

Event Report

Round Table Discussion

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: Harmony and Collective Action

Chaired & Moderated by: Maj. Gen. J.V Prasad VSM (Retd), Director, CNSS

Distinguished Panelists: Maj. Gen. Ravi Murugan PVSM AVSM (Retd); Dr. Shalini B.; Maj. Gen. U Suresh Kumar AVSM YSM VSM; Dr. Daniel J. PhD

Venue: Board Room, RMC, GG Campus, Mathikere, Bangalore,

Day & Date: (Tuesday) May 27, 2025

Welcome – Mr. Balasubramanian C, Senior Research Officer & Head of India Strategic Studies Programme, CNSS

India's role in United Nations peacekeeping is becoming increasingly significant, even as it faces calls for reform to enhance its effectiveness and inclusivity. India stands as the second-largest contributor of uniformed personnel to UN peacekeeping missions, with over 200,000 personnel having served in 49 different operations since 1948. In 2007, India marked a historic milestone by deploying the first all-woman Formed Police Unit to the UN Mission in Liberia, thereby setting a global precedent and reaffirming its commitment to inclusive peace efforts. Further demonstrating this commitment, the Indian Army has established the Centre for UN Peacekeeping in New Delhi, which trains more than 12,000 troops annually in specialised peacekeeping operations. As the United Nations approaches its 80th anniversary, this roundtable discussion seeks to address two central questions: first, the relevance of peacekeeping operations in the current global context, and second, the role of the UN in the emerging multipolar world order. The Indian ethos of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, which translates to “the world is one family,” aligns deeply with the mission of UN peacekeepers who dedicate themselves to promoting peace and stability across the globe. With these reflections, the speaker concluded the address and handed over the proceedings to Major General J.V. Prasad, Director, CNSS

Opening Remarks – Maj. Gen. J.V. Prasad

Major General J.V. Prasad began his address by reminding the audience that May 29 is observed as the International Day of UN Peacekeepers. This day commemorates the sacrifices and dedication of UN peacekeepers across the world. So far, 4,433 peacekeepers have laid down their lives in the line of duty, including around 182 from Maharashtra alone. This solemn occasion calls for gratitude and remembrance of those who made the ultimate sacrifice in the pursuit of global peace.

He emphasised that the United Nations, established in the aftermath of World War II, was shaped primarily by the victors of that conflict. As such, both the charter and its implementation have often reflected prevailing geopolitical interests and still do today. This has constrained the UN's independence in decision-making. General Prasad noted that while the UN has six principal organs—including the General Assembly, Security Council, Economic and Social Council, and the International Court of Justice—it would be an injustice to assess the organisation solely through the lens of peacekeeping operations. Institutions such as UNESCO and other UN bodies have made substantial contributions in education, culture, and humanitarian efforts.

Nonetheless, the visibility and media coverage of UN activities tend to focus disproportionately on geopolitical matters handled by the Security Council and peacekeeping missions. Successes in peacekeeping often go unacknowledged, while failures are spotlighted. He highlighted a stark paradox: while the top ten financial contributors to the UN—largely Western powers—donate significantly to the UN's \$5.6 billion peacekeeping budget, they contribute less than 10% of the actual troops. In contrast, countries like India provide a far larger share of uniformed personnel, but often have little influence in decision-making processes, appointments, or command structures, which are largely dominated by financial contributors.

This, he argued, results in a fundamental dichotomy: the Western understanding of peacekeeping is shaped by a liberal, Westphalian construct, often imposing liberal democratic frameworks on conflict-affected areas without fully appreciating local judicial, socioeconomic, or cultural systems. However, UN reforms in recent years have increasingly recognised this limitation, gradually shifting towards community-based and bottom-up peace building approaches. Major General Prasad concluded by expressing hope that the roundtable would further explore these critical themes, especially the prospects for reform, and invited the next speaker to share their insights.

Panelist I - Dr. Daniel J. Senior Advisor, UN Studies, United Service Institution (USI):

Dr. Daniel J. opened his remarks by acknowledging the efforts of the organisers and expressing appreciation for being invited to share his perspectives. He focused on three strategic dimensions of peacekeeping, beginning with an overview of the UN's finances. The United Nations operates on an annual budget of approximately \$85–90 billion, of which around \$7–8 billion is allocated specifically for peacekeeping. An additional \$2–3 billion is spent on logistical support such as unmanned aerial surveillance, medical supplies, equipment transfer, and other operational necessities. In total, peacekeeping operations consume about 10–12% of the UN's annual budget.

