

100 Voices on Technology & Peace Operations

Exploring the impact of digital technology on conflict dynamics and peace operations

| The need for a new Expert Panel on Technology and UN Peace Operations

10 June 2020 | Professor Walter Dorn

Five years after the Expert Panel on Technology and Innovation in UN Peacekeeping (known as the TIP panel) presented its report, it is time for another review that reflects recent developments in the fast-moving world of technology. The new Expert Panel should build on lessons from the implementation of the 2015 TIP report, as well as on innovation and progress generated in the field. Charting the future of peace operations, now is the time to explore how technologies can better detect, prevent and mitigate threats to peace.

THE STORY SO FAR

Having served in 2014 on the Expert Panel on Technology and Innovation in UN Peacekeeping, I saw how useful such a body could be. It reviewed UN progress, explored new areas, and served as a channel for many new proposals. The 2015 TIP Report was enthusiastically accepted by those UN departments most involved with peacekeeping. An extensive 18-month TIP Implementation Strategy was very quickly developed. Good progress was made as the UN tried out many new technologies in the field, including aerostats (tethered balloons with video cameras), novel UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles, for observation), mobile command centres, and new forms of data collection and analysis, as well as more secure means of communication. However, momentum for the TIP Implementation Strategy waned after 18 months. Some progress continued in the field but most of the 120 recommendations from the TIP report were left unimplemented, unexplored and unprioritized.

A stock-taking of progress since the TIP Report would be valuable, especially for the UN's experiences with new technologies, e.g., UAVs, which have gone from three in 2014 to over 100 at present (mostly mini-UAVs). Many lessons can be learned from the past half-decade. New technologies have been explored, some abandoned, but all of the experiences provide significant opportunities for analysis and institutional learning.

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KEEPING UP WITH EVOLVING TECH

The TIP provided excellent suggestions for improving technology in UN peace operations but its recommendations are no longer sufficient as guidance. Five years is a long time in the fast-moving world of technology. Furthermore, the report makes no mention of artificial intelligence and machine learning, key evolving fields that are now major interests of the United Nations and its Secretary-General. Likewise, the TIP report did not foresee the importance of blockchain and the Internet of Things (IoT) which will play a major role in the near future.

Also, the TIP Report did not consider technology use by conflicting parties. Since cell phones, smart phones, and other technologies have changed the way many conflicts are conducted, new responsive measures are needed for UN field operations. The report also lacked discussion of technology for UN mediation and negotiation, which is a key part of modern peace operations, nor did it offer comments or recommendations on important issues like data privacy.

POLICY AND PEACEKEEPING INITIATIVES

A new panel could review recent experience and developments, not only on the technology side but also in relation to political and peacekeeping initiatives. The Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) may not mention technology but its implementation can be greatly enabled by technology. For example, performance measurement can be enhanced through tracking, reporting and data analysis.

Moving forward, some key documents and processes since 2014 can help frame a discussion on the use of peacekeeping technologies. The reports of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO), of General Santos Cruz ([report on Improving Security of United Nations Peacekeepers](#)), and the [High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation](#) all provide valuable insights to consider. Most importantly, the Secretary-General's [Strategy on New Technologies](#) stipulates excellent principles that have yet to be systematically applied to peace operations. Similarly, with the UN's five-year ICT Strategy ending in 2020, there is a need for new ideas and directions for the next period. And following the 2018 management reforms, the UN has new structures and capabilities to deal with technological innovation, even as the final division of labour still needs to be settled. Finally, the recently created UN Technology Innovation Labs ([UNTIL](#)) can assist with a host of UN themes, especially the peace and security pillar, by furnishing new ideas and resources for technology integration across fields and pillars.

SCOPE AND AMBITION OF A NEW EXPERT PANEL

The new panel* can help fill the large digital gaps that peacekeeping is experiencing not only between developed and developing countries in the field, but also between peacekeeping and other functional pillars of the United Nations. Some development agencies, like UNICEF and UNDP, started innovation earlier and are now further ahead.

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A review – such as the stock-taking suggested above – could help to guide the new panel or be done by it, identifying key lessons and themes requiring further exploration. The sponsoring departments will have to decide on the technological scope of the panel: narrow (e.g., “information technology”) to very broader (technology in general, to include the technologies that use digital technology but go beyond information, e.g., for solar power, waste water treatment, and engineering tools.) Similarly, the panel could deal narrowly with peacekeeping or more broadly with peace operations (including special political missions) or even more broadly with the peace and security pillar and its linkages to the UN’s other pillars – development and human rights – while also considering the environment. Even if the panel has a narrow mandate, it could review progress by other UN agencies, funds and programmes, and other pillars (e.g., development) to find lessons and examples. Because peace is closely related to development, new synergies should be explored.

The panel will likely not focus on conflicts between great powers in cyberspace – because of their resistance to such inquiry, but the panel will have to deal with the hacking of websites and computers of peace operations and cyber-conflict between the conflicting parties in field mission. This gives rise to some exciting possibilities for building cyber peace. Applying the principles and practice of peacekeeping to cyberspace should reveal important differences but also useful similarities. Much of what is done in physical space can also be done in cyberspace (see exploratory [paper](#)).

As the United Nations gets the new Expert Panel off the ground, the world organization is not only charting the future for field operations but also for 120 nations participating in those missions. By demonstrating technological innovation and new ways to adapt digital technology, the United Nations can not only make peacekeepers more secure and effective, they can also show how appropriate technologies can better detect, prevent and mitigate threats to the peace and thus make the world safer.

* Editor’s note: the name of the new panel has not yet been publicly announced but it is confirmed to be Expert Panel on Digital Technology Innovation and UN Peace Operations (DTIP, for short).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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