

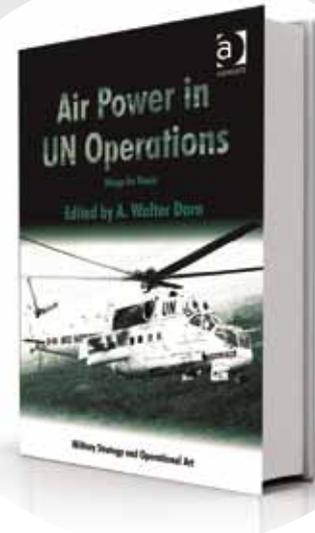


The opportunity for air power in peace operations

In his foreword to *Air Power in UN Operations: Wings for Peace*, LGen (Ret'd) Roméo Dallaire notes that air capability “remains an under-used and under-studied tool for peace operations.”

There is a mistaken view, he writes, of peacekeeping as only an army activity. But just as modern militaries stress the importance of joint operations, “achieving ‘jointness’ is also important for the United Nations.”

The book, launched in September at an event in Toronto, is edited by **Walter Dorn**, a professor of defence studies at the Canadian Forces College and the Royal Military College of Canada. Below is an excerpt from his preface.



Peacekeeping has evolved considerably beyond the two surface dimensions of space to cover the third as well: airspace. The peacekeepers of the air also have a story worth telling. As in conventional warfare, the air campaign is a vital adjunct to the ground campaign; the two are intrinsically bound together. But the air power story in peacekeeping has hardly been told.

To students and practitioners of UN operations, it appears as a major gap in the public, professional and academic literature – one that needs to be filled so all can benefit.

As in all military operations generally, the core capabilities provided by air power are: transportation, observation, and firepower. Simply put, aircraft provide means to carry, see, and

shoot. Almost all air power functions derive from the three basic capabilities, which are sometimes combined during a single flight. For instance, an armed helicopter might carry troops to a conflict zone, observe the movements of opponents, and fire missiles against those who attack the UN forces.

Each of these functions is vital, intriguing, and worth studying in detail. The first, transportation, involves more than deploying peacekeepers into the host country and inserting/extracting them into precise conflict zones (maybe called the “battle space” or even the “peace space”). It also means moving vast quantities of equipment and supplies to sustain not only the peacekeepers but also the “peacekept” – the local population and displaced persons whom the United Nations seeks to save and help. In addition, aircraft can transport and drop



leaflets to educate and inform the local population and, in emergencies, provide medical evacuation (air “medevac”) for fast transport of peacekeepers and local civilians to hospitals.

Aerial observation, the second capability, can be as simple as a pilot viewing the ground while transporting personnel and goods. But to verify complex peace agreements and to prevent the spread of deadly conflict, the United Nations needs dedicated surveillance flights, sometimes observing raging battles from above. Since many of the violations and atrocities in armed conflicts are carried out at night, the United Nations also must overcome the night barrier by using airborne night vision equipment, which few missions have done. Such devices can spot and help stop night attacks and the smuggling of arms, precious minerals, and human beings.

While peacekeeping is meant to de-escalate violence, it is sometimes necessary to use force to stop force. When attacked, UN peacekeepers have a right to defend themselves, including the right to call in close air support. Furthermore, in the twenty-first century, UN missions have a responsibility to protect civilians under imminent attack or threat, requiring rapid and forceful responses, sometimes delivered by air. Such a combat capability is sometimes called “kinetic air power” or aerial firepower; this is the third of the core capabilities. The armed helicopter, the Mi-35, has become an iconic and somewhat ironic symbol of robust peace operations. Once an instrument of suppression and dictatorship, the Russian-made helicopter is now used by the United Nations as an instrument to prevent aggression and oppression, proving its worth in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Liberia

and the Côte d’Ivoire. The combat capability of the Mi-35 is usually applied only when a firefight erupts or an attack is under way, but the mere presence or sound of the heavily armed helicopter can serve as a powerful deterrent. That is the power of presence. Parties are less likely to violate peace agreements if they know that violations will be met with UN resistance backed up by robust UN air power.

The mission of peacekeepers is, however, very different from that of warfighters. Rather than gain victory on the battlefield, the United Nations seeks a negotiated settlement so that the conflicting parties can live in peace for the long term. In his article “Peacekeeping at the Speed of Sound,” John Hillen observes that UN peacekeeping emphasizes “restraint, perseverance and legitimacy as opposed to offense, surprise and mass.” Using all the facets of air power can facilitate negotiations and a sustainable peace.

Aircraft are sometimes used for relaying communications, bouncing signals from the ground to locations much further from their origin. Of course, aircraft also need to communicate their own information, including what they observe from the air and a host of flight details. In addition, aircraft can broadcast messages electronically to the wider public through radio, television and the Internet. Alternatively, they can jam unwanted signals, such as hate radio broadcasts that inflame conflict. (This is usually done by saturating the particular radio frequency with white noise.) Sometimes aircraft are used as mobile relay stations to pass communications to other aircraft or ground forces.

From these core capabilities a host of UN air functions are developed. For example, UN commanders sometimes place themselves aboard helicopters to oversee the movement of their troops and to observe any hostile or opposing forces. In another example, airborne search and rescue crews use aerial surveillance to locate lost persons and air transport to bring them quickly to a hospital or back to base. Similarly, the interdiction of illegally trafficked people and contraband involves surveillance (that is, spotting the illegal traffickers or goods) and the transport of troops to bring traffickers to custody and seize their ill-gotten gains. It can also involve combat, if the traffickers put up a fight.

There were only a few precedents in UN history where the United Nations used combat air power. The first part of the book considers an early, important, and fascinating case study involving combat: the leap in air power made by the United Nations in the Congo (1960–1964). The Congo operation proved irresistible as a prime case study for the development of UN air power. In some ways the mission carried out activities unsurpassed by any peacekeeping mission to the present day. For instance, it was the only mission (so far) to use bomber aircraft. In its multidimensional application of air power it was a forerunner of the many peace operations in the post-Cold War world. The mission saw the creation of the UN’s first “Air Force”, which expanded in number and type of aircraft as the world organization became embroiled in a battle to maintain law and order, and prevent secession in that new-born country.

While not exactly “winged angels”, the aerial UN peacekeepers are important agents of protection and support. They are an attempt to bring the better angels of human nature to the fore. UN air power is a celestial and material representation of humanity’s concern for humanity. This book shows how air power can save lives, alleviate suffering, and build global security. But these aerial applications can be as complicated and as challenging as they are fascinating. ■

For more information about *Air Power in UN Operations*, see <http://unairpower.net>