To understand the full scope of the UN, Dr. Daniel pointed out that the organisation comprises 54 main bodies, including programs, specialised agencies, and treaty institutions. Across these, there are nearly 289 departments and agencies. Despite the breadth of the UN system, peacekeeping remains a crucial, visible, and often contested component. Dr. Daniel noted that from the Korean War onward, India has participated in peacekeeping missions primarily in non-combat roles, such as providing medical assistance and logistical support, maintaining a consistent policy of non-combat engagement. India's approach contrasts sharply with other nations, particularly in Africa and the Middle East, where troop contributions are often tied to national or regional interests. For instance, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) faced challenges that led Somalia to restrict foreign (non-African) military presence. This reflects growing concerns about the political agendas of contributing nations. Dr. Daniel highlighted that many countries, including Uganda, Rwanda, and Ethiopia, have played dual roles—both contributing troops and being involved in regional conflicts—complicating the neutrality of peacekeeping missions.

In contrast, Indian peacekeepers are widely respected for their professional conduct and adherence to UN mandates without advancing narrow national interests. Dr. Daniel emphasised that India's principled approach stands out in a peacekeeping landscape often marred by conflicting agendas. He concluded by stressing the need to recognise these complexities and reform the system to better reflect the contributions and capabilities of troop-contributing nations like India.

Panelist II Maj. Gen. Ravi Murugan (Retd.), PVSM AVSM

The session moved forward with an engaging address by Maj. Gen. Ravi Murugan, who brought to the table a deeply analytical and experienced military perspective on the effectiveness and challenges of the United Nations Peacekeeping Forces. He began by drawing attention to the long-standing power imbalance in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), pointing out that the five permanent

members often hold the UN system hostage due to their veto powers and strategic interests. This, he argued, hampers effective action in peacekeeping and conflict resolution.

Maj. Gen. Murugan outlined the three core principles that guide UN Peacekeeping operations: consent of the parties, impartiality, and non-use or minimum use of force. While these are foundational to UN mandates, he critiqued their efficacy in modern conflicts where the asymmetry of warfare and the changing nature of threats often render these principles insufficient. He acknowledged the low success rate of UN Peacekeeping missions overall, offering the Balkans as an illustrative example. Although NATO took interventionist action in the Balkans, the UN has disproportionately borne the blame for the failure to bring about a resolution, despite not having an explicit mandate in that scenario.

Nevertheless, Maj. Gen. Murugan offered a nuanced perspective by asserting that UN peacekeeping should not be judged solely on the basis of conflict resolution. If these missions have saved civilian lives or delivered humanitarian aid, he argued, they must be considered at least partially successful. He further highlighted the disparity between the contributions of the Global South and the Global North. Developing nations contribute the majority of the troops, often putting their soldiers at risk, whereas developed nations, particularly the P5 countries, largely provide funding but hesitate to send their troops. Despite this limited troop contribution, they wield the most influence in decision-making processes at the UN, owing to their financial muscle.

Maj. Gen. Murugan further called for urgent reforms, emphasising the need for a convergence of political and military strategies under initiatives such as the UN's "Action for Peacekeeping." He asserted that in cases of inter-state conflicts, the UN's track record has been abysmal, with rare exceptions like the Iran-Iraq ceasefire or the Camp David Accords. In contrast, intra-state conflicts have seen comparatively more success, as the UN tends to enjoy greater leverage in such contexts. However, he was candid in stating that wars of asymmetry, like the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Gaza conflicts, are beyond the operational capacity of the UN, as the involved states themselves often resist international mediation.

Additionally, he proposed a series of structural reforms, beginning with a re-evaluation of UNSC membership to ensure broader and fairer representation, especially from the Global South. He called for the abolition of the veto power, arguing that it allows the P5 countries to protect their national interests at the cost of international peace. He also advocated for a system where at least 50 countries maintain a state of readiness to contribute troops to UN Peacekeeping operations. The UN, in turn,

should take responsibility for one-third of the maintenance costs. He urged the General Assembly to be empowered to pass more binding resolutions, which would democratise global decision-making further.

Concluding his remarks, he emphasised the concept of “shared blood” – a moral appeal to the Global North to take equal responsibility alongside the Global South in peacekeeping operations, rather than merely contributing funds. He also touched upon whether peacekeeping should be outsourced or regionalised, acknowledging that while regional setups may be more feasible, and they come with their own geopolitical complications and biases.

Panelist III - Dr. Shalini B., Assistant Professor of International Relations at CHRIST (Deemed to be University)

Following him, Dr. Shalini B. provided an academic lens to the ongoing discourse, questioning whether the United Nations as an institution is still relevant in today’s multipolar world. She argued that the foundational goal of the UN was to prevent another world war, and in that regard, the absence of a large-scale global conflict since 1945 speaks to its partial success. However, she acknowledged the increasing complexity of intra-state conflicts, where the UN’s role is constantly evolving.

