



THE PANKAJ KUMAR JHA
CENTRE FOR SECURITY STUDIES

PKJCSS EVENT REPORT

“UNITED NATIONS AND INDIAN PEACEKEEPING OPERATIONS”

Speaker: Brigadier V. Vidyashankar

On November 8, 2024, the Pankaj Kumar Jha Centre for Security Studies hosted an insightful lecture featuring Brigadier B. Vidyashankar, a distinguished officer of the Indian Army. The lecture, focusing on India's significant contributions to global peacekeeping efforts, began with a welcome address by Prof. Gitanjali Sinha Roy, the Centre Director, followed by an introduction of the guest by Harini Vallal J, the Centre Coordinator.

In his lecture, Brigadier Vidyashankar delved into the evolving concept of peace, emphasizing that the UN sees peace not as a mere ideal but as a dynamic state rooted in empathy, dignity, and inclusivity. He highlighted key aspects of peace, such as conflict resolution, dialogue, cooperation, and sustainable development. Drawing inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi's principles, he stressed the importance of non-violence and tolerance in global peace efforts. Referring to an iconic image at the University of Strasbourg, he illustrated the power of peace over violence. Brigadier Vidyashankar then posed a thought-provoking question to the audience: “Are we discussing Indian peacekeeping or UN peacekeeping?” This led to a deeper exploration of India's crucial role in UN peacekeeping operations worldwide.

Brigadier Vidyashankar continued by highlighting India's significant contributions to peacekeeping, particularly under UN mandates. He spoke about India's deployment of an entire contingent to Sri Lanka as part of the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) and emphasized that India's peace operations are carried out within the multilateral framework of the UN, working alongside other nations. Brigadier Vidyashankar also discussed significant reforms in UN peacekeeping, noting that in 2018, the UN renamed its Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) to the Department of Peace Operations (DPO) to reflect evolving peace strategies, including peacebuilding, peace enforcement, and conflict prevention. He highlighted India's vested interest in peace operations, with key governmental bodies like the Ministry of External

Affairs (MEA) and the Ministry of Defence playing pivotal roles, particularly the Ministry of Defence, which leads India's military contributions to peacekeeping. He referenced the UN Charter's preamble, emphasizing its core principle of preventing future wars, a driving force behind the UN's creation after the devastation of the World Wars.

He also touched upon the growth of the United Nations, from its founding with 51 member countries in 1945 to 193 today. He recognized Professor Arcot Ramaswamy, India's head of delegation, who signed the UN Charter on behalf of India. The lecture further explored countries like India and Israel, which were not part of the original 51, with India gaining independence in 1947 and Israel ratifying the Charter the same year, despite its autonomy since 1922. Brigadier Vidyashankar highlighted India's historical ties with the UN, citing India's influential role in its early years, including the appointment of Sir Arcot Ramaswamy Gujarat as the first President of ECOSOC in 1946.

Brigadier Vidyashankar's lecture provided a comprehensive overview of the evolution and significance of UN peacekeeping operations, with a focus on India's contributions. He began by discussing the early history of peacekeeping, highlighting the deployment of military observers under UN mandates. The first such mission, initiated on May 29, 1948, involved monitoring inter-state conflicts, a role that later expanded as peacekeeping operations evolved. The United Nations General Assembly recognized May 29 as International Day of UN Peacekeepers in 2002, commemorating the contribution of peacekeepers worldwide. India's first contribution to UN peacekeeping came in 1958 in Korea, where the Indian military, including a 16-unit field ambulance and paratroopers, participated in de-escalating tensions between North and South Korea. He also emphasized India's pivotal role in the United Nations' early leadership, citing Mrs. Vijayalakshmi Pandit, who became the first female President of the UN General Assembly in 1953.

The lecture also highlighted the distinction between the UN General Assembly and the UN Security Council. The General Assembly, comprising 193 member states, is a forum for discussion, while the Security Council, a 15-member body, is responsible for international peace and security. India has served multiple terms in the Security Council, most recently in 2022, and plays a crucial role in shaping UN peace and security policies.

Brigadier Vidyashankar explained the shift from peacekeeping as a mere observer role to a more complex and active mission involving troops and weapons for deterrence and protection.

He highlighted the 1953-54 Korean War mission, where India contributed significantly to the creation of a Neutral Nations Repatriation Committee for the exchange of prisoners of war between the communist and democratic camps. This early engagement marked a turning point, as India took on a larger peacekeeping role. He noted that the term "peacekeeping" was officially coined in 1967 by Lester B. Pearson and Dan Hammerstein, who recognized the necessity for military forces to intervene in conflict zones, albeit with strict rules of engagement. The evolution of peacekeeping is encapsulated in the work of Tim Blumen and William Buckley, whose 2013 paper "Five Generations of Peace Operations" outlines how peacekeeping has developed from its initial military observer role to a multidimensional approach involving military, police, and civilian components.

He also noted the shift in peace operations, from traditional peacekeeping to peace enforcement, as seen in missions in Somalia, Rwanda, and East Bengal, where military intervention was required to protect civilians and stabilize regions. Peacebuilding efforts, such as strengthening government institutions, training national forces, and repatriating refugees, further evolved the scope of peace operations. One of the most significant moments in India's peacekeeping history occurred between 1960-1963 in the Katanga province of Congo, where Indian peacekeepers faced significant challenges in stabilizing the region amidst internal conflict. Brigadier Vidyashankar honoured the sacrifice of 39 Indian soldiers, including Major General S.P. Salaria, who became the only recipient of the Param Vir Chakra, India's highest gallantry award, for his bravery in Congo.

The lecture also addressed the growing emphasis on the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda within UN peace operations, acknowledging the vital roles women play in conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction. Brigadier Vidyashankar highlighted that the participation of women in military and medical peacekeeping roles has become increasingly significant, particularly in addressing the needs of non-combatants, especially women and children, affected by conflict.

The session concluded with an engaging question-and-answer round, where students explored critical aspects of UN operations and global diplomacy. Discussions centered on how the UN determines whether conflicts necessitate peacekeeping missions or diplomatic and humanitarian solutions, particularly regarding Palestine, and the role of the Indian community in representing India during UN engagements. The discussion also highlighted how the UN serves as the only truly multilateral body where all member countries can come together to

express their voices and collaborate on global issues. Questions about US influence in the Security Council sparked reflections on power dynamics and the role of veto-wielding nations in shaping global policies. Lastly, the importance of transitioning responsibilities from UN missions to local governments was stressed to ensure sustainable governance and long-term stability. We would like to thank our speaker, participants and Centre Director Prof. Gitanjali Sinha Roy for making this discussion a success.