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EMPLOYMENT OF INDIAN AIR POWER IN UNPK: CASE FOR AN INDO-AFRICAN PARTNERSHIP

RAJESH ISSER

INTRODUCTION

Over the past seven decades, India's role and participation in UN Peacekeeping (UNPK) have set benchmarks of professionalism and commitment. It not only includes giving the highest sacrifices as a soldier, but consistency in an unbiased and agenda-free demonstration of concern for civilian protection. Almost every contingent and its leaders have been briefed only on carrying out impeccable conduct at the tactical level. This is especially true of IAF contingents that have been deployed in short bursts over many decades. This article covers some of the highlights of this contribution besides deliberating on major issues that impede robust peacekeeping especially the key mandate of protection of civilians. It brings out the value-addition of Indian teams with a case-study on aviation. There is a need for Africa to manage its own peace, and therein a suggestion is made for a partnership with India to synergise diverse capacities. Unlike

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Western agenda-driven aid or even the debt-trap diplomacy of China, India is a safer bet as a partner to train, equip and advise African Union (AU) peacekeeping efforts ahead. In a scenario with fast changing actors, technology and tactics this is an imperative if Africa aims for sustainable peace. Free of nefarious agendas, this is an achievable objective.

A PROVEN TRACK-RECORD IN AFRICA

India's contribution to peace-operations, which encompass peace-making, peacekeeping and peace-building, has been a benchmark of unbiased and agenda-free contribution to sustain a peaceful Africa. Over decades, as newer challenges were thrown up such as proliferation of non-state actors, disruptive tactics and technology, among others, Indian peacekeepers evolved to present a robust but humane face in dealing with crises across Africa. For example, to deal with the current pandemic in highly vulnerable operations, 140,000 UN field personnel were fully vaccinated in 2021. Additionally, Indian hospitals as part of UNMISS in South Sudan and MONUSCO in DR Congo were upgraded to handle COVID-19 complexities.

As a founding member of the UN, India has taken part in 51 of the 71 UNPK missions with more than 258,000 members as part of this noble enterprise. It is a serious commitment of men and material strictly in line with the spelt-out UN mandates. The 159 lives sacrificed in field operations as Blue Helmets are a prime indicator of this commitment. Starting from the first mission in the Congo (ONUC 1960-1964), Indian peacekeeping has shown its effectiveness across Africa, i.e., Angola (UNAVEM 1989-1991 and UNTAG 1989-1990), Mozambique (ONUMOZ 1993-1995), Somalia (UNSOM II 1993-1994), Rwanda (1994-1996), Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL 1999-2000), DR Congo (1999-2010), Ethiopia Eritrea (2000-2008) and Sudan UNMIS 2006-2011). Peacekeeping personnel were also deployed in Liberia (since April 2007) and Ivory Coast (since April 2004). Many Indians have also taken leadership roles as force commanders, police commissioners as well as military and police advisers in various UN Missions.

UNPK CHARTER AND MANDATES: ISSUES

The central aim of the United Nations Charter is to “maintain international peace and security, and to that end, take collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression.”¹ Chapter VI of the Charter deals with peaceful settlement of disputes through many benign means. Chapter VII, however, gives power to the Security Council to “take resort to the use of armed force should this mode fail”.² Chapter VII ‘enforcement actions’ should correctly be interpreted as they were intended to be, i.e., “waging war when international peace and security is under serious threat”.³

Actually, there is no provision or mention of peacekeeping specifically in the Charter. As per Satish Nambiar, a veteran in UNPK involved at multiple levels, “It is an invention of the United Nations Secretary General and the Secretariat, and evolved as a non-coercive instrument of conflict control, at a time when Cold War constraints precluded the use of the more forceful steps permitted by the Charter.”⁴

By itself, mediating between heavily armed opponents is a difficult proposition. But with the very nature of conflict evolving rapidly, some noticeable trends include: larger involvement of paramilitaries, non-state actors and irregulars; higher civilian casualties and destabilisation; newer tasks such as demobilisation, national reconciliation processes and state-building; and broader support to humanitarian aid missions, including protection of “safe areas” and escort of relief convoys.

