Technology as a Force Multiplier in Contemporary UN PKO

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'*Digital technologies can support United Nations Peacekeeping efforts globally, including by ensuring the safety and security of peacekeepers.*'[1]

INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed pronounced militarization and spread of global conflicts, throwing up new challenges to the UN on managing and resolving new conflicts. With the operating environment undergoing constant transformation, UN peace operations are experiencing a paradigm shift in their entire spectrum of peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding. Climate security and COVID-19 pandemic have aggravated international tensions escalating political violence, social distress and economic decline.

UN Peacekeepers operate in a violent environment, with asymmetric and cyber threats becoming part of the conflict narrative. A disturbing trend has been UN's impartiality and neutrality being challenged in the field, resulting in targeted attacks against UN peacekeepers besides

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innocent civilians and humanitarian aid workers. Of immediate concern is the use of modern technology by irregular forces and non-state armed groups (NSAGs) often resorting to the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and human suicide bombers, leading to high fatalities amongst those targeted.

We live in a connected and contested world where information and communication technologies greatly assist in managing global conflicts. The UN though is well behind in the technology curve and needs ways and means, both non-lethal and kinetic, for countering contemporary threats. Conversely, new technologies offer peacekeepers opportunities and tools to gain information advantage, as well as upgrade their operational responses. They also open equivalent strategic opportunities for multi-dimensional collaboration in exploiting technical capacities, including with the private sector.

Contemporary UN Peacekeeping

Majority of new UN peace operations are authorized Chapter VII mandates, with demanding clauses for protection of Civilians (POC) as a major responsibility. This has led to pro-active application of force, with offensive operational content. However, while global geo-politics and conflict environments have undergone a fundamental change, the process of evolution and review of mandates by UN Security Council (UNSC) remains unchanged, driven by motivated discussions.

Having recognized the new landscape and changing requirements, UN Secretariat has embarked on multiple reforms. The Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) initiative is UN Secretary General (UNSG)'s collective agenda to strengthen peacekeeping in eight thematic areas—advancing political solutions, partnerships with peacebuilding stakeholders, UN-AU cooperation on political affairs, equal and meaningful participation of women, improving security of peacekeepers with particular emphasis on use of technology for situational awareness, integrated performance policy framework, assessment and capacity building of military units and zero tolerance policy of on sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA).[2]

Notwithstanding recent reform initiatives, there continues to be unequal successes in UN missions. Admittedly, the present elaborate prescriptive mandates have not kept pace with the changing conflict demands. For meaningful outcomes in the field, a major change is required in our strategic thought. The UNSC needs to enlarge its consultation for deriving mandates which are visionary in nature and

look at evolving long-term solutions comprehensively. Ideally, UNSC mandates should spell out deconfliction objectives, providing permissive environment for their operationalization in the field. Regular contact is recommended between headquarters and field through secure telephonic conversations and video conferencing. However, these virtual contacts are no substitute for face-to-face interactions.

Concurrently with the mandate evolution, the Department of Peace Operations (DPO) and Department of Operational Support (DOS) require to analyze root causes of conflicts with multiple stakeholders, in particular the troop contributing countries (TCCs). This interactive dialogue on digital platforms would help produce consensual structures, concepts and frameworks, which provide ownership to civilian and military components. These documents are to be reviewed based on technology assisted conflict mapping.

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN UN PEACEKEEPING

The 'Strategy for Digital Transformation of UN Peacekeeping' has been released in September 2021. It underlines the importance of digital technologies in our ever more complex conflicts. The strategy calls for innovative, data-driven and technology enabled peacekeeping. It has multiple target audience, to include the peacekeeping architecture, member states, UN System and external partners.[3]

The strategy emphasizes a deliberate and systemic approach to achieve digital transformation in the field and calls for multidimensional demand driven processes – and their transparent non-intrusive application with due caution on data protection and privacy.[4] It is based on four goals – driving innovation for geographical and cultural environment, maximizing potential of current and new technology to augment their capacity, understanding threats to the safety and security of peacekeepers and ensuring responsible use with ethics.[5]

'Partnerships for Technology in Peacekeeping' attempts to bring greater involvement and collaboration to UN peacekeeping by aligning modern technological and innovative capacities in the world.[6] Partnerships offer member states, including regional organizations and friendly coalitions a new DPO-DOS technology sharing relationship. Safeguards would be nevertheless necessary to ensure that large technological companies or states do not bring their own agendas into UN's security and economical domains.

Leveraging digital technology is inevitable for leaders across the board—to understand, decide, monitor and adapt. UN Peace operations operate under political primacy; understanding political context and its relationship with mandate can help mission leadership to identify risks and actions required for preemption and/or mitigation. In high tempo operational environment we operate, anticipating and adapting are overriding leadership traits to stay ahead the story arc. Conceptual thought and technical skills, however, can only succeed if there is competence and motivation to deliver, for which selection, training and accountability of leaders is critical.

