

100 Voices on Technology & Peace Operations

Supporting the implementation of mandated tasks through digital technologies

| UN Peacekeeping Embraces the Digital World

21 September 2021 | Annika S. Hansen, Naomi Miyashita

At the United Nations (UN) Security Council Open Debate on August 18, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres launched the Strategy for the Digital Transformation of UN Peacekeeping, underlining that digital technology “represents one of the greatest opportunities, but also one of the greatest challenges, of our time.”

In a presidential statement adopted on the same topic, the Security Council recognized technologies’ “potential as a force multiplier” and encouraged “exploring available and future technologies and best practices that can contribute towards the safety and security of peacekeepers and protection of civilians, and allow for safer and more effective peacekeeping missions.”

Indeed, for peacekeeping, there is no escaping the digital revolution and transformation that is heading its way. Failing to evolve along with the momentous changes brought on by digital technologies would consign peacekeeping to Ozymandias-like oblivion.

For UN peacekeeping to continue adapting to new threats and challenges in conflict, the UN secretariat has endeavored to set an ambitious agenda for digital change. The Strategy for Digital Transformation of UN Peacekeeping is part of the secretary-general’s broader commitment to leveraging the potential of digital technologies throughout the organization.

The Strategy for the Digital Transformation of UN Peacekeeping seeks to set peacekeeping on a course where it can make fuller use of digital technologies, especially data, to protect civilians and peacekeepers and to deliver on mandated tasks. It recognizes the need for a “transformation” process that goes beyond the delivery of technology to field missions to address systemic and cultural issues and ensure the sustainability of UN missions.

The strategy was widely consulted over the course of its eight-month gestation period—drawing on UN staff at headquarters and in field missions, agencies, funds and programs, other international organizations, academia, research, and civil society—reflecting the multidisciplinary nature that is essential for the success of the whole undertaking.

100 Voices on Technology & Peace Operations

IDENTIFYING THE CHALLENGES

The consultations among peacekeepers revealed unfulfilled needs: whereas 83 percent of some 500 field and headquarters staff surveyed felt that there were opportunities to apply digital technologies in mandate implementation, over half felt that key tech tools were unused, or underused. And despite conflict actors' widespread reliance on digital technologies to propagate mis- and disinformation, almost half of senior leaders surveyed felt that they did not have the tools to respond. COVID-triggered changes to work arrangements were embraced by peacekeepers, but there was an overall sense of frustration from field and headquarters colleagues with slow processes, unsuitable technology, fragmentation, siloed information sharing and communication, as well as limited skills, capacity, and understanding of the potential of technology.

In addition, common challenges arose in virtually all field missions. The strategy describes these in some detail, but here, we focus on four main issues that contextualize the strategy's content.

First, understanding what is happening in the peacekeeping theater is central to mandate implementation. Civilian and uniformed components of missions gather a wealth of information, but this is not always translated into knowledge because information from different sources is often insufficiently integrated and information sharing remains a struggle. The UN has made some progress with tools like the Situational Awareness Geospatial Enterprise (SAGE)—a web-based database system that allows UN military, police, and civilians in UN peace operations to log incidents, events, and activities to obtain dynamic dashboards visualizing hotspots—and the Comprehensive Planning and Performance Assessment System (CPAS)—a tool to link the context of a country with peacekeeping planning, data, results, and reporting to assess performance and inform future plans. But the challenge is not solely technical, as working cultures, mindsets, and capacities also impact the lack of integration.

The second challenge and underlying impediment is the disconnect between technology providers and users. Technology specialists require a fuller understanding of field challenges and work closely with field colleagues to co-create suitable and user-friendly responses. Mandate implementers on the other hand need a fundamental understanding of the potential of technology, and the digital literacy to identify and articulate how technologies can support their work.

Third, peacekeeping must increasingly grapple with the impact of emerging technologies on the conflict environment. This entails deterring, detecting, and defending against the hostile use of digital technologies—such as sophisticated, remotely-triggered improvised explosive devices (IEDs) or armed unmanned aerial vehicles, and averting physical attacks on civilians and on peacekeepers. The spread of mis- and disinformation is a growing challenge that can directly threaten or breed animosity against peacekeepers. Peacekeeping must gain an understanding of how digital technologies shape conflict dynamics, empower conflict actors, and heighten political influence, but also create spaces for dialogue and enhance inclusivity and participation. At present, peacekeeping is still at an early stage of being aware and able to recognize and utilize this realm.

100 Voices on Technology & Peace Operations



Fourth, a serious gap exists between the troop and police contributing countries (T/PCCs) with widespread digital access and acquisition of skills, and the majority of TCCs where digital access and skills are limited. This is particularly stark in theaters where the security stakes are the highest. Associated challenges regarding which contributing countries can access information critical to safety and security were also highlighted. A central thrust of the strategy is inclusivity—transformation must be for all, and for this, a strong push is needed for partnerships among T/PCCs to level the playing field through capacity-building and training support, as well as technology sharing. Of importance will also be the removal of barriers to sharing critical information between peacekeepers.

WHAT'S IN THE STRATEGY?

