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The role of Afro-Asian States, and especially of India, in the formative years of United Nations (UN) international peacekeeping has traditionally been neglected. While there is now an emerging literature which aims to highlight the major troop and police contributions of states of the Global South such as Bangladesh, Ethiopia, India, Nepal, and Pakistan, the interest of Southern states in supporting and shaping UN peacekeeping is hardly a new phenomenon. As a result, Swapna Kona Nayudu’s thorough and documented analysis of India’s involvement in the Lebanon crisis of 1958 is a very welcome addition to the nascent revisionist scholarship aiming at repositioning the agency of Global South states and leaders at the centre of UN crisis management and peacekeeping in the 1950s and 1960s.

Breaking with old narratives that have generally viewed extra-regional intervention in Middle Eastern crises as the exclusive purview of Washington and Moscow, Nayudu’s article discusses the perspective and key role played by New Delhi in the resolution of the Lebanon crisis. India effectively contributed as one of the three members of the core group in the United Nations Observation Group in Lebanon (UNOGIL) and also then participated in the peacekeeping mission. Nayudu further describes how India played a pivotal mediating role.

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role between the UN, the U.S., Egypt, the USSR, and, of course, the Lebanese government. Nayudu notes that as in other contemporary global crises, the relatively favorable reputation of India and its prime minister of the time, Jawaharlal Nehru, facilitated the possibility of brokering a compromise between these various actors and positions. While there are some important works on the influence of the Cold War in the Middle East in the 1950s, this particular crisis and the contribution of actors like India both at the bilateral and multilateral levels have been neglected by the scholarship.

But why would India embark in this risky diplomatic mission given its apparently limited interests in this region? Nayudu effectively argues that a series of factors motivated New Delhi in 1958. First of all, India was concerned with growing U.S. military and political presence in the Middle East. Nehru was particularly disturbed by U.S. efforts to build up military alliances such as the Baghdad Pact of 1955 which also included India’s regional rival, Pakistan. Nehru strongly criticized the pact on the grounds that it divided the region and weakened the Arab League, which had been created for the purpose of facilitating cooperation among Arab states. Nayudu notes Nehru’s publicized concerns about the intrusion of Cold War politics in the Middle East, especially as India pushed at the time for the creation of a third non-aligned Afro-Asian movement. Finally, the article emphasizes India’s strong support for UN mediation and especially for UN peacekeeping. Nayudu notes the gradual involvement of India in UN peacekeeping efforts in Korea and particularly in the Sinai following the Suez Canal crisis of 1956. As a result, Nayudu convincingly argues that India’s participation to the UNOGIL was part of a broader engagement process that India initiated in the 1950s and would commit to further by contributing to the UN peacekeeping force in Congo in the early 1960s.

Nayudu builds on new archival material from various primary sources to make the argument that India played a decisive mediatory role in the nature of the final settlement to the crisis. The article also provides comprehensive evidence that India, through Nehru and India’s diplomats in New York and on the ground in Lebanon, such as Ambassador Rajeshwar Dayal who acted as UN Secretary General’s Special Representative, played key roles in the shaping the rules and customs that would frame UN intervention in international crises. In the context of the Lebanon crisis, Nayudu argues that India’s active participation in the UNOGIL helped de-escalate and resolve the Lebanon crisis, thereby also reducing the urgent need for a U.S. troop presence, as well as facilitating the development of specific procedures and principles to be used in peacekeeping operations. This article therefore offers a novel perspective on the onset and settlement of this short-term crisis, breaking with traditional and partial accounts over the decisive role played by the United States.

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This description of India’s pivotal responsibility in shaping the nature of the UN diplomatic strategy and peacekeeping mission parallels the resolution of the Suez Canal crisis and the creation of the first United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF-I). In that earlier crisis, the Indian diplomat Arthur Lall, who was India’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations, also played a fundamental role in New York and in negotiations with the Egyptian leadership. India’s initial involvement in the Suez Crisis and the subsequent deployment of UNEF was equally driven by its ambition to play an active mediating role between the European powers (France and UK), the great powers (the U.S. and the USSR), and a Middle Eastern power (Egypt). India wanted to be recognized by these different international actors as a neutral and effective peace-broker. In order to also bolster its claim to leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement, India also made sure in both 1956 and 1958 that Egypt and Lebanon’s political and economic rights were respected through the process of the settlement of the crisis. Thus, in the context of the Suez Crisis, status consideration also explained India’s participation in peacekeeping operations.

It seems that this article is part of a broader historical and comparative project of Nayudu’s which looks more broadly at the evolution of India’s involvement in diplomatic crises in the immediate post-independent period. While this article successfully combines detailed and convincing empirics with a broader argument about India’s gradual role shaping the UN’s diplomacy and peacekeeping agenda, more discussion of the subsequent and long-term implication of the Lebanon crisis would have been useful. How did this particular crucial juncture shape India’s approach to UN peacekeeping, especially in the context of its intervention in Congo and its long-term presence in the Sinai? In addition, while during the Suez crisis, India played a carefully calculated and cautious role, it seems that its position during the crisis of Lebanon put it at odds with U.S. policies and interests. This stands in contrast with 1956, when both U.S. and India criticised the intervention of the French, the British, and the Israelis. In fact, 1958 marks the growing estrangement between India and the U.S. when it came to policies towards the Middle-East. Barring these minor comments over the long-term consequences of the Lebanon crisis, which fall to some degree out of the scope of inquiry of this particular paper, Nayudu’s article is a must-read for all those who are interested in the long neglected but strategic role played by India in the resolution of various regional crises in the 1950s and 1960s. At a time when there is an increasing debate over emerging powers needing to take their responsibilities as stakeholders in providing global security, this article is a necessary reminder that some of these powers were very active in the incipient stages of UN peacekeeping.


Continuity, Change, and Compromise since 1922 (Oxford University Press, 2015) and he co-edited the Oxford Handbook of India’s National Security (Oxford University Press, 2018).

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