

Pakistan's Peacekeeping Contribution to United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA): Lessons Learnt

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Introduction

Barely two decades into its creation as a nation-state, Pakistan embraced a pragmatic foreign policy, least expected of a newly crafted state, grappling with how best to mark a niche within the comity of nations (Bakare, 2018). Since 1960, when its first peacekeepers were deployed to Congo, peacekeeping has been pursued vehemently as an integral part of Pakistan's foreign policy for the fulfilment of its national interest (Bakare, 2018; Kiani, 2004; Meiske and Ruggeri, 2017; Yamin, 2017). As one of the largest Troop Contributing Countries (TCC), its peacekeeping contributions in different conflict zones, especially in Africa, cannot be underestimated. It has contributed over 200,000 troops deployed in 28 countries in 46 missions. Since the indelible and heroic contribution to the United Nations Operation in Somalia II (UNOSOM II) — 1993 (Yamin, 2019), Pakistan has never relented in marking significant footprints through peacekeeping in Africa.

Against this backdrop, this essay makes a critical appraisal of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA). It examines the crisis of nation-building in the Central African Republic (CAR) and the exigency for a peacekeeping operation in which Pakistan extensively participated. In addition to locating the CAR mission, as a manifestation of the foreign policy of Pakistan in Africa and a display of shared responsibility towards global peace and order, the essay especially answers the questions of *why* the CAR mission was sensitive (owing to the ethno-religious and political complexity of the conflict, the overwhelming militancy, the process of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration [DDR], and the necessity of fixing the country's infrastructural lacunae), and *what* challenges confronted peacekeepers in the mission. Predicated on the pressing humanitarian need, MINUSCA was sanctioned on April 10, 2014, by the UNSC (MINUSCA Fact Sheet, nd). While the CAR mission may not necessarily be different from others, the lessons learnt can instrumentally help craft better future missions, especially for Pakistani peacekeeping decisions and policymakers.

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Share of Global Responsibility

Amidst the growing discourse of democracy and economic liberalization, many African countries have achieved impressive political and economic milestones. Nevertheless, for many complex reasons, the continent still grapples with political uncertainty, leaving Africa with the largest record of modern forms of conflict (Blanton, Mason, & Athow, 2001; Fenske & Zurimendi, 2017; Kamanu, 1974; Mwakikagile, 2001; Osinubi & Osinubi, 2018). Since its creation and driven by the idea of humanitarian intervention, the United Nations has acted fairly responsibly to maintain world peace, particularly in places where the national government is incapacitated to enforce the order. Starting its operation in 1948, the United Nations Peacekeeping Operation (UNPKO) signifies the manifestation of multilateralism and the commitment of multilateral efforts towards the maintenance of world peace.

Since joining the league of TCCs, Pakistan has contributed instrumentally towards peacekeeping and peacebuilding in conflict-ridden areas. Peacekeeping in CAR is one amongst the many peacekeeping operations, bearing the footprint of Pakistan in Africa. MINUSCA was mandated by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on April 10, 2014. It was set to expire on November 15, 2020. However, the mission remains operational with a total of 15,069 personnel, of which 1213 troops (including Staff Officer) is the contribution of Pakistan (MINURCA Fact Sheet, n.d.; MINURCA Fact Sheet, 2020). As a member of the international society, the foreign policy of Pakistan — through peacekeeping — has become a vivid representation of its national interest, a fulfillment of Pakistan's founding father's peace theory, and a strategic contribution to ensuring peace the world over. Peacekeeping draws strength from the Kantian liberal peace paradigm and internationalization element of the liberal school of international relations.

Crisis of Nation Building and Reason for Peacekeeping

The post-colonial syndrome has plagued many former colonies, of which CAR is no exemption. Since gaining independence from France in 1960, the francophone African country has not only grappled with nation-building but is also troubled by a varied degree of political unrest, conditioned by ethno-religious and political factors. The political crisis of 1996-1997 culminated in the failed Bangui Agreements, signed in January 1997, and eventually led to the replacement of the inter-African military mission with the U.N. peacekeeping force (MINURCA). Since 1997, the country has garnered headlines for ethno-religious and political unrest and also maintained an indelible record of hosting more U.N. peacekeeping interventions than any other country (Hancock, 2007; McCormick, 2015).