Dr. Shalini criticised the manipulation of veto power by countries like Russia and China, particularly highlighting the UN’s inaction during the Syrian and Yemeni crises. These examples, she pointed out, expose the limitations of the current UN framework, particularly in its decision-making processes, which are often halted due to clashing geopolitical interests among the P5. Despite these flaws, she maintained that the UN remains indispensable, simply because there is no alternative forum that brings together all 193 member states under one roof to deliberate on global issues.

She went on to discuss the UN’s pivotal role in tackling climate change. The organisation, she argued, provides critical funding and resources, despite the discord between the Global North and South. For instance, the United States’ withdrawal from the Paris Agreement under President Trump revealed the Global North’s tendency to shirk responsibility, whereas the Global South continues to bear the brunt of climate change impacts for which it is the least responsible. This discrepancy, she asserted, underscores the UN’s necessity in mediating global conversations and distributing responsibilities more equitably.

Dr. Shalini also highlighted the UN's evolving role in addressing non-traditional security threats such as artificial intelligence and emerging technologies in warfare. The organisation has taken important steps in documenting how these technologies affect civilian populations and exacerbate conflicts, as seen in Syria's refugee crisis. Moreover, she mentioned the rise of conflicts between non-state actors, such as in Yemen, which has prompted the UN to reconsider how resolutions are framed and whom they target.

The speaker made a strong case for the continued relevance of the UN by highlighting how it facilitates dialogue among conflicting states like India and Pakistan or Armenia and Azerbaijan—countries unlikely to find common ground elsewhere. She criticised the fact that conflicts in states like Mali and South Sudan receive little attention from global powers but are kept in international focus through the efforts of the UN.

Dr. Shalini gave particular importance to the inclusion of women in peacekeeping missions, referencing UN Resolution 1820, which underscores the role of women in peace and security. Women peacekeepers, she argued, are more effective in addressing gender-based violence and in building trust with local populations. Finally, she emphasised that the Global South continues to push for representation and inclusivity within the UN framework because it provides a rare platform where their voices matter. Without the UN, she warned, decisions affecting the Global South would be made unilaterally by the Global North.

Panelist IV - Maj. Gen. U Suresh Kumar, AVSM YSM VSM

The session then transitioned to Maj. Gen. U. Suresh Kumar, AVSM YSM VSM, who examined two key aspects: the future of UN Peacekeeping Missions and the importance of developing robust exit strategies. A military veteran with deep field experience, Maj. Gen. Kumar noted that there has been a significant decline in large-scale peacekeeping deployments since 2014. He attributed this shift to several structural changes within the international system, including reduced polarisation among global powers, increasing adoption of technological tools, and the rise of regional peacekeeping efforts.

He outlined two possible scenarios for the future. In the first, a “resurgent” UN Peacekeeping model would continue to rely on ad hoc committees and coordinated missions under UN mandates. In the second, regional organisations would take a more prominent role, stepping in where the UN lacks capacity or political will. Both models, he argued, have their strengths and weaknesses, but coordination between the two is crucial.

A major focus of his talk was the exit strategy—an area he felt the UN has not adequately addressed. He criticised fixed timelines for withdrawal, pointing to Afghanistan as a case where premature exit worsened the situation. He argued that exit strategies should be context-specific, based on clearly defined criteria and sub-criteria such as reduction in violence, restoration of governance, and rebuilding of civil institutions. Continuous monitoring and collaboration with regional stakeholders, he said, are essential to ensure long-term peace.

Maj. Gen. Kumar concluded by emphasising India's critical role in Peacekeeping missions. Indian peacekeepers, he stated, have consistently demonstrated high levels of professionalism, adaptability, and compassion. Their contributions should serve as a global benchmark for others, reaffirming India's leadership role in global peace efforts.

The session then opened up for a brief but engaging Q&A round, where the audience posed insightful questions, leading to a rich exchange of views. This was followed by dignitaries offering their final thoughts, suggestions, and possible solutions to the existing gaps in the Peacekeeping framework. The session concluded with a formal felicitation ceremony led by Maj. Gen. J.V. Prasad, who honoured the distinguished speakers for their valuable insights and contributions.

Upon the felicitation of the esteemed panelists for their invaluable insights and in a token of gratitude, Maj. Gen. J.V. Prasad felicitated the panelists, and Mr. Prathyush Pran Sharma, Research Assistant, CNSS, delivered the vote of thanks, expressing gratitude to all the speakers, participants, and organisers who made the session a deeply enriching experience.
