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The interaction between humanitarian and military actors: where do we go from here?

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Key messages

- Militaries and humanitarian actors have long shared the same field of operation, even if their objectives and the means used to achieve them vary considerably.
- Much has been done in terms of guidance, training and awareness of respective roles and responsibilities, yet both military/security and humanitarian actors have struggled to define the appropriate level of coordination on the ground, particularly in conflict contexts.
- Dialogue between military and humanitarian actors is essential if aid is to be provided in an effective and timely manner in conflict- and disaster-affected areas. Consistent and strategic engagement both at headquarters and in the field would help in finding agreement on core issues of responsibility and competence, while recognising differences in approach and objectives.

Since the end of the Cold War, and more particularly since the attacks on the United States on 9/11, major Western donor governments have increasingly sought to use civilian assistance to achieve political or strategic goals in so-called fragile states. Under the rubric of stabilisation, security and military actors have been aligned with peacebuilding and humanitarian and development tasks that would normally be assumed by civilian actors. International militaries have also become increasingly involved in natural disaster response.

This increased engagement by the military in humanitarian crises has been controversial, particularly for humanitarians. Aid agencies fear cooption by the military and worry about the tension between political and military objectives and the impartial and neutral provision of basic assistance. Leaving aside the poor track record of stabilisation efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq, aid actors

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Photo: A US soldier participates in the relief operation following hurricanes in Haiti in 2008. © US Navy photo bt Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Christopher Lange/flickr.

argue that being perceived as complicit with military actors may at best deny humanitarian organisations access, and at worst put them and those they are trying to assist at risk. By the same token, however, the aid community as a whole has been inconsistent in its respect for its own principles; in Afghanistan, for instance, some agencies prioritised presence and funding concerns, furthering the political and military objectives of one set of belligerents, undermining their ability to advocate for neutral and impartial assistance from donors and eroding their credibility in the eyes of many of the people they were seeking to assist.[1] Drawing on a two-year research project looking at civil–military interaction in Afghanistan, South Sudan, Timor-Leste and Pakistan, this Policy Brief argues for a fresh approach to this enduring problem.[2]

Challenges

The key, overarching and widely documented challenge facing civil–military interaction concerns the tension between the neutral and impartial provision of humanitarian assistance and the political and strategic objectives of military forces and the governments that direct them. This can take a variety of forms: 'stabilisation' in Afghanistan and Iraq, where assistance was explicitly enlisted in the pursuit of political, military and strategic objectives and military units engaged in the direct provision of aid through Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs); engagement with the military in Pakistan, where the Army is simultaneously the primary responder to disaster, a predominant political actor and architect of a counter-insurgency campaign that is directly contributing to the humanitarian crisis in the north of the country; or the pressure exerted on humanitarian agencies in South Sudan to align themselves with the political objectives of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) in support of the nascent government. Although tensions such as these are by no means new, and their implications for the actual provision of assistance are open to debate, to some extent this is beside the point as the potential challenge they pose to the principles of humanitarian action is a clear source of concern to many of the most vocal critics of interaction with the military.

Asking belligerent governments and militaries to set aside their political and strategic objectives in countries or regions that are believed to be vital to their interests is pointless and may even be counter-productive if it adds to the atmosphere of mutual mistrust and incomprehension that has bedevilled this debate. These are geopolitical issues that are beyond the scope of humanitarian actors to influence. Some traction may, however, be gained if it is possible to demonstrate to militaries that conforming to International Humanitarian Law (IHL) is not only desirable from a humanitarian standpoint, but is also in their own interests. In Afghanistan, for instance, broad arguments against stabilisation, PRTs or the West's counter-insurgency strategy were largely ineffective, and appeals to the perceived rights and special status of aid agencies also made little headway; by contrast, where dialogue was rooted in IHL and strategic argumentation, as with advocacy focused on civilian harm, which appealed to a shared interest to reduce that harm, it was more persuasive. Such engagement is complex and time-consuming, suggesting a need to ensure that aid agency staff receive better training and preparation, particularly around IHL and the political and military contexts of the environments to which they are deployed.[3]

The protection of civilians (PoC) in conflict is a common goal of both the military and humanitarians. It is also an area where military forces have a clear comparative advantage: while the physical presence of aid agencies can in some circumstances be a deterrent to potential perpetrators of violence, unarmed aid workers are not equipped to robustly protect civilians from large-scale attacks. Yet this is also where the relationship between the two sets of actors can be the most difficult. Where a UN mission has a mandate to protect civilians with the use of force, particularly where peacekeepers are a party to a conflict or are working alongside government forces thought to be violating human rights, cooperation becomes especially difficult – as demonstrated by the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and South Sudan, where civilians do not view intervening military forces as neutral because of their involvement with national security forces that themselves pose a threat to the population. In this context, being seen to be aligned with the UN peacekeeping mission has obvious implications for the

1 Ashley Jackson and Simone Haysom, *The Search for Common Ground: Civil–Military Relations in Afghanistan, 2002–13*, HPG Policy Brief 51, April 2013.