As a code, UN peacekeepers should never forget that they are deployed to support the host nation. Digital technologies are being perceived by many countries as an intrusion into their sovereign and cultural domains. To promote technology acceptance, whole-of-government dialogue and civil society engagement is essential. The messaging has to convince the hosts that new technologies are beneficial for their governance and development—and aligned with available infrastructural and local skill expertise.

Use of Force – Deployment and Employment

Efforts are afoot to make missions stronger and safer, for which military components are being deployed tailor-made with modern equipment and improved training. It is prudent that UN missions deploy proactively to 'control the space'. This requires a threat-based combination of pivots (operating bases) and maneuver elements. Adopting a robust posture with intelligence-driven domination has proved to largely deter threats.

A new category of 'technology contributing country' (TechCC) is being promoted to offer reinforcement in technological support, complementing the traditional notion of TCC. However, there have been challenges to implement this 'two-tier' peacekeeping format, where besides operable asymmetry there have been demands by TechCCs for operating caveats and protection measures. This concept therefore needs refining so that we do not introduce 'missions within a mission'. The preferred option could be to incentivize proven TCCs to supplement identified technology in their profiling.

The UN may be pro-active in facilitating tech-assisted operations but for that the TCCs need to overcome mindsets to adopt new structures, equipment and concepts. So even though technology is available the tactical level operatives of peacekeepers may become

inhibiters to change. In casualty prone violent environments, there is no alternative to operate under the mission chain of command. With increased threats to UN bases and personnel, there has been a growing demand from more troops for close protection. An emerging dilemma is ensuring a balanced military deployment which secure installations, while retaining sufficient mobility to respond. UNMIS pioneered the concept of temporary operating base (TOB) for extending its footprint for need based tasks. TOBs were designed to exploit local resources and technology for habitat, mobility and operational support.[7]

Operating bases can be better protected against physical and standoff attacks using modern surveillance, sensing and night vision equipment. The outer perimeter should cater for day-night observation, especially covering vulnerable ingress routes. The construction of temporary walls against standoff attacks may at times become a necessity, but fortressing is not the answer.[8] While visiting African Mission in Sudan (AMIS) in Darfur in 2006, I noticed few bases were being targeted by stand-off fire at night. The reason was simple—no outside movement after last light. We made contingents start night patrolling, to start with closer-to-the-perimeter and subsequently expanding outwards in concentric circles. When I revisited these units in the domination culture, I found distinct reduction in fire assaults on their bases. The sheer churning noise and light glares of APCs appeared to have reduced rebel attacks considerably.[9]

Situational awareness is at the heart of effective peacekeeping. All-weather-day-night surveillance grid has become fundamental to robust peacekeeping. Satellite reconnaissance, aerial observation (particularly drones), geographic information systems (GIS), surface radars, acoustic sensors and night vision devices are being integrated for real time information flow and intelligence generation. While helicopters have been at the forefront in aerial observation, UAVs are being successfully integrated in many missions to provide information for timely interventions and humanitarian responses.

Flash Information is an essential part of early warning cycle, while actionable intelligence gets processed through Joint Operations Centre (JOC) and forward-looking intelligence generated by Joint Mission Analysis Centre (JMAC). Though the need for technical intelligence (techint) through digital tools cannot be overemphasized, human intelligence (humint) remains an inextricable input of intelligence collection. As per the UN policy, dissemination of peacekeeping intelligence products is to be done in compliance of need to know/need

to share' concepts as well as the below organizational requirements for information classification, security, handling ownership and sharing.[10]

Maneuver culture should be strongly encouraged to physically dominate outer reaches, for which terrain-compatible protected air and surface platforms are being preferred. Soft mobile components comprising of ceasefire-monitoring bodies, patrols and escort convoys need to move with protection. Unpredictable pattern of operations not only saves casualties but has helped in outwitting the attackers.

The use of IEDs in UN peacekeeping environments is not new, but the numbers and sophistication of these attacks have increased. Since the UN Multidimensional Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was established on 1 July 2013, majority of peacekeeping fatalities in that mission (the highest number of fatalities of any UN peacekeeping mission in 2014) occurred as a result of explosive devices.[11] Countering terrorism remains a blurred peacekeeping issue leading to majority of TCCs being ill-equipped and/or inadequately trained in countering IEDs. Measures are afoot to standardise counter-IED measures, to include surveillance and domination of vulnerable stretches, electronic-cum-mechanical methods to detect and neutralize IEDs and deploying mine protected vehicles.

A word on strategic leadership. With introduction of asymmetric and cyber threats, new conflicts are becoming redefined in space and time. However, majority of leadership still operates in the conventional strategic-operational-tactical construct. This philosophy has to change. Each action by a peacekeeper in contemporary conflicts is strategic in nature. It follows that strategic thought is no more linked to rank or status. The operating environment warrants an attitudinal shift towards field delegation where junior leaders are trained to think creatively and empowered to take time-critical decisions.