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1. UNDPK, *United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Principles and Guidelines* (New York: UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2008), p. 31.
 2. John Karlsrud and Keseniya Oksamytna, “Norms and Practices in UN Peacekeeping: Evolution and Contestation”, *International Peacekeeping*, 26, no. 3, 2019, p. 254.
 3. Satish Nambiar, *For the Honour of India: A History of Indian Peacekeeping* (New Delhi: CAFHR (USI), Impress, 2009), p. 525.
 4. Satish Nambiar, “Reflections on the Conduct of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations into the Next Two Decades of the 21st Century”, Manekshaw Paper No. 60, 2016, p. 2, at www.claws.org. Accessed on January 24, 2022.

INDIA'S DEMONSTRATED VALUE-ADDITION

India's participation and record in keeping the peace in African countries is a benchmark legacy. India's track record is unique in professionalism, humanitarian concern, and promotion of gender equality. Judicious risk-taking, a humane approach and a capacity for sustained commitment have been hallmarks of all Indian contingents. Its success in countering domestic insurgency has helped hone such a model of peacekeeping. This includes a large effort to helping and winning the trust of local communities. Within UN Peace Operations, India's promotion of gender equality and sensitivity has been exemplary. For example, a contingent of 125 all-women team of the Central Reserve Police Force to Liberia in 2007 set the tone and encouraged Liberian women to join up for security duties.

The support to the African Union (AU) in maintaining peace and security has been wholehearted. An African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) which involved raising an African standby force of 25,000 troops by the end of 2015 was fully endorsed and supported by India including funding. African solutions to the continent's vexing problems are the way ahead, and AU needs reliable partners. Unlike western agenda-driven aid or even the debt-trap diplomacy of China, India is a safer bet as a partner to train, equip and advise AU peacekeeping efforts ahead. This was reiterated by India's Prime Minister in 2018 while addressing the Ugandan Parliament.⁵

There are a number of non-UN missions currently in Africa under the auspices of the African Union (AU), European Union, and other regional groupings, for example, the AU Mission in Somalia. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) has deployed in Mozambique for combating growing insurgency there. China's sudden enhanced contribution to UN's peacekeeping programme is intriguing. It seems perfectly aligned to its economic interests in Africa, the DRC and South Sudan. In a span of six years (between 2012 and 2018), of the 13 nations that it deployed, nine have huge Chinese investments.

5. "PM Modi address to Ugandan Parliament", *The Hindu*, July 25, 2018, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/narendra-modi-speech-in-uganda-parliament/article24511039.ece>. Accessed on January 25, 2022.

Along with the United States, India has endeavoured in capacity-building of AU soldiers and officers through many programmes focusing on a train-the-trainer model. Examples are the annual UN Peacekeeping Course for African Partners (UNPCAP-III) and the field military exercise Afindex-19 with 17 African nations. One can contemplate hybrid models involving AU and outside the region trusted actors such as India. Such coalitions may prove to be far more responsive, effective and robust rather than a 'cauldron' of soldiers with differing abilities and motivations. This will be quite in sync with other political, economic and social partnerships planned by India with Africa.

A unique professional contribution of India has been its aviation assets and their employment in low-intensity conflicts typical of Africa. An examination of Indian air power employment in two UN Chapter VII missions, namely, Sierra Leone and DRC, bring out the importance of clarity of aim and other lessons at the tactical level.

CASE STUDIES

Sierra Leone

The trouble and unrest in Sierra Leone dates back to the early 1990s. After a decade of misrule, a military government came to power. Since then, the history of Sierra Leone is replete with military coups, struggles for power, insurgency, instability and anarchy. The Revolutionary United Front (RUF), a fledgeling organisation in the early 1990s, grew into a major rebel force taking advantage of unstable conditions in the country and help from certain neighbouring countries. By 1995, RUF had established control over major diamond mining areas and were only a few miles away from Freetown. In 1996 a peace accord was signed at Abidjan between the Government of Sierra Leone and RUF but peace did not return to Sierra Leone and RUF continued its attacks. In 1999, the signing of the UN-brokered Lomé accord led to the birth of United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL). This mission comprising troops contributed from eight member countries, and military observers from some others, was mandated to oversee the process

of Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) in the trouble-torn country.

