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Technology and Innovation in UN Peacekeeping

A New Issues in Peacekeeping Observatory seminar organized by the International Peace Institute and sponsored by the Government of France

New York, 29 January 2015

Meeting Summary

On 29 January, 2015, the International Peace Institute, as part of its New Issues in Peacekeeping Observatory project, held a roundtable seminar with Member States, UN Secretariat officials, researchers, and the Expert Panel on Technology and Innovation in UN Peacekeeping on the eve of the release of the panel's report. The discussion was kicked off with opening remarks by Ambassador Ib Petersen, Permanent Representative of Denmark to the United Nations. The Chair of the Expert Panel, Assistant Secretary-General Jane Holl Lute, and panel member Dr. Walter Dorn then provided briefings on their findings and recommendations. The subsequent discussion was chaired by Adam C. Smith, Director of the Brian Urquhart Center for Peace Operations at IPI.

Background

In June 2014, the UN Under-Secretaries-General of Peacekeeping Operations and Field Support tasked an Expert Panel on Technology and Innovation in UN Peacekeeping to advise on how technology and innovation could be leveraged to enhance the operational effectiveness of peacekeeping. The Panel sought to establish the basis for a threshold consensus that no peacekeeping operation should deploy without the essential technology to help ensure mission success. It examined how technology and innovation could achieve immediate impact across mission lifelines, such as safety and security, mobility, energy, and health and well-being; for operational imperatives, including information gathering and command and control; and for mission support functions. The Panel also took a longer view and explored how UN peacekeeping can become a learning enterprise that seeks out and applies new technologies and innovations on a continuous basis, thereby enabling it to be prepared for the future.

It was explained that the use of technology had to be guided by a set of principles. Such principles included the need to use widely-available and inexpensive technology that is relatively easy to maintain in the field; to put a premium on technology that facilitates mobility of mission assets and information technology platforms; to use technology that meets clearly identified needs; to maintain transparency in the consideration and use of sophisticated technology; and to acquire

these technologies locally, or regionally when they cannot be secured from member states.

Innovation and Adaptation

It is worth remembering that people have more computing power in their pockets today than even the most powerful computer could handle a few decades ago. Yet many aspects of the technological revolution have not yet caught up to UN peacekeeping missions over the last few decades, though others have seen potential in exploiting technology. In 2012, in the DRC, the rebel group M23 took their offensive online when they created a Facebook group. They used social media to generate support for their cause and post photos of abuses by Congolese army soldiers. Such non-state actors are innovating, constantly finding ways to harness new technologies. In this respect, as the expert panel's report states, "no mission can be expected to succeed in today's complex environments without an ability to innovate."

Modern technology can allow peacekeeping missions to be one step ahead of their adversaries. New technology can enable peacekeepers to enhance operational efficiency, improve safety and security of personnel, and expand situational awareness. However, it was explained that we must first make sure peacekeepers can "get the basics right." New technology can help streamline mission support for instance. A gallon of water weighs 8.34 lbs, or 3.87 kilos. When multiplied by thousands daily, that is a lot of water weight that has to be carried. Technology can help us to locate sources of safe drinking water, carefully sourced so as not to delete water reserves in local communities. Technology can help the UN determine the best locations to construct UN compounds, and ensure missions have access to local energy grids.

A key part of the technological vision for peacekeeping is the creation of a robust intelligence capacity to improve both mandate implementation and the safety and security of the peacekeepers. Such an intelligence capacity requires human and signals intelligence analysis bolstered by surveillance technologies such as long-range and short-range UAVs. In addition to UAVs, high resolution satellite imagery, precise positioning and data visualization have the potential to expand situational awareness for peacekeepers and allow for real-time overhead visualization of mission environments.

In 2014 alone, 27 peacekeepers in Mali were killed as a result of increasing use of improvised explosive devices. The UN is responding by deploying Explosive Ordinance Teams, specialized armored ambulances, and mine protected vehicles. There is even a smartphone app that can help identify types of landmines and IEDs. In addition, location tracking systems can greatly improve the safety and security of UN personnel by providing their exact locations at any time. GPS phone and vehicle tracking systems are a practical solution to help peacekeepers who are lost, missing, or under attack.

Conclusion

Some important challenges to increasing the use of technology in peacekeeping operation were raised by members of the seminar. First, how can the UN ensure that information/intelligence will be used appropriately? TCCs and host governments worry that this surveillance technology will be used for spying or non-mandated purposes. How can the UN lessen these concerns over privacy and data protection? On this

issue, discussions referred to the Panel's recommendations on the need for the UN to establish rules and regulations for information collection and use, and the need for full disclosure and transparency on the use of more sophisticated technology.

A second challenge identified was how the UN can integrate the diverse technological capabilities of the various TCCs. In Mali, European troops in armored personnel carriers with some of the world's most high-tech equipment operate alongside Chadian forces in pickup trucks. With over 100 TCCs, how can the UN ensure the benefits of new technology are evenly spread around?

A third issue relates to the engagement of local communities on the introduction of certain types of technology. Research suggests that some communities may fear that UAVs are weaponized, or that information will be used to identify them and lead to discriminatory actions. Can the UN find a way to listen to community concerns and obtain their consent for the use of new technology? Finally, how much is too much information and will the UN ever have the capacity to process and analyze so much information? On this issue a panelist cautioned against "analysis paralysis and the fog of more," and it was recommended that the UN's approach to this needed to be very pragmatic.

As the expert panel's report states, "technology is not a panacea. No panelist believes that simply throwing technology at a problem will help a peacekeeping mission fulfill its mandate. A field operation might have all the enabling technology in the world, yet still be ineffective or unwilling to use it. But the moment is now for peacekeeping to take greater advantage of the waves of technology and innovation washing over every dimension of life in societies the world over."[1] In this respect, a set of working papers on technology and peacekeeping published by IPI's New Issues in Peacekeeping Observatory were discussed. This research has begun the process of going into more depth on the key issues identified in the expert panel's report in order to identify the specific challenges and possible opportunities on the horizon should the UN work towards developing a culture of innovation and integrate new technology into its operations in the future.

[1] United Nations DPKO / DFS, "Performance Peacekeeping: Final Report: Expert Panel on Technology and Innovation," New York, 2014, p. 11