In 2012, the political fallout of François Bozizé re-election aggravated the already political volatile climate and steered the country into a civil war. The ethno-religious nature of the conflict, largely dominated by the Seleka-Muslim and anti-balaka militia — Christian, has further widened the communal distrust in the country. It resulted in the destruction of lives and properties in a country that is rich with natural resources but has a poorly developed economy. Given the lawlessness in the country, armed groups have flourished and contributed to the crippling nature of the economy. According to some estimates, the damaged economy has pushed 75 per cent population of the country into poverty (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021).

Similarly, the protraction of the conflict has led to a massive internal displacement of around 200,000 individuals, and that number continues to spike (IDMC, 2015; UNHCR, n.d.). Following the fall of Bozizé, the humanitarian concern

spurred Michel Djotodia, the new president, and Prime Minister Nicolas Tiangaye to request a U.N. peacekeeping force from the UNSC and the latter “authorized on 10 April 2014, the deployment of a multidimensional United Nations peacekeeping operation — MINUSCA — with the protection of civilians as its utmost priority” (MINURCA Fact Sheet, 2020, p. 2). Since 2015, the Pakistan army has been participating in MINUSCA in different capacities.

Pakistani Peacekeepers in the Central African Republic

Over the last several years, Pakistani peacekeepers have served and sacrificed in challenging conflict zones. They have received numerous commendations vis-à-vis quenching intra-state warfare, peace-enforcement, and participation in high-risk volatile theatres of operation (Kiani, 2004; UNPKO-Pakistan, n.d.; VoA, 2009; Yamin, 2019). In CAR, the Pakistani peacekeepers were deployed to the Central sector of the country, which suggests overlapping operational influences from the East and West sectors. As aforesaid, combined with political factors, the ethno-religious nature of conflict in Africa underpins its complexity. The mission in CAR was sensitive in many senses.

For instance, the conflict was primarily religious, between Christian and Muslim militias. In such a climate, the sensitivity of the peacekeepers was vital. Second, the religious complexion of the conflict created a trust deficit between the religious militias and the peacekeepers. For example, referring to the wariness, McCormick (2015) cited a witness of the conflict saying, “[...] They said the U.N. is delivering the Muslims to the anti-Balaka to be slaughtered (para.7).” Third, outside the capital city of CAR, Bangui, virtually nothing is under government control. This explains the massive displacement of people across the country, in which safeguarding the camps of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) was crucially sensitive, given the overwhelming presence of the militias.

Amidst the sensitivities, the fulfilment of the mission objective was paramount to the Pakistani peacekeepers. They were instrumental in laying the foundations of stability in the Nana-Gribizi region; where they significantly reduced violence, increased space for state institutions to function, helped in the disposal and recovery of explosive material and ammunition, and even sensitized some of the armed groups towards embracing nationalism than treading the path of national destruction. In addition, the peacekeepers were also responsible for 768 kilometers of road reconstruction, repairing of 18 bridges and nine airfields, construction of eight military bases, and 34 infrastructural amendments (Saeed & Nawaz, 2020).

Mission Challenges: The Case of MINUSCA

Irrespective of their achievements over the last many years, the U.N. peacekeeping missions have been diagnosed as having a spectrum of challenges. For instance, they are uninsulated from socio-political issues, non-availability of resources, training, mission mandate, rule of engagement, equipment-related issues, health care, gender, and psychological issues. This is equally true for the MINUSCA mission; whose mandate was set between April 10, 2014 and November 15, 2020, but the mission has outlived its original expiration date. This constituted serious challenges for the entire mission, though the concern is directed at the Pakistani troops. Between 2019 and 2020, the troops were stationed in the Central sector of the country, which is characteristically volatile. Eventually, due to the extension of the mandate, they suffered from overstretched capacity. The troops were deployed in an area of more

than 92000 Square kilometers, which resulted in the overindulgence of the manpower and resources and was resultantly consequential for the overall operations in the Central sector. Besides, the overstretched forces and resources also constrained the commanders from having proper contingencies and undermined reinforcement against the reemergence of threat in areas enjoying mission accomplishment.

Another area of challenge was perception management and confidence-building mechanism (CBM). In addition, one of the underlying principles of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) is impartiality. Peacekeepers must be impartial in discharging their services and must try to gain the trust and confidence of the locals in the mission areas. In the case of MINUSCA, Pakistani troops at some point had to grapple with the issue of impartiality, trust, and confidence, given the high religious terrain of their operation. Kaga Bandoro is a Muslim-dominated area and troubled by armed groups of both Christianity and Islam. In some instances, the civilian component of MINUSCA tried to decipher the actions of Pakistani troops through the lens of religion and accused them of partisan — favoring Muslims. Such reminisces similar Muslim accusation that the U.N. peacekeepers were “delivering them to anti-Balaka to be slaughtered” (McCormick, 2015, para.11).