As part of the Indian Contingent, 5/8 Gorkha rifles (GR) was deployed at Daru, a small town in the Eastern province, about 260 km east of Freetown in March 2000. Two companies of the battalion were tasked to move to Kailahun, a RUF stronghold in April 2000. The situation in Sierra Leone deteriorated in May 2000 with clashes between Kenyan peacekeepers (KENBATT) and the RUF in Makeni/Magburaka, and finally resulted in the detention of Indian peacekeepers in Kailahun and Kuiva. The situation became precarious in July 2000 when even rations were refused to be replenished. Op Khukri was a unique multinational operation aiming to break the two-month long siege by the RUF.

Due to sparse aviation assets (three each Mi-8s and Mi-25s), Britain chipped in with two Chinook heavy-lift helicopters and one C-130. But bad weather badly affected the plan grounding the Indian helicopters. Immediately after getting airborne, the C-130 established aerial communication post utilising the state-of-the-art avionics and secure communication contact with the Chinook aircrew waiting on ground and provided them with all the necessary inputs about weather and terrain. Equipped with the full picture about the weather and terrain, two Chinook helicopters took off with 80 SF troops of Indian Company. All through their flight to the landing site short of Kailahun, the Chinooks were guided by the C-130 flying overhead, besides their own precision navigation aids like INS, latest GPS and Doppler, etc. Chinooks reached the landing site and slithered down all the troops safely. Within five minutes both the Chinooks cleared Kailahun helipad after picking 11 MILOBS, 7 Indian troops and some load and landed safely at Daru. The Indian aviation components were able to fly and complete their tasks after a few hours.

In case of the Mi-25s, they carried out attacks on well-defined and predesignated targets employing 57 mm rockets and 12.7 mm Front Gun. The pre-emptive strikes terminated in speculative suppressive fire at Giehun and Pendembu, just prior to troop insertion by the Mi-8s. Targets at Buedu, Segbwema, Bunumbu Junction and Koidu were softened in order to preclude possible build-up of reinforcement from these places.

An analysis of this major operation brings out the following lessons:

- The UN peacekeeping component was kept only as a reacting force, thereby ceding the initiative to the RUF. Lags in bureaucratic processes meant the UN was always a few steps behind in the situation.
- Paucity of air assets did not leave space to manoeuvre in a pre-emptive or aggressive manner even in a crisis. The presence of more modern British assets allowed a modicum of an offensive plan. Therefore, when deploying military aviation under Chapter VII, both quality and quantities of resources are critical.
- The UN (MONUSCO) incorporated these lessons when deploying Indian aviation assets in the Kivus (eastern DRC) between 2003 and 2008. All these assets were fully capable of day/night/bad weather operations.

DR CONGO (DRC)

DRC is a suitable test bench to ‘taste the pudding’. Besides the Indian brigades that brought honed capabilities in peacekeeping and counterinsurgency, it was the deployment of state-of-the-art aviation assets that were game-changers in a decade of Chapter VII deployment.⁶ On many occasions, utility and attack helicopters of Indian Aviation Contingents took small arms hit in the thick of action. This credibility of purpose and commitment was crucial to the tactical successes that followed in 2004, 2006 and 2008.

CHALLENGES TO THE MANDATE

Among other issues, the many challenges included “lack of clear distinction lines between actors, existence of multiple armed groups with varying goals and culture, criminalisation of politics for greed and profit, wide-ranging strategies of various actors and targeting of civilians as a norm of the conflict rather than an exception.”⁷ Multiple

6. Rajesh Isser, *Protection of Civilians: IAF Helicopters in the Congo* (New Delhi: KW Publishers, 2012), p. 89.

7. Rajesh Isser, “UN Peacekeeping in Democratic Republic of Congo, 2003-10”, in *United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Lessons, Trends and Future Prospects* (New Delhi: JDS, IDSA), p. 87.

actors from different nations only added to the differing perceptions and confusion.