The strategy proposes solutions to the overarching challenges identified, and defines four goals with related actions:

The first is on cultivating technological innovation. The strategy proposes the establishment of a liaison function that connects technology users and technology developers to collaboratively match mandate implementation challenges with technology solutions. A process of co-creation between techies and mandate implementers will ensure that technology solutions are applied where they are most needed. In addition, the strategy suggests that an innovation and digital transformation space be created at headquarters that allows leadership to elevate, propagate and promote innovation in support of mandate implementation and safety and security.

The second goal is to make sure that we maximize the potential of technology in use today. Many new tools have been introduced to peacekeeping missions, but there is a way to go to ensure that systems are interoperable, that operators know how to use the tools, and that personnel have access to them, even in remote forward positions. Peacekeeping is a complex undertaking—it brings together personnel from 121 countries, many who rotate in and out after six months or a year, and many with no prior familiarity with peacekeeping technology. That means that we need to have a constant cycle of consistent training, capacity-building, and awareness-raising on technology tools, both pre-deployment and in theater.

Third, the strategy seeks to put in place the mechanisms to ensure that peacekeepers detect, analyze and address potential threats in a timely and integrated manner. Peacekeeping host countries are dangerous. Armed groups are nimble and adaptive, and are several steps ahead in terms of the weaponization of digital technologies. The strategy proposes a strengthening of situational awareness for better informed planning and decision-making, as well as developing an integrated approach to mis- and disinformation and hate speech. It calls for measures to reduce the likelihood and impact of cyberattacks, as well as other attacks enabled by digital technologies, including through remote-activated IEDs and uncrewed aerial vehicles.

100 Voices on Technology & Peace Operations

With greater reliance on digital technologies come greater risks and vulnerabilities. That is why the fourth goal of the strategy proposes measures to mitigate the risk, through the establishment of clear principles for the ethical use of digital technology, especially data, in peacekeeping, as well as guidelines for how these should be applied. Regular reviews and a complaints mechanism should be put in place to ensure that deviations are corrected and weaknesses addressed.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

The challenges related to a mission's ability and willingness to actively use digital technologies vary greatly among missions, but also between different locations in the same mission. This means that developing mission-specific approaches that build on what has already been achieved and meet the respective most-pressing demands will be essential to maintaining the support of missions for the implementation of the strategy and the envisioned digital transformation.

It has been said that reforming UN peacekeeping is akin to changing the course of an oil tanker. Keeping abreast of, adapting, and using fast-evolving technology effectively, across the 85,000 plus peacekeepers deployed in three continents is a steep challenge. Agile, nimble, and flexible peacekeeping has been a central theme of review and reform initiatives, from the 2015 High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) [report](#), to the [Action for Peacekeeping \(A4P\)](#) initiative. Digital technologies are key enablers for this, as is recognized by A4P+, the A4P implementation strategy for 2021-2023.

Technology in and of itself will not make the difference; the culture, systems, and processes put in place by the people who run peacekeeping will. That is why leadership is key. Senior-level commitment, advocacy, and active use of digital technologies are essential for successful transformation at all levels. The strategy alone will not change anything unless its implementation is deliberately and purposefully pushed and supported by peacekeeping leaders—at all levels—in the field and at headquarters. Further, the strategy should not be a one-off; with the establishment of systems to enable it, digital transformation must be an ongoing process.

From their inception, peacekeeping operations have relied on partnerships and a recognition of common challenges and collective responses. In their presidential statement on this topic, the Security Council called on the secretary-general “to continue to work with member states in exploring available and future technologies.” Member states will remain at the heart of this partnership, but the advent of digital technologies in peacekeeping calls for the net to be cast wider to bring in those that are driving innovative thinking in the technology sector, academia, and civil society. Forging an alliance of different stakeholders—public and private, government and society, and policy and operational—will be the key to unlock the opportunities offered by digital technology, while, of course, helping to guard against its excesses and potential abuses.

Similarly, conceiving and managing the digital transformation process will need a multidisciplinary approach. Bringing together people with diverse backgrounds sparks ideas and helps to push the

100 Voices on Technology & Peace Operations

boundaries of what is possible. For this, technology specialists, political analysts, communications teams, and military and police officers need to come together both at headquarters and in the field.

Finally, as the UN secretariat embarks on the digital transformation of peacekeeping, some concrete opportunities to galvanize diverse stakeholder support lie ahead: the Peacekeeping Ministerial Meeting, to be held in December 2021 in Seoul, Republic of Korea, and the next Partnerships for Technology Symposium, to be held in South Africa in 2022. Building on both events' track record of generating tangible initiatives to address challenges and move peacekeeping forward, they are occasions to solicit specific technology and financial commitments, establish collaborative training partnerships, or promote knowledge sharing that can accelerate and empower the implementation of the Strategy. This agenda is ambitious but indispensable for ensuring that UN peacekeeping remains an effective and valuable peace and security tool for the 21st Century.

This blog piece was also published on the [IPI Global Observatory](#) on 17 September 2021.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Annika S. Hansen is a senior researcher and Head of the Analysis Division at the Center for International Peace Operations, Berlin, Germany. Naomi Miyashita is Policy Planning Team Leader in the UN Department of Peace Operations, New York.