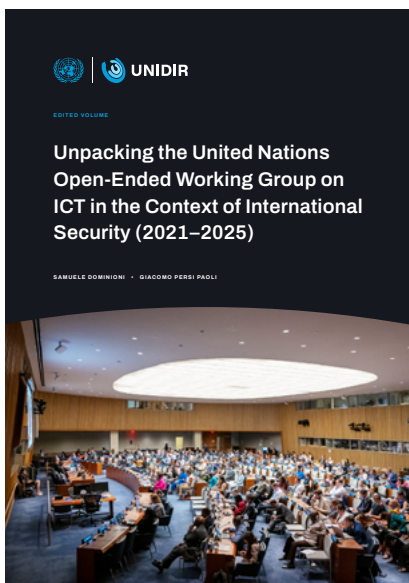




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Introduction

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1. Background and purpose of the study

The United Nations has long dealt with the issue of information and communications technology (ICT) and its impact on international security. The General Assembly first addressed this issue in 1998¹ and, starting in 2004, it established six Groups of Governmental Experts (GGEs) and two Open-Ended Working Groups (OEWGs) to study this issue. Four of the GGEs and both OEWGs reached consensus on substantive reports containing conclusions and recommendations that were welcomed by all United Nations Member States. Each group built on the work of its predecessors and generated significant cumulative progress on the issues it considered.²

Altogether, these multilateral efforts produced and developed the Framework of Responsible State Behaviour in the Use of ICTs, made up of five pillars: an understanding of existing and potential threats, a set of norms of responsible State behaviour; the affirmation that international law applies in the ICT environment; specific confidence-building measures (CBMs); and cyber capacity-building principles and initiatives. These achievements are the products of decades of intense negotiations among Member States, which, round after round, further advanced their collective understanding of national and international implications of ICTs. In addition, Member States also agreed that starting from 2026, the discussions on these matters will take place in a new permanent forum: the Global Mechanism on Developments in the Field of ICTs in the Context of International Security and Advancing Responsible State Behaviour in the Use of ICTs.

This edited volume examines the second and last OEWG, which took place between 2021 and 2025. The General Assembly, when establishing the group through resolution 75/240, tasked it with promoting common understandings on rules, norms and principles of responsible State behaviour, existing and emerging threats, how international law applies in the ICT³ environment, and advancing CBMs and capacity-building.⁴ This OEWG (2021–2025) operated under a five-year mandate, a longer duration than is usual for such groups in the area of disarmament and international security; the length of the process enabled more sustained engagement and iterative discussions than previous, shorter processes.

1 General Assembly, resolution, [53/70](#), 1999.

2 Office for Disarmament Affairs, “Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security”, n.d., <https://disarmament.unoda.org/en/our-work/emerging-challenges/developments-field-information-and-telecommunications-context>.

3 Unless otherwise specified, this volume uses the terms “ICT” and “cyber” interchangeably. The use of these terms is in no way intended to convey any normative assessment or value of judgment regarding their nature or scope.

4 General Assembly, resolution 75/240, 2020, paragraph 1.

Throughout the years of negotiations, chaired by Ambassador Burhan Gafoor of Singapore, the Member States reached consensus on three annual progress reports (APRs) and a final report. The OEWG (2021–2025) generated extensive understandings that reflect the perspectives, priorities and concerns of Member States on all aspects of ICTs in the context of international security. Because the OEWG (2021–2025) operated on a consensus basis, not all views could be fully reflected in the agreed APRs or the final report. Nonetheless, the rich discussions held across 11 sessions provided important insights into how States approached each pillar of the Framework of Responsible State Behaviour.

This study analyses these substantive discussions comprehensively. Each of the six chapters focuses on one of the substantive agenda items of the OEWG (2021–2025)'s programme of work: existing and potential threats; rules, norms and principles; international law; confidence-building measures; capacity-building; and regular institutional dialogue. Each addresses three overarching research questions:

- I. How did discussions on ICTs in the context of international security evolve throughout the OEWG (2021–2025)'s mandate?
- II. What major themes and trends can be observed?
- III. What insights emerge from the discussions beyond what was agreed in the APRs and final report?

Each chapter explores the evolution of discussions within the scope of each agenda item, identifies trends and main themes, analyses what drove consensus and what hampered it, assesses the influence of developments in the external international security landscape, and highlights insights applicable beyond the OEWG (2021–2025). The study thus contributes to a comprehensive understanding of how Member States addressed the issue of ICTs and their impact on international security in the OEWG (2021–2025). These findings can help shape future deliberations within the Global Mechanism and beyond.

The primary audience for this study includes diplomats and State representatives engaged in the ICT security discussions. It is also intended for civil society, academia and private-sector actors who, while not always directly involved in the negotiations, seek a deeper understanding of the OEWG (2021–2025) process and its implications for international security, peace and stability.



Participants attending the eleventh substantive session (7-11 July) of the open-ended working group on security of and in the use of information and communications technologies 2021–2025. Credit: UN Photo / Loey Felipe.