The highly bureaucratic approach of the UN to operations only created gaps and loss of time in critical situations. This was clearly exposed in real crises such as in Ituri (2003), Bukavu (2004) and Goma in 2006 and 2008. Despite clear forecasts, the demand for more troops was delayed or denied due to time-consuming bureaucratic clearances. An equally important hurdle was the varying skills and wills of the troops from different nations, for example, Bukavu in 2004. Another hurdle was the UN Department of Flight Safety (DFS) with its strict rules based on UN personnel safety at the cost of operational imperatives.⁸ According to UN decision-makers, “since consent and pre-agreed manoeuvre are the bottom-line in an UN operation, there has to be care and due consideration before military units are given any freedom to tactically engage.”⁹

AIR POWER EMPLOYMENT AND INDIA’S OWN EXPERIENCE

A multi-decade experience of countering insurgent forces across India using a whole-of-government approach has convinced all actors of the decisive support and enabling action of air power. Not only does air power enable counter-insurgent forces in every aspect of operations and civil assistance, it denies core requirements of sanctuaries, finance, combat resources to the insurgents. A very large effort goes into good governance aspects.

THE MONUC MANDATE

The mandate covered the following:¹⁰

1. Stopping the killing and ending the tragedy of war and conflict.
2. Facilitating political transition leading to free and transparent elections.

8. MONUC Aviation Section at UN website details these very inflexible rules framework, which mostly enables tail-clear/no-responsibility attitude.

9. Jean-Marie Guéhenno, “Robust Peacekeeping: Building Political Consensus and Strengthening Command and Control in Robust Peacekeeping”, in *Robust Peacekeeping: The Politics of Force* (New York: Center of International Cooperation, 2009), pp. 7-11.

10. Orders and directives of the MONUC Force Commander (2003), available in MONUC Archives.

3. Working towards the establishment of a rule of law and respect for human rights, which are essential foundations for economic development.
4. Addressing the legacy of war by improving human conditions for sustainable peace.

CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS

Indian aviation assets (a dozen medium-lift and attack helicopters each) were to provide capabilities for: "Preventive aerial deployment capacity; Monitoring or supervision over a large area; Surveillance of cantonment areas, demilitarised zones or buffer zones between warring parties; Supporting all processes of peace including disarming and demobilising of the warring factions; Protection and support of humanitarian assistance; Non-combatant evacuation under threat and establishment of protective zones; Support in election-conduct, maintenance of civil order and enforcement of sanctions."¹¹

OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES

Some of the environmental threats and challenges included lack of emergency landing areas, unpredictable weather, and no permission to cross international borders. And, of course, the belligerents with their small arms and rocket-propelled grenades formed the major challenge.¹² Force protection of aviation resources, both men and material, had very severe constraints of geography and tactical considerations.

A key to security in DRC was deterring the belligerent. But, while quickly-deployable combat assets were a mainstay, there was a need for fielded troops to have survival and deterring capacities. Unforeseen developments in an environment of uncertainty and unpredictability demanded adequate response capacities. This was lacking until the full force from the Indian subcontinent arrived. Even they learnt the hard way that, in reality, UN-mandated forces needed higher integral capacities than the usual. An example was MONUC's DDRRR campaign that required large and pervasive support of utility and attack helicopters.

11. Isser, n. 7, p. 84.

12. Isser, n. 6.

The lack of a proactive approach in operations was a result of the UN principles of “consent and pre-agreed manoeuvres.”¹³ While attack and troop helicopters helped, the element of surprise was rarely available to Blue Helmets. A case in point was the operations around Goma, DRC, in 2006. On November 26, 2006, just short of Goma, MONUC established a security cordon to halt the advance of some renegade Congolese Brigades on the attack mode. Indian night-attack enabled Mi-35 helicopters tracked the attackers and largely decimated their capabilities.

