# The Russia-Ukraine War: Addressing Possibilities and Challenges for Peacekeeping Mission

**Hajira Arif[1]**

## Introduction

A cursory look at the history of humankind illuminates that there is no glory in war. Championing the principles of sovereignty, statehood, and democracy, today, the west finds itself enmeshed in the quagmire of great power struggles that have tainted European archives since antiquity. With over 100 days since the outbreak of war in Ukraine, political tensions in the west continue to rise, despite the flurry of diplomatic activities. The situation is expected to have intense global ramifications, such as immense loss of life, humanitarian and refugee crises, food insecurity, energy insecurity, regional and global economic challenges, and broader geopolitical shocks (IMF, 2022; Katser-Buchkovska, 2022; Pantuliano, 2022). Nonetheless, the Ukraine war is a setback to the international infrastructure and ideologies of the New World Order (Tisdall, 2022). Furthermore, reminiscent of the cold war period and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) stalemate on matters pertaining to global peace and security, the current US-Russia rivalry over Ukraine can be expected to follow a similar pattern of bottlenecks. Recent developments in the situation follow sanctions on Russia, an increase in US exports of armaments to Ukraine, a blockade of the Black Sea for grain export, and the impossibility of a respite in the near future (Welfens, 2022).

There have been talks of a peacekeeping mission for Ukraine predating the ongoing war, but no tangible framework has been presented yet, particularly due to the active large-scale conflict and disagreements involving UNSC members. More specifically, talks of a Ukraine peacekeeping mission have circled the international arena since the Crimea and Donbas crisis in 2014 (Zavoli, 2017). This essay highlights the debate on the possibilities and challenges of establishing a UN peacekeeping mission for Ukraine. Further, the essay follows a brief review of peacekeeping during the cold war years. By reminiscing on previous decades, the essay situates the current situation of the Ukraine war in the context of challenges faced and lessons learned in peacekeeping from that time of history. In short, a peacekeeping mission to Ukraine can deescalate tensions by immediately enacting a

---

[1] *Hajira Arif* is currently a student of MS Peace and Conflict Studies at the Centre for International Peace and Stability (CIPS), National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST), Islamabad, Pakistan. E-mail: hkhan.mspcs20cips@nust.edu.pk

ceasefire while engaging the parties to conflict toward peace-making. It would limit the loss of life, property, and the global reverberations of the ongoing war. However, realistically speaking, apart from the US-Russia rivalry, a Ukraine peace mission faces several challenges, such as a realistic mandate, composition of the mission and personnel, and regions of deployment.

## US-Soviet Rivalry and Détente Peacekeeping

The cold war period, particularly from 1964 to 1987, saw a relative decline in peacekeeping missions. This 'détente peacekeeping' (peacekeeping constrained by superpower rivalries) was also challenged by several other obstacles. These included global political crises, financial restraints, the unfolding process of decolonization, etc. However, the rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union was arguably the chief reason. It hampered the effectiveness of the UN Security Council in response to global peace and security threats. The detente peacekeeping period launched only six peacekeeping operations, compared to seven operations in the next 15 years, 34 peacekeeping operations in 1988, and 21 from 1999 to 2013 (Koops et al., 2015). From the détente peacekeeping period, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), launched in 1978 as a response to assure/monitor the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon, serves as an enduring reminder of how not to authorize and manage a peacekeeping operation. UNIFIL was authorized despite insignificant support by UNSC members, criticism by the UN Secretariat, lack of a clear-cut mandate, and unrealistic demands of the party to the conflict. Years preceding UNIFIL saw a stagnation of the peacekeeping system, with no new peace operation being launched for over a decade (Koops et al., 2015).