2. Structure and methodology

Each of the six thematic chapters in this edited volume follows a defined structure: an introduction; a section that retraces the evolution of the discussion on its agenda item; a section on the main themes and trends that emerged from the discussions; and a concluding section with applicable insights beyond the outcomes of the OEWG (2021–2025). The order of the chapters follows the usual order of the agenda items at meetings of the OEWG (2021–2025).

For analytical purposes, the multi-years mandate has been broken down into smaller segments, named cycles. Each of these cycles started with one or two substantive session(s) and ended with a session in which an agreed text (an annual progress report or the final report) was negotiated (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1.

Timeline and cycles of the OEWG 2021–2025



Analysis by cycles allows for better retracing of how the discussions evolved and how themes and trends⁵ for each agenda item emerged and evolved over time. It also allows for a more accurate comparison of how issues or proposals discussed during the substantive sessions were negotiated and how they were mirrored (or not) in the agreed text at the end of a cycle. This mapping exercise also allowed for the identification of themes and trends across cycles and agenda items.

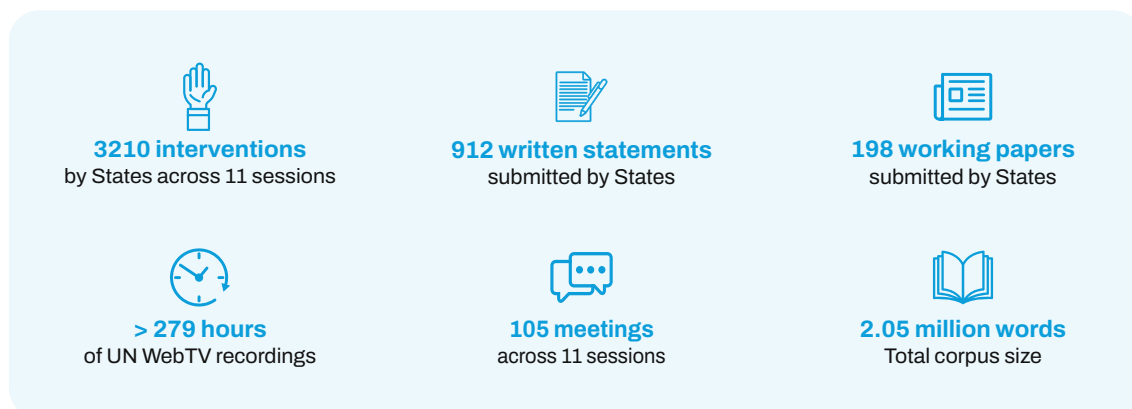
The analysis is based on a broad and diverse corpus of primary and secondary materials. This included 3,210 statements delivered by States; 912 written statements and 198 working papers submitted by States;⁶ and official documents, including Chair’s letters, annual progress reports and the final report.⁷ The analysis also drew on official session recordings

5 “Themes” refer to specific recurring issues debated within each pillar, while “trends” reflect both how Member States understand them over time and other dynamics that were observable across sessions.

6 As the OEWG was a State-led process, the research focused on Member States inputs, and it only partially reflects multi-stakeholder contributions. Nevertheless, given the extreme relevance of the multi-stakeholder community and its expertise on the issues discussed, future research will focus on its contribution to the OEWG process.

7 Available on the Office for Disarmament Affairs Meetings Place, <https://meetings.unoda.org/meeting/57871>.

available through UN Web TV,⁸ amounting to more than 279 hours of material, as well as notes taken by UNIDIR and the Office for Disarmament Affairs and unofficial session transcripts.⁹ In total, the corpus analysed exceeded 2 million words.



Given the volume and diversity of the material, the research team adopted a rigorous and systematic methodological approach. First, all relevant data was identified, collected, organized, labelled and reviewed to ensure accuracy, consistency and usability. Second, the material was organized into thematic clusters corresponding to the agenda items set out in the programme of work.¹⁰ Third, the research team conducted a structured content analysis using a combination of manual review and software-assisted coding. This included the use of qualitative analysis tools to identify recurring themes, patterns, and areas of convergence and divergence across the corpus.¹¹ Fourth, all findings were verified through manual cross-referencing and fact-checking of relevant information against the source material.

Finally, the research team interpreted and synthesized the data in relation to the research questions guiding the study. Following the drafting of each chapter, the report underwent a multilayered quality assurance process. This included two rounds of internal review, followed by feedback from seven external reviewers selected on the basis of their subject-matter expertise, while also taking into account geographical diversity.

8 UN Web TV, “Open-Ended Working Group on Security of and in the Use of ICT”, <https://webtv.un.org/en/search/categories/meetings-events/general-assembly/subsidiary-organs-general-assembly/open-ended-working-group-security-and-use-ict> (last accessed 25 March 2026).

9 Including those available at CyberCapacity, “UN Open-ended Working Group (OEWG) Transcripts”, <https://cybercapacity.org/resources/oewg-transcripts/>.

10 The analysis captured statements made during and pertaining to the agenda items according to the programme of work. Interventions made outside the programme of work or agenda items may not have been captured.

11 Qualitative and quantitative content analysis was supported by a variety of software, including Microsoft Copilot, NotebookLM, ChatGPT-5.2 and Python 3.11.