

Air Power in UN Peacekeeping

*Manmohan Bahadur**

Air power has made its presence felt ever since the Wright Flyer took to the air in 1903. The air domain, over the years and in all conflicts, has established itself as a pivotal tool in the hands of the politician and of course, the military exponent. Its attributes of speed, reach, mobility and flexibility along with the ability to be employed in a logistics, humanitarian and/or an offensive role positions it as an ideal tool to be used in all aspects of peace operations. Indeed, India has been at the forefront of such missions for bringing-in peace in troubled lands far and wide.

As is well known, there are three basic principles in UN peacekeeping, viz., consent of the parties involved, absolute impartiality and non-use of force except “in self-defence and defence of the mandate”. In the not too distant past, the Security Council has introduced a concept of a ‘robust mandate’ in certain situations, authorizing peacekeepers “...to use all necessary means to deter forceful attempts to disrupt the political process, protect civilians under imminent threat of physical attack, and/or assist the national authorities in maintaining law and order.” While this is different from a Chapter VII authorisation, it is imperative to

Disclaimer: This article was originally published in the January 2022 Edition (Vol. 1) of the UN Journal, *Blue Helmet Odyssey: Defining India's UN Footprints*, published by the Centre for United Nations Peacekeeping (CUNPK), New Delhi, India. Due permission has been taken for reprinting this article.

* Air Vice Marshal Manmohan Bahadur, VM, Retd, *former IAF contingent Cdr, UNMIS.*



examine the effect of the highly potent capabilities that air power brings to peacekeeping for their optimal utilisation under the ambit of a given mandate. The effects, when seen from a strategic perch, can be broadly categorised under three heads – capability enhancement, conveying of intent and the net result of the two which can be termed as boosting the credibility of the UN as a whole.

CAPABILITY

The aim of any UN Mission is to, not only get peace during the deployment of peacekeepers but, more importantly, to leave behind an environment that engenders it even after the ‘blue berets’ have left. Thus, the availability of quick transportation means – of logistics as well as peacekeepers – which is vital for implementation of the mission mandate, is brought about through equipping the mission leadership with adequate air power tools. The task of protection of civilians, building up of development infrastructure and setting up of institutions that support nation building (like, a force for internal security, a legal framework, education backbone, etc.) gets a fillip if there are adequate transport aircraft and helicopters to help shape plans made on paper. While ‘robust peacekeeping’ is generally associated with timely use of force by ground troops, the availability of offensive air assets like armed/attack helicopters impregnate the mission with deterrence capability of a higher dimension, as seen in mission in Congo (MONUC/MONUSCO). A similar deterrence effect was seen in the 1960s in UN Mission in Congo, ONUC, due to the availability of six B-57 Canberra Bombers of the Indian Air Force (IAF).

INTENT

The equipping of any UN Mission is a pointer to the intent of the mission. The author of this essay was the Contingent Commander of the first Indian Aviation Contingent in the UN Mission in Sudan, UNMIS, in 2005-06. The basic aim of UNMIS was to get the belligerents to eschew violence and start a dialogue so that favourable conditions could be obtained for the conduct of a referendum in 2011 on the question of the future of Sudan. The IAF Mission was equipped with six Mi-17 helicopters for logistics support only; no armament was authorised to be carried to the mission area. Other aviation contingents, viz., from Pakistan and Russia had a similar inventory. The intent of the presence of UN peacekeepers was, thus, clearly laid-out. As 2011 approached,

violence had raised its ugly face and one can argue whether the presence of offensive air assets could have deterred some amount of bloodshed that took place. Did the non-availability of offensive air power emasculate the 'defence of the mandate' task of UNMIS is a question that can be debated; did it effect the credibility of an international force? These are issues that go much beyond just the 'military arm' of the United Nations and strike at the credibility of UN peacekeeping as a whole.

CREDIBILITY

The first Secretary General of the UN, Dag Hammarskjold, had famously said, "peacekeeping is not a job for soldiers but only soldiers can do it." It is in this context that the credibility of the United Nations in peacekeeping becomes vital. While it is well understood that the Security Council is as political a body as it gets, the members (especially the P5) must equip every UN mission with adequate and relevant resources to implement the mandate given to it. Here, the importance of aerial assets become vital, especially due to the new capabilities becoming available through rapid technological advancements in the field of aviation. It is well known that behind the scenes political wrangling delayed the entry of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) for many years; the cost could be counted in terms of lives lost and a sub-optimal utilisation of a ground force that could have benefitted immensely from the Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance capabilities of the UAVs; also delayed was the ability of UAVs for utilisation in humanitarian tasks. And, it would not be wrong to say that troop contributing countries would soon ask for using armed drones so as to avoid putting their soldiers in harm's way.

Low casualty threshold is no longer the 'preserve' of advanced nations, who have hitherto contributed to peacekeeping mostly through financial resources. It is imperative that adequate emphasis is placed on equipping missions with cutting edge air power assets, to include those that harness the opening up of space and artificial intelligence. The arena of peacekeeping in the coming years would, in any case, have belligerents that would be using the vast horizon opening up with the synthesis of the two, a situation that needs to be factored in the equipping process of UN missions. If this is not done, the blue berets on the ground would always be playing 'catch-up' while the UN, as the international watchdog, would suffer a dent in its credibility. If it comes to that, Dag Hammarkjold, if he was alive today, would certainly not approve.

SUMMATION

Air power assets, adequate and relevant, would be vital in the employment of UN peacekeeping forces in the coming decades. They do not come cheap, and no country procures them for an 'anticipated' UN tasking. Thus, planners in New York would always have a problem of immense measure while fixing mission mandates. There are no easy solutions as instituting aviation squadrons as part of a rapid reaction force would demand political sagacity and financial commitments of no mean proportions. The international community has to rise to meet this demand for the sake of world peace.