Furthermore, despite the numerous challenges aroused by international fragmentation and the influence of superpower tensions of the period, peacekeeping played a crucial role in managing conflicts in which the permanent UNSC members were not a direct party. Such missions affirmed UN peacekeeping as a useful tool for the prevention of 'wider internationalization of regional conflicts' and 'escalation management', by creating buffer zones between conflicting parties and paving the way for negotiations and peace-making. The effectiveness of UN peacekeeping was highlighted by its role of going in some of the most intractable conflicts of the twentieth century, such as in the case of Arab-Israel, Lebanon, Cyprus, and India-Pakistan. Accordingly, a review of peacekeeping missions since their inception highlights that peacekeeping remains crucial for the 'multilateral conflict management mechanism' (Koops et al., 2015).

By the second half of the cold war, peacekeeping began to see a shift from its traditional role of observational and symbolic presence to multidimensional nature with the incorporation of humanitarian aid, human rights, protected areas, protection of civilians, and role/ incorporation of regional organizations (Kercher, 2012). Based on the Charter of the UN and principles of International Humanitarian Law, the multidimensional peacekeeping missions of today are undertaking a broad range of tasks, propelling it as an effective tool for the prevention and management of conflicts (Fortna, 2008).

## Considering a Peacekeeping Solution for the Ukraine Conflict

The possibility of a Ukraine peace mission would require UN principles of peacekeeping to be fully incorporated within the mission proposal and mandate. These principles are (1) consent of parties, (2) Impartiality, and (3) Non-use of force except in self-defense. To begin with, for any peacekeeping intervention, an agreement between both Ukraine and Russia would be the foremost requirement.

However, this proposal faces deadlock due to Russian dissent at regional level talks and the Russian veto at UNSC consultations. Although Russia has previously shown interest in forming such a mission, following the Minsk agreement in 2015 with Russian President Vladimir Putin showed openness to the possibility of blue helmets in Ukraine (Carroll, 2015). Two years later, Moscow proposed peacekeepers along the line that divides separatist and Russian forces in eastern Ukraine. However, the experts looked upon the suggestion unfavourably based on doubts and disagreements over the region of deployment and a narrow mandate (International Crisis Group, 2018). After the current war in Ukraine outbreak, Poland was the first to suggest a peace mission to be deployed in Ukraine as an interim measure ("Poland to propose Ukraine peacekeeping mission", 2022) but failed to present a concrete framework for the mission. Accordingly, in response to the suggestion of the Ukraine Peace mission, UN Director of Crisis Group, Richard Gowan (2022), pointed out the vagueness of the suggestion, stating, 'it would be unwise to invest too much hope in the prospects for peace operations.' Gowan's response to the Ukraine impasse and rising tensions reminisces cold war days of US-Russia rivalry and the inability of the Security Council to decide on matters of concern to both parties. The peacekeeping solution for Ukraine has also been criticized for rendering the existing international tools of conflict settlement as 'not always effective'. Research explores that while buffer zones, demarcation lines, and peacekeeping missions may help save people's lives, they would not restore Ukrainian sovereignty over occupied lands (Zamikula, 2017).

Despite the superpower's deadlock and criticism of the effectiveness of peacekeeping, the possibility of positive contributions of a peacekeeping mission for Ukraine should not be undermined. The effectiveness of a Ukraine peace mission can be understood through the contributions of the Special Monitoring Mission (SMM), launched by the Organization of the Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), to the Donbas region in 2014. Although a multilateral mission of mere 1400 unarmed civilians with the restricted purpose of impartial reporting of the on-ground situation, SMM still contributed to de-escalation in the Donbas from 2014-2019 (Hartel et al., 2021). In furtherance, a Ukraine peace mission comprising a robust mandate and plentiful resources would surely result in net-positive contributions and de-escalation, as seen by SMM in its limited scope.

