UN Peacekeeping After the Pandemic: An Increased Role for Intelligence

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United Nations peacekeepers have a tough job, and the coronavirus is making it much tougher. Effective peacekeeping requires detailed information about rebel movements, troop levels and other ground-level conditions. However, the coronavirus has reduced peacekeepers' abilities to obtain this information by diminishing their physical presence in conflict areas.

Worries abound that peacekeepers will either contract the virus if sent into hot spots, or spread the virus to a country that has not had a severe outbreak. As a result, traditional suppliers of peacekeepers, such as Bangladesh, Ethiopia, India, Pakistan and Rwanda, have expressed reluctance to contribute them, and potential host countries have been hesitant to accept them.[1] Troop rotations thus have been put on hold.[2] Those states that have deployed troops have minimised their interactions with local populations.[3] The UN has suspended training for local partners if physical contact or close proximity is involved, and reduced military patrolling.[4] This reduction in peacekeepers' physical presence has undoubtedly impaired the situational awareness and tactical knowledge that peacekeepers depend on. They are compelled to figure out how to do more with less.

One partial solution may be to increase peacekeepers' access to information derived from intelligence sources. While no technical intelligence platform can fully substitute for local knowledge gained on the ground,

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expanding and enhancing available intelligence will greatly assist the UN as it seeks to advance its traditional peacekeeping goals, providing new streams of information as UN peacekeepers' traditional means of gathering it are inhibited. But ramping up intelligence does have costs. These include leaks and a loss of transparency, which the UN has been keen to avoid. Its concerns could be mitigated through better protections for confidential information. While such an approach may challenge established UN practices, the world is changing, and the UN may need to change with it.

The qualified utility of intelligence

Peacekeepers are called upon to interpose themselves between hostile parties, monitor peace processes, implement peace agreements and pre-empt violence.[5] All of these activities require detailed knowledge of conditions on the ground, both to enable them to effectively keep the peace and to ensure their safety. Peacekeepers may need to navigate difficult terrain, monitor disease outbreaks, locate refugees, detect security threats or learn about military activities.

The necessary information can be gleaned on site, but it can also be obtained via intelligence systems. Satellites and uninhabited aerial vehicles, thermal sensors and signals intercepts can relay detailed information to peacekeepers to supplement existing knowledge or to direct their movements. Open-source information can also help, though it is rarely as detailed and probative as professionally generated intelligence.

Such intelligence typically comes from outside actors or is gathered by the UN itself. Many large member states invest significant resources in developing sophisticated intelligence bureaucracies and collect peacekeeping-related information either on a dedicated basis or as a by-product of other collection activities.[6] They then choose whether to share this information with the UN. These states have also equipped the UN with technology to allow it to obtain some of this information itself.

At the same time, intelligence is often highly sensitive, making governments hesitant to share it and leading them to restrict how much intelligence the UN itself can collect. In particular, in providing intelligence to the UN, member states risk exposing the sources and methods they used to collect

it.[7] Such exposure can endanger their national-security interests, as intelligence targets may learn to avoid detection once they understand how they are monitored. Moreover, other states may mimic their advanced methods of intelligence collection, eroding their advantage. While states could omit sensitive details in providing intelligence to the UN, such information would be considered less credible.

The UN's direct collection of intelligence is one alternative. But member states may oppose it owing to sovereignty concerns. They may also fear that the UN could uncover information that they wish to keep secret, such as detailed security arrangements or personal data. The pandemic may exacerbate these sensitivities, as states may wish to hide outbreaks in their countries to avoid trade and travel restrictions that negatively impact their economies.[8]

Protecting confidential information

To mitigate such factors, the UN could implement strong confidentiality measures to reassure intelligence providers that their information will be kept secure. The UN already has some experience with this, as it has collected intelligence sporadically for some time.[9] For example, the Security Council allowed the UN to use drones for intelligence collection during its mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Joint mission-analysis centres have been adopted and used as mission-specific locations for states to share peacekeeping-related intelligence. Member states have also robustly shared intelligence for the UN peacekeeping mission in Haiti. For the most part, however, these intelligence-sharing efforts remain ad hoc.

Today, peacekeeping missions are able to both collect their own intelligence and receive it from member states, sometimes even from other international organisations.[10] The Department of Peace Operations' intelligence framework, developed in 2017 and revised in 2019 in response to members' concerns, highlights and recognises the need to keep this information secure. The framework states that 'missions will put in place procedural, technological and physical security tools … to ensure secure information management and communications'. Such tools might include protection measures for computers and servers, encryption,

access control, training for personnel and other tools. It further calls for information to be shared on a need-to-know basis and for labels based on levels of classification.[11]

Implementation of this framework has faced difficulties, however. UN headquarters has long had a reputation for leaking information, based in considerable part on a particularly egregious instance that occurred during the peacekeeping mission in Somalia, when the US found unprotected classified documents in a deserted UN office. The leak led to the cancellation of planned intelligence-sharing initiatives and has contributed to a lack of trust in the UN's existing confidentiality systems. On account of a 'general lack of trust', peacekeeping missions now use two official databases with different levels of access, along with their own unofficial systems and personalised platforms.[12]

Perceptions of corruption and bias have also impeded the expanded use of intelligence in UN peacekeeping efforts.[13] Previous instances of wrongdoing, neglect and corruption, including alleged sexual misconduct during peacekeeping missions and peacekeepers abandoning their stations, have left states wary of giving the UN too much power and fed worries about intelligence-gathering by the organisation. Indeed, rather than turning towards secrecy, the UN has made transparency and accountability critical goals.[14] States worry that the UN will use intelligence to favour particular members, and that secrecy may obscure who is calling the shots.