USE OF FORCE: STUDY IN CONTRASTS

The stark difference in value for African lives can be gauged by comparing Indian operations with EU’s Operation Artemis in the second quarter of 2003. To diffuse a situation of an impending genocide among the Lendu and Hema communities in Ituri, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan allowed a France-led multi-nation force to stabilise the situation. The Europeans deployed roughly 2,000 troops and aerial firepower with freedom to shoot wherever violence erupted. This did nothing to solve underlying issues but was effective in image-building for the EU. There were no European casualties.¹⁴

According to Simon Chesterman, wrong lessons learnt from UN deployments in DR Congo, Somalia and Bosnia further confused the issue of use of force.¹⁵ Trevor Findlay suggested a revamp of UN doctrines to “balance effectiveness and own vulnerability.” His analysis centred on UN action in Bosnia and Somalia.¹⁶ Unfortunately, all the debates around the issue are coloured by different agendas of major actors. Susan Woodward also brings out the argument in her case-study book, *Balkan Tragedy*.¹⁷

13. Guéhenno, n. 9.

14. UN, *Operation Artemis: The Lessons of the Interim Emergency Multinational Force*, Peacekeeping Best Practices Unit, Military Division, UN, October 2004, at www.un.org. Accessed on January 25, 2022.

15. Simon Chesterman, *You, The People: The United Nations, Transitional Administration, and State-Building* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

16. Trevor Findlay, *The Use of Force in UN Peace Operations* (Oxford: SIPRI and Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 223, 271.

17. Susan L. Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution after the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1995), p. 378.

NEED FOR ROBUSTNESS

Mandates with Chapter VII provisions demand more robust engagement by peacekeepers with primary focus on protection of civilians. But there is still little clarity on doctrine and recommended praxis on how to do this in a multi-nation set-up of Blue Helmets. 'Robust' is interpreted in as many ways by different contingents' peacekeeping, and without consistency. A hesitance to engage in conflict and resultant body bags is the motive behind this vagueness at the cost of atrocities on civilians.

Does robustness in UNPK include combat and a defined enemy? In such complex melees, spoilers and fence-sitters take full advantage of any hesitancy of deployed peacekeepers. Without clear rules of engagement or effective standard operating procedures, variable discretion among peacekeepers leads to ambiguity and higher risk-taking by spoilers. At the same time, any UN deployment needs to recognise, accept and collaborate with ongoing political efforts for reconciliation and peace-building activities of governance restoration, building infrastructure, and establishing rule-of-law mechanisms.

Robustness has also to take into account the intractability and longevity of UN missions. By their past record, most have continued for decades with no end or exit strategy in sight. It is driven by multiple motivations with UN civilians' agenda of profit-making at the foremost. While military contingents are regularly rotated, civilian and logistics engagement are near permanent. Local affiliations that depend on the presence of the UN as a gravy train seem to calibrate their actions to support this. How can militaries operate robustly in such complexities?

AFRICANS UNDERSTAND AFRICA BETTER

Impartiality, neutrality, and consent are terms that are increasingly being subjectively interpreted and debated. Unlike earlier, where most literature on the subject was dominated by Western 'liberal thought', there is a growing knowledge base of non-Western and even local experiences of understanding the context of conflicts. This strongly calls for reform of institutions and machinery designed for sustainable peace in Africa. The truth is that most outsiders' interests

are only aligned to their own national interests, and not overly concerned with local needs and demands. Here, India's involvement has been unique and different as demonstrated on ground. Local communities are best judges of this.

As per Under Secretary-General in UN Department of Peace Keeping, Jean-Marie Guéhenno's suggestion 'consent' of at least the major parties to the conflict could be made a criterion rather than an unachievable full consent of all. Impartiality in deed and what is seen by local communities is vital for a mission's credibility and legitimacy. However, decision-makers at the helm are mostly from Western nations with multiple agendas, while the execution is left to troop-contributing countries (TCC). For example, in many missions, blue helmets are deployed in support of government forces that have questionable authority and even lesser credibility with local communities. This strains the mandate of protection of civilians in many cases. The mandates turn out to be undoable, encompassing looking for a peace to keep (where there is no accord), bringing an end to hostilities, while also providing protection to civilians, and then find resources and the will to focus on long-term, sustainable peace.