Additionally, confidence and trust between the locals and peacekeepers can be better consolidated if the latter are well trained and acquainted with the social fabric of the mission areas. The need and imperative for pre-deployment training for both civil and military personnel have gained considerable traction. Pre-deployment training ensures that troops understand how their role as peacekeepers differs from that of combat forces, and it equally boosts the preparedness of U.N. Peacekeepers (Milofsky et al., 2017; NATO, n.d.; UN Women, 2013). In the case of MINUSCA, the communication gap, especially the language barrier and social challenges, created some degree of hurdles. Pakistani troops were hindered by the communication gap and dearth of a deeper understanding of the social setting, which in turn truncated good and smooth relations with the locals and undermined the full potential of doing effective work. Peacekeeping must transcend carrying weapons and must carefully embrace the idea of peace communication, which is located within the domain of persuasive communication processes (Blake, 1998).

Another challenge that characterized MINUSCA during the timeframe under study was the lacunae between the civil and military components of the mission. Like every other mission, the civil component in MINUSCA is one of the major aspects that influences the decision making and implementation of the mandate, while working in close coordination with the military component. However, the difference of opinion affected the courses of action on strategy and operational matters, which eventually paved the way for lack of cohesion in issues pertaining to peace and security at execution stages. The dilemma subsequently led the two to a hostile zone while working for the implementation of the mission.

More than anything else, the COVID-19 pandemic has shed more light on the need for the preparedness of peacekeepers for an enormous health-related crisis. The latest global pandemic calls for some rethinking in the field of peacekeeping. Combined with ensuring peace and security, the peacekeeping mandate must be transformative and inclusive, and should resonate with the growing — predictable and unforeseeable — challenges confronting the world. For instance, what role must peacekeepers play amidst an outbreak of an epidemic or pandemic, especially in mission areas? (Pakistan contingent in other peace missions have conducted awareness campaigns and workshops on COVID-19 which can also be executed in other missions). Other than shouldering the maintenance of peace and security, should

their responsibility include a developmental role as part of the larger stabilization and post-conflict reconstruction?

The analysis of the situation during the pandemic reveals challenges related to perception, execution, and accomplishment of mandate faced by the troops. Other than operational challenges, issues such as travel ban, quarantining, and restriction on fieldwork added to lowering the flow of work in the mission area. In the case of MINUSCA, the U.N. peacekeepers were initially challenged by the COVID-19 outbreak, but with close coordination with health care organizations, the spread of the virus was mitigated. The U.N. Department of Peace Operations (DPO) healthcare, in close coordination with the World Health Organization (WHO), Department of Operational Support, and Organization of Healthcare Management, worked effectively to counter the pandemic challenges. They provided a prompt response which in turn raised the morale of troops to carry on with their duties, within their operational capacity, at a time of pandemic (UNPK, 2021).

Conclusion

MINUSCA is not entirely different from other missions, yet it is characteristically unique and proves the commitment of Pakistan to advance its national interest through peacekeeping operations. It equally underscores Pakistan's commitment to helping others on the path of nation-building, even though the country continues to grapple with its issues at home. MINUSCA reiterates the need for proper documentation of lessons learnt in mission areas for better preparedness of the troops and pragmatic policy trajectory. Every mission carries with it positive and negative points; MINUSCA is no exemption. Therefore, the challenges such as overstretched mandate vis-à-vis capacity and capability must be accorded critical assessment at the appropriate level of United Nations Peace Operations. It will reduce forfeiting any sort of gains or achievements in the mission area.

Secondly, amongst others, the success of a mission depends on impartiality, and trust and confidence between the troops and the locals, and also between the civilian and military components of the mission. Troop deployment must also be inclusive; it generates some degree of trust in the hearts of the locals, especially in a multi-religious setting, such as CAR. More can be done with regards to pre-deployment training, which Pakistan is already doing at different levels. For instance, the Department of Peacekeeping Training at the Centre for International Peace and Stability (CIPS), Islamabad, is a platform where pre-deployment training is offered to both national and international peacekeepers.

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