As a result of these concerns, the UN's capacity for intelligence integration is relatively weak, and defining what peacekeeping intelligence means in practice has been left unclear.

Moving forward

Leaks, corruption and biases cannot be completely eliminated. But because of the pandemic, the benefits of adopting new technologies that allow the UN to access or collect intelligence now arguably exceed the costs. International organisations other than the UN Department of Peace Operations – including the International Atomic Energy Agency, the World Trade Organization and the Organisation for the Prohibition of

Chemical Weapons – have dealt effectively with similar obstacles to intelligence collection and have successfully implemented strong confidentiality systems.[15] These include stand-alone computers, document-classification systems and penalties for leaks, among other measures. The UN could draw from these models.

The UN has already started to improve its confidentiality system in specific missions. For the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, for instance, it has introduced the All Source Information Fusion Unit intelligence structure. But stronger measures are possible. In particular, the UN should work towards integrating its multiple peace-keeping databases to allow personnel to access information that has been gathered by other units and prevent unnecessary delays in securing useful information. Confidentiality classifications and clearance levels could then be standardised rather than determined by who trusts whom on an ad hoc basis. For such reforms to be practically feasible, the UN would need to build a track record of securely handling information to gain the trust of its members. The organisation might, for example, visibly redact sensitive information from published documents, and ensure that its information-gathering and -sharing processes are transparent. The UN could also recruit technocratic experts to help incorporate and enforce systemic measures and protocols that guarantee information security.

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A dearth of detailed information is only one of several challenges that the current pandemic has posed to UN peacekeeping. Indeed, peacekeeping was already on the decline prior to the coronavirus outbreak, with reduced funding and no new missions authorised since 2014. As governments slash budgets and prioritise public health, peacekeeping is unlikely to regain substantial momentum in the medium term. Yet the demand for peacekeepers is likely to rise due to pandemic-induced instability in fragile states. Greater reliance on intelligence cannot completely close the gap, but it could help UN peacekeepers to continue to work effectively at relatively low cost.

Notes

1   See Cedric de Coning, 'Examining the Longer-term Effects of COVID-19 on UN Peacekeeping Operations', *IPI Global Observatory*, 13 May 2020, https://theglobalobservatory.org/2020/05/examining-longer-term-effects-covid-19-un-peacekeeping-operations/.

2   See Richard Gowan and Louise Riis Andersen, 'Peacekeeping in the Shadow of Covid-19 Era', reliefweb, 12 June 2020, https://reliefweb.int/report/world/peacekeeping-shadow-covid-19-era.

3   See 'Community Outreach and COVID-19', UN Peacekeeping, 22 May 2020, https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/20200522_peacekeeping_community_outreach_and_covid.pdf.

4   See Namie De Razza, 'UN Peacekeeping and the Protection of Civilians in the COVID-19 Era', *IPI Global Observatory*, 22 May 2020, https://theglobalobservatory.org/2020/05/un-peacekeeping-protection-of-civilians-in-covid-19-era/.

5   See Virginia Page Fortna, *Does Peacekeeping Work? Shaping Belligerents' Choices after Civil War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

6   See David Carment and Martin Rudner (eds), *Peacekeeping Intelligence: New Players, Extended Boundaries* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006).

7   See Allison Carnegie and Austin Carson, *Secrets in Global Governance: Disclosure Dilemmas and the Challenge of International Cooperation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

8   See Catherine Z. Worsnop, 'Concealing Disease: Trade and Travel Barriers and the Timeliness of Outbreak Reporting', *International Studies Perspectives*, vol. 20, no. 4, November 2019, pp. 344–72.

9   See A. Walter Dorn, 'United Nations Peacekeeping Intelligence', in Loch Johnson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of National Security Intelligence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 275–95.

10 See UN Security Council, Resolution 2547, 27 February 2019, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2457.pdf.

11 See UN Department of Peace Operations, 'Policy: Peacekeeping Intelligence', 2 May 2017 (reviewed 2 May 2019), https://www.confluxcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/2017.07-Peacekeeping-Intelligence-Policy.pdf.

12 Sarah-Myriam Martin Brûlé, 'Finding the UN Way on Peacekeeping-Intelligence', International Peace Institute, 20 April 2020, https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2004-Finding-the-UN-Way.pdf.

13 See, for example, Rick Gladstone, 'Armies Used by U.N. Fail Watchdog Group's Test', *New York Times*, 3 April 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/04/world/armies-used-by-un-fail-watchdog-groups-test.html.

14 See UN Peacekeeping, 'Standards of Conduct', https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/standards-of-conduct.

15 See Carnegie and Carson, *Secrets in Global Governance*.