.²⁷

India is now beginning to take the initiative to promote regional security cooperation

India has also begun to expand security cooperation with some of its neighbours, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, the Maldives, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. It has intensified its engagement with the military forces of its neighbours and has developed with the Maldives and Sri Lanka a trilateral framework for maritime security cooperation.²⁸ India is currently unlikely to support any regional framework for peacekeeping by the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) states collectively²⁹ However, much room exists for greater engagement with Bangladesh and Nepal (both of which contribute troops to UN peace operations) on peacekeeping issues. Less probably, such a framework could be extended to Pakistan if and when the Pakistani Army overcomes its reluctance to cooperate with its Indian counterpart.

V. Conclusions

As India's interests widen beyond the subcontinent and India recognizes the need to develop a more cooperative approach to its immediate neighbourhood, the prospect of India's reclaiming and modernizing the Raj legacy as the regional engine of economic growth and security provider has come closer to realization.³⁰

As the external context of international peace operations evolves, it is likely that India will eventually have to recast its approach and demonstrate

²⁶ Khurshid, S., Indian Minister of External Affairs, Statement to the ministerial meeting of the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation, Gurgaon, India, 2 Nov. 2012, <<http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/20763/>>.

²⁷ See e.g. Ghosh, P. K., 'Indian Ocean naval symposium: uniting the maritime Indian Ocean', *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 36, no. 3 (May–June 2012), pp. 352–57; and Naidu, G. V. C., 'Prospects for IOR-ARC regionalism: an Indian perspective', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, vol. 8, no. 1 (June 2012), pp. 21–36.

²⁸ Radhakrishnan, R. K., 'India, Sri Lanka, Maldives to sign agreement on maritime cooperation', *The Hindu*, 16 Dec. 2012.

²⁹ On security cooperation in SAARC see e.g. Bailes, A. J. K., *Regionalism in South Asian Diplomacy*, SIPRI Policy Paper no. 15 (SIPRI: Stockholm, Feb. 2007).

³⁰ For further discussion of this point see Mohan, C. R., 'Modernizing the Raj legacy', *Seminar*, no. 629 (Jan. 2012), <<http://www.india-seminar.com/>>.

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greater flexibility. The pressure for change will not come from a review of India's peacekeeping tradition or its multilateralism. Instead, the sources of transformation are likely to be the new imperatives of India's national security, the changing nature of its great power relations, the logic of maintaining a stable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region, India's growing military capabilities, the renewed awareness of its role as a regional security provider, and its increasing weight in the international system. The nature of India's participation in international peace operations can only be one element of the inevitable change in India's strategic conception of its place in the region and the world.

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