In support of Ukraine's peace mission, experts have explored ways to bypass the Russian consent and the UNSC deadlock. Accordingly, alternative routes, such as the possibility of a peacekeeping mission in eastern Ukraine to be established by the UN General Assembly (Zavoli, 2017), have been explored. However, invoking Russian opposition through such processes would be an unwelcoming development. Consent of both parties through diplomatic pathways as per the principles of UN peacekeeping should be emphasized. International and regional actors should continue their insistence on bringing the two parties to the table for peacekeeping consultations. Secondly, according to the principle of impartiality of UN peacekeeping, discussions on which states would comprise the Ukraine peace mission further adds to the stalemate. Parties to the conflict must agree on which states would comprise the mission to keep it impartial. The on-ground situation of the conflict also entails putting the peacekeepers' life in an unsafe environment. Under such perilous circumstances, the willingness of the troops contributing countries (TCCs) would be a daunting assignment, particularly in the context of the reluctance of the Western states to send their troops on challenging peacekeeping missions (Bardalai, 2022). Furthermore, as proposed by Poland, Kremlin responded negatively to the possibility of a NATO-UN peacekeeping force, stating any contact between Russian and NATO troops as 'reckless and extremely dangerous'. Experts and officials reiterated the

dangers of NATO and US forces in Ukraine at the start of WWIII (Johnson, 2022). However, Russia itself cannot be the sole decision-maker in the situation.

An alternative understanding of peacekeeping and mission composition, particularly from the Russian perspective, further complicates the possibility of Ukraine's peace mission. According to Burkle et al. (2022), Russia's alternative understanding of peacekeeping, such as Putin's announcement on ordering military forces in two separatist regions of Ukraine as 'peacekeepers', legally and traditionally challenges the understanding of peacekeeping missions. While peacekeepers can be from state militaries, they cannot be from the state that is a party to the conflict, as it undermines the principle of impartiality. Furthermore, (Gowan, 2018) examined realistic, long-lasting peace through the likelihood of a peacekeeping mission in the Donbas (Ukraine) and concluded the need for a robust mandate with 20,000 peacekeeping personnel from non-NATO, European countries, such as Sweden, Austria, or Finland. Although published years prior to the ongoing war, the report is still relevant today. It answers pressing concerns on the composition of the peacekeeping mission for Ukraine.

Lastly, apart from the Force Intervention Brigade (IB) in the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), with authority to conduct offensive attacks due to the unique mission environment of DRC, UN peacekeeping abides by its principle of non-use of force except for in self-defense. However, peacekeeping tasks depend on the mission mandate, formalized through the consent of the parties. It is likely for Ukraine's peacekeeping mission to be more traditional in comparison with the contemporary multidimensional missions. Despite having a restricted mandate, Ukraine's peacekeeping mission should be given considerable thought by all involved actors. It would not only put an immediate end to hostilities but also limit global economic reverberations of the war while paving the way for future transformations of the region under conflict.

## Conclusion

This essay explored the possibilities and challenges of a peacekeeping mission for Ukraine. Despite the superpower rivalry and limitations of the time, the role of peacekeeping in regional conflict management and the creation of buffer zones, particularly in several intractable conflicts of the twentieth century, indicate the net-positive contributions of peacekeeping missions. In the current context of the Ukraine war, the possibility of a peace mission is marred with several inconsistencies. This includes US-Russia rivalry, consent of the parties, the composition of the mission, a clear-cut mandate, and regions of deployment. These inconsistencies also provide challenges for adapting the principles of UN peacekeeping. Yet, research and debates on the topic highlight possible solutions. With regards to the UN principle of consent, since Russia had previously shown interest in blue helmets for Ukraine in 2015, there is a possibility. Secondly, the impartiality of the mission can be maintained through the participation of Non-NATO European states. Lastly, the mission can be expected to be traditional with a narrow mandate and strict abidance of non-use of force except for self-defense. Despite these challenges, the value of a Ukraine peace mission should not be undermined as it holds potential for an immediate cessation of hostilities, limiting the loss of life and property, and can be used as an effective tool for regional conflict management. Therefore, the formulation of such a mission should be given utmost importance.

