Thematic Series on Building More Effective UN Peace Operations

"Technological Innovations and Peace Operations"

Summary of the 13 June, 2012 Thematic Series Panel Discussion

The Permanent Mission of Canada to the United Nations and the Center on International Cooperation held their seventh panel discussion of the thematic series, "Building More Effective UN Peace Operations," on 13 June 2012. The event examined current and potential uses of technological innovations by peace operations to bridge the gap between mission mandates and mission capacity. Following introductory remarks from Canada's Permanent Representative, Ambassador Guillermo Rishchynski, CIC's Associate Director Richard Gowan moderated panelists Walter Dorn, Professor of Defence Studies at the Royal Military College of Canada and the Canadian Forces College, and Micah Zenko, Fellow for Conflict Prevention at the Council on Foreign Relations, in a discussion of how available technologies could enhance the capabilities of peace operations, how these technologies could be adopted, and how they could be effectively integrated into the UN's peacekeeping architecture.

Technological advances can enhance the monitoring capabilities of peace operations by allowing unmanned monitoring and surveillance, increasing the range and accuracy of manned monitoring, allowing nighttime observation, enhancing the safety of staff in the field, and recording observations electronically. These technologies include infrared imaging, aerial surveillance systems, radar, acoustic sensors, seismic detectors, night vision, and thermal imaging. Much of this equipment is already very affordable, and monitoring technology is steadily becoming less expensive. The UN's Special Committee on Peacekeeping has in the past five years passed progressive resolutions urging Member States and the Secretariat to provide more technology to peace operations.

Some of these technologies have already been deployed in the field. Remote video cameras have been used in Nepal to monitor arms caches and in Cyprus to observe the green line for the UNFICYP mission. The use of remote cameras could be up to one hundred times cheaper than manned observation posts, but UNIFCYP is the only UN mission to deploy them to date. Ground sensors were used by the US in the Sinai Field Mission in the 1970s. Sophisticated Canadian multisensory reconnaissance vehicles were deployed in the UNMEE mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea, helping prevent unauthorized personnel and equipment movement. Overall, however, the UN lacks the equipment, resources, preparation, and training needed for effective and efficient use of monitoring technology.

Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) could help fill the monitoring gap, with small unarmed drones useful for border monitoring, terrain mapping, remote surveillance, tracking movement of equipment and personnel, delivering humanitarian assistance, monitoring weapons depots, and assisting in search and rescue. US drones currently provide threat warnings to AMISOM peacekeepers in Somalia. More advanced drones could perform sophisticated tasks such as transmitting information to refugee groups or acting as impromptu communications satellites, as in Libya, where the

government shut down the cellular network but NATO drones were able to retransmit mobile phone signals. UAV operational costs can vary from hundreds to tens of thousands of dollars per hour, but over time these are cheaper than manned surveillance. Support capacity is where most of the costs lie, and specially trained personnel are needed to operate UAV systems. Clear status of forces agreements with rules of use and engagement will be needed to address host state concerns about intentions and motivations, and flyover rights must be negotiated with all relevant states.

The UN is capable of implementing technological advances, but its use of monitoring technology has been ad hoc and unsystematic, and organizational changes would are needed before the UN can fully take advantage of these advances. There are several options for how authority for integrating new technology could be allocated. The UN Communication and Information Technology Service could take responsibility, a new UN technology center could be established, or responsibility could be assigned to specific field units within missions. Contingent-owned equipment would be suited for more robust systems, but systems that can be easily shifted from one mission to another could be UN-owned. Hiring contractors may be the best option for systems optimized for specific tasks.

Host states have legitimate privacy concerns regarding monitoring and surveillance, and missions must know when to turn off sensors and what information not to use. Peace operations must clearly articulate what they are looking for, and observation targets should be clearly defined. Cooperative monitoring could be beneficial, with the mission sharing observed data with the host state to help alleviate tensions or confirm events. There is an absence of polices, doctrine, standard operating procedures, and training materials regarding the use of new technology, and these must all be updated. During the discussion session, representatives of troop-contributing countries emphasized that they are not opposed to the use of technological innovations in peace operations.