Protection of Civilians (POC)

POC has become central to UN peacekeeping with legitimacy of missions being judged on their credibility to protect. The three-tiered DPO POC policy-protection through dialogue and engagement, provision of physical protection and establishment of a protective environment requires inclusive technological interface. Prevention, Pre-emption, Response and Consolidation form four phases of POC interventions, which are premised on joint protection with external partners as well as the host nation. Missions have been advised to exploit their different

skillsets to scenario-build and coordinate their POC activities though an integrated 'Threat Analysis and Risk Assessment' matrix.

Communities are main victims of internal conflict and primary stakeholders in POC and need to be dovetailed in entire spectrum of conflict prevention and resolution. Building trust and meaningful participation of women is fundamental to community empowerment. For UN missions to be meaningfully population-centric, POC coordination mechanisms need to establish community networks using available information tools and confidential early warning alerts. The design and use of technology in gender considerations, including differences in access, literacy and bias stand highlighted in the UN policy document.[12] Militaries need to attempt gender parity as a priority issue.

OPERATIONAL SUPPORT

Technology can play a major role in reducing our carbon footprint and fostering environmental sustainability. UN missions are accordingly being encouraged to adopt alternative technologies in habitat, transportation, communications and medical care. Contemporary peacekeeping demands a responsive operational-driven logistics support. Since resources would remain finite, cost-effective employment could be facilitated through technological assistance. Additionally, technology enabled interface can significantly upgrade cooperation within the UN system for peacebuilding activities, specifically between the UN mission and UN Agencies, Funds and Programs (AFPs).

The UN has initiated major steps to reduce operational casualties by upgrading its medical support. Modern all weather casualty evacuation and advanced lifesaving treatment is proving to be a huge confidence builder for inescapable risk taking. Larger bandwidth secure operational communications have improved our command-and-control (C2) construct. The use of strategic communications has taken added importance due to changes in pattern of violence and technological landscape.[13]

In the information world we live in, missions require contextual public information strategies for coherent messaging and influencing perceptions. The target audience is diverse and reachable through varied digital platforms. Radio Maraya was effectively used by us in UNMIS to convey status of peace agreements, provide updates on conflict resolution initiatives and win public support.

Weaponization of technologies in terms of disinformation campaigns through social media platforms have brought their own set of challenges to UN peacekeeping. The peacekeeping community requires to reach a broad consensus on cyber resilience, to include approach and frameworks to harness technologies in cyberspace, both at the conceptual and operational levels. While the debate between digital freedom and cyber intimidation continues, a greater public-private sector synergy is imperative to protect data and harness artificial intelligence, while denying its negative use.

Training for Effect

The success of a peace operation is largely dependent on comprehensive training, both pre-deployment and in-mission. New technologies come with a need to train our uniformed and civilian personnel to effectively handle these technologies. Pre-deployment trainings already exist and have to be further adapted to evolving needs and standards.[14] With hybridization of conflicts, it is necessary for all peacekeepers to train harshly, condition their peacekeepers to persevere in adversity and develop mental mobility for operational innovation.

UN Technology training portal is available for online specialized training tailored to enhance skills and optimize their use in UN systems, technology assets and procedures.[15] In addition, specialized scenario-based exercises are available on multiple subjects. However, these templates are only guides and require judgement in application.

My final word. Technology is an enabler—a force multiplier to do our job better. While common processes are vital to work together effectively, especially under pressure, we should not become slaves to technology or process at the expense of adapting to and innovating in a new operating context.[16]

Notes

1. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres.
2. UN Secretary General Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) Initiative, 2018.
3. United Nations Strategy for Digital Transformation of UN peacekeeping 2021.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.

6.   Partnership for Technology in Peacekeeping, Department of Operational Support, 2018.

7.   Considerations for Mission Leadership in UN Peace Operations 2021, 4.3.6 2021, International Forum for the Challenges of Peace Operations, Stockholm.

8.   Weapons and Ammunition Management in Contemporary Hybrid Peace Operations by Lt Gen Jasbir Lidder, Small Arms Survey, Small Arms Survey Regional Workshop, Indonesia, Dec. 2019.

9.   Ibid.

10. UN Policy on Peacekeeping Intelligence May 2019.

11. Counter-IED Technology in Peacekeeping: Expanding Capability and Mitigating Risks, Lisa Sharland April 2015.

12. United Nations Strategy for Digital Transformation of UN peacekeeping 2021.

13. Strategic Communications in UN Peace Operations; From an Afterthought to an Operational Necessity, International Peace Institute.

14. UN Security Council Working Group on Use of Technology Readout, 28 April 2016.

15. UN Technology Training Portal, Courses for peace Operations.

16. UK MOD Joint Doctrine Publication 04, Understanding and Decision Making, 2016.