AGENDAS AT WORK

Responsibility to Protect (RTP), as endorsed at the 2005 World Summit, is another area open to manipulation and misinterpretation. Though it applies to four specific aspects of genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing, it is highly contextual and requires deep understanding and empathy. Whether it is about deploying Quick Reaction Forces as a preventive deployment or an appropriate larger mission for a situation, Africans may be the best to understand, conceptualise and deploy in the most effective way. The role of regional organisations is recognised in the UN Charter through Chapter VIII provisions. The performance of the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States/Southern African Development Community (ECOWAS/SADC) have indicated the efficacy of regional efforts. Of course, success or failure depends on the untethered commitment, training and resources available.

The Western agenda is very succinctly brought out by Gen Nambiar:¹⁸

To suggest that the countries of the Western world prefer to operate under the auspices of NATO because of the 'inefficiency' or 'incompetence' of the UN system is, in my view, hypocrisy of the highest order.

He goes on to further elaborate their machination:

garnering senior command positions in the UN missions that are deployed, or in securing senior military and police staff positions at the headquarters of the missions deployed.

As an example in 1992-1993, he brings out that:

every single contract, whether it was for provision of aircraft, helicopters, vehicles, provisions, bottled water, maintenance of equipment, communication equipment, or whatever, was in the hands of the countries of the developed world.

In plain terms, these nations supposedly contributing majorly to financing these missions, not only got their money back but even more than that in every way.

The decision to deploy a peacekeeping mission itself is a net result of political and strategic wrangles in the Security Council especially between the P-5.¹⁹ More often than not, consent can differ as it percolates down from the strategic level to field operations. Because of the conundrum at the P-5 level in UNHQ, there is rarely a clear consent passed. Managing local consent at various levels in the mission area requires understanding of smaller players, spoilers

18. Satish Nambiar, "India and United Nations Peacekeeping: A Saga of Dedication and Commitment", *Blue Helmet Odyssey* (CUNPK), vol. 1, edition 2022, p. 39.

19. T. Fraser, "Peacekeeping and Rule of Law: Challenges Posed by Intervention Brigade and other Coercive Measures in Support of the Protection of Civilians", in David Curran (ed.), *Perspectives on Peacekeeping and Atrocity Prevention* (New York: Springer, 2015), p. 69.

and other forces.²⁰ Especially in intra-state conflicts with multiple big and small players in context to Africa, this is a must-do for ensuring sustainable peace.²¹

Capabilities of the force must be realistically assessed before a mandate of robust posture.²² If most of it is spent in self-protection, then very little can be achieved towards a mandate of civilian protection. Therefore, the key is in crafting a doable mandate that also keeps in mind the vagaries of a multi-nation force that are not necessary allies in the strictest sense.

CONCLUSION

The assessment of contribution of Indian peacekeepers in Africa over seven decades is a demonstration of an agenda-free, honourable and purposeful contribution while abiding by UN mandates. However, the peacekeeping road for TCCs has been rough with many speed-breakers. Some of these issues such as mandates, consent and adherence to principles have been discussed repeatedly over decades, but with little progress due to differences within the P-5.

It has been brought out how India adds substantial value to effectiveness of UNPK in Africa. A focus on Indian aviation deployments has been done with case studies of Sierra Leone and DRC. Aviation contributes majorly to creating asymmetries where peacekeepers can operate effectively. A detailed discussion on vexing issues such as use of force, robustness and tactical imperatives has been attempted along with key recommendations.

India is actively cooperating with the AU and African nations in building regional and local capacities. This clearly suggests a synergetic partnership between the two to help Africa manage its own peace. Bereft of Western agendas or the highly bureaucratic UN approach, a more effective template is suggested.

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20. Whalan Jeni, "The Local Legitimacy of Peacekeepers", *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 11, no. 3, 2017, p. 309, at <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2017.135375>. Accessed on January 25, 2022.
 21. Abiodun Alao, John Mackinlay and Funmi Olonisakin, "Regional Peacekeeping after the Cold War", *Peacekeepers, Politicians and Warlords: The Liberian Peace Process* (Tokyo: United Nations University, 1999), p. 7.
 22. UN, *Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations [Brahimi Report]*, UN Doc. A/55/305/-S/2000/809, 21 August 2000. Accessed on January 25, 2022.