# References

Bardalai, T. (2022, April 2). *Ukraine Conflict: Is UN peacekeeping an option*? USI. https://usiofindia.org/publication/usi-journal/un-peacekeeping-and-conflict-management-is-there-an-option-for-ukraine/

Burkle, F. M., Goniewicz, K., & Khorram-Manesh, A. (2022). Bastardizing peacekeeping and the birth of hybrid warfare. *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine*, *37*(2), 147-149. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049023X22000425

Carroll, O. (2015, September 26). Ukraine crisis: Vladimir Putin "told Kiev he may accept peacekeeping force in eastern region. *The Independent*. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/ukraine-crisis-vladimir-putin-told-kiev-he-may-accept-peacekeeping-force-in-eastern-region-10517236.html

Fortna, V. P. (2008). Does peacekeeping work?. In *Does Peacekeeping Work?*. Princeton University Press.

Gowan, R. (2018, February). *Can the United Nations unite Ukraine?* The Hudson Institute. https://rasmussenglobal.com/media/can-un-unite-ukraine-rg-expert-report-peacekeeping-eastern-ukraine

Gowan, R. (2022, March 24). A Tentative First Look at Options for Peace Operations in Ukraine. *Crisis Group.* https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/eastern-europe/ukraine/tentative-first-look-options-peace-operations-ukraine

Härtel, A., Pisarenko, A., & Umland, A. (2021). The OSCE's Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, *Security and Rights*, *31*(1-4), 121-154. doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/18750230-bja10002

IMF. (2022, March 5). *IMF Staff Statement on the Economic Impact of War in Ukraine* [Press release]. https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2022/03/05/pr2261-imf-staff-statement-on-the-economic-impact-of-war-in-ukraine

Johnson, J. (2022, March 23). Russia Says NATO Peacekeepers inside Ukraine would be 'dangerous and reckless.' *Common Dreams.* https://www.commondreams.org/news/2022/03/23/russia-says-nato-peacekeepers-inside-ukraine-would-be-dangerous-and-reckless

Kertcher, C. (2012). From Cold War to a system of peacekeeping operations: The discussions on peacekeeping operations in the UN during the 1980s up to 1992. *Journal of Contemporary History*, *47*(3), 611-637.

Koops, J. A., MacQueen, N., Tardy, T., & Williams, P. D. (Eds.). (2015b). *The Oxford Handbook of United Nations peacekeeping operations*. Oxford Handbooks.

Pantuliano, S. (2022). The systemic impacts of the war in Ukraine: A triple shock. *ODI Insight.* https://odi.org/en/insights/the-systemic-impacts-of-the-war-inukraine-a-triple-shock/

International Crisis Group. (2017, December 15). *Peacekeepers Break the Deadlock in Ukraine?* https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/eastern-europe/ukraine/246-can-peacekeepers-break-deadlock-ukraine

Poland to propose Ukraine peacekeeping mission at NATO summit, says PM. (2022, March 18). *Reuters.* https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/poland-propose-ukraine-peacekeeping-mission-nato-summit-says-pm-2022-03-18/

Tisdall, S. (2022, March 12). How Ukraine has become the crucible of the new world order. *The Guardian*.

https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/12/how-ukraine-has-become-the-crucible-of-the-new-world-order

Welfens, P. J. (2022). *Russia's Attack on Ukraine: Economic Challenges, Embargo Issues & a New World Order* (No. disbei312). Universitätsbibliothek Wuppertal, University Library.

Zamikula, M. (2017). Cyprus Conflict in the Context of International Peacekeeping Experience: Lessons for Ukraine. *Ukraine Analytica*, (3), 9.

Zavoli, I. (2017). Peacekeeping in Eastern Ukraine: the legitimacy of a request and the competence of the United Nations general assembly. *Journal of conflict and security law*, *22*(1), 147-173. https://doi.org/10.1093/jcsl/krw008