2 Individual case studies from the research are available from the HPG website at www.odi.org.uk/hpg.

3 Ashley Jackson and Simone Haysom, *The Search for Common Ground: Civil–Military Relations in Afghanistan, 2002–13*, HPG Policy Brief 51 (London: ODI, 2013).

perceived neutrality of the humanitarian community – though the humanitarian case against closer integration with the political and military elements of UN missions is not helped by the lack of a coherent and consistent approach. In the DRC and Darfur, for instance, some humanitarian actors called for military intervention to protect civilians and facilitate humanitarian access, while refusing to engage with peacekeeping staff on the ground.[4] As with many other aspects of humanitarian engagement in crisis contexts, the most appropriate position on integration is likely to be highly dependent on the prevailing circumstances: there will be contexts where a certain level of integration will be possible; equally, there will be contexts where such integration should be avoided and a clear distinction should be made between the political/military objectives of the UN mission and those of humanitarian agencies. The onus on humanitarian agencies is to make a convincing case that separation is in the best interests, not of themselves as a special group of actors, but of the people they are seeking to assist.

Simply having a mandate to protect civilians, as peacekeeping missions now commonly do, does not automatically give the necessary guidance to the military and civilian personnel of UN missions on how to operationalise the concept. Both the UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) and its successor in South Sudan, UNMISS, have developed PoC strategies outlining their responsibilities in relation to civilian security, but neither seems to have had a clear and mission-wide understanding of what was expected in terms of PoC, and the military component (particularly in UNMIS) has lacked the skills, capacity and willingness to protect civilians in any substantive way. Although UNMISS has provided an element of protection, notably by opening up its compounds to civilians following clashes in December 2013, under-resourcing, insufficient troop numbers, weak transport and logistics capacity and competing demands and priorities have all presented operational challenges that will be nigh-on impossible to overcome in the absence of a massive increase in funding and political will among UN member states.[5] This is not to argue that the welcome attention on civilian protection in UN peacekeeping should be abandoned, but it does suggest the need for more modest expectations about what can be achieved, and a stronger emphasis on diplomatic and political efforts to promote IHL and address conflict causes, not simply its effects.

Ways forward

While not, in themselves, the answer to improving civil–military interaction, clearer, context-specific guidelines at strategic and operational level – and a stronger commitment to adherence to their provisions by aid agencies – are needed, alongside more clearly defined mandates for civilian and military actors and better communication between the two. In particular, greater clarity and consistency is required around the fundamental concept of last resort. Although in principle the concept is clear – that military assets and capabilities can only be used in humanitarian response in exceptional circumstances, and if no suitable civilian capability is available – in practice there is deep disagreement about when precisely these conditions apply, and implementation and compliance have been problematic: in Pakistan there were serious disagreements among humanitarian agencies over the use of NATO air assets in the flood response in 2010, and in the DRC there have been persistent concerns about over-reliance on UN military escorts in the east of the country.[6]

Many humanitarian organisations are more familiar with armed forces in the context of conflicts rather than as first responders following a disaster. Yet national armies are frequently called on to support government-led efforts to provide post-disaster assistance, as is the case in the Asia-Pacific, for instance. While guidelines are important as a framework, the context in which they are applied will dictate to what degree it is feasible to use military assets: using military assets of a party to a conflict will clearly be more problematic than using them during a natural disaster. However, until at least some degree of consensus is achieved on the fundamental question of when the use of military assets is acceptable, it is difficult to see how meaningful progress can be made. If such consensus cannot be achieved then it may be time to ask how relevant a generic concept such as last resort really is as a guide to action for a highly heterogeneous sector working in highly complex, fluid environments. In some contexts

4 Victoria Metcalf, Alison Giffen and Samir Elhawary, *UN Integration and Humanitarian Space*, An Independent Study Commissioned by the UN Integrated Steering Group (London and Washington DC: HPG and the Stimson Center, 2011), p. 15.

5 Wendy Fenton and Sean Loughna, *The Search for Common Ground: Civil–Military Relations and the Protection of Civilians in Sudan*, HPG Working Paper (London: ODI, 2013).5.

6 Victoria Metcalfe and Michelle Berg, *Country-Specific Civil–Military Coordination Guidelines*, HPG Working Paper (London: ODI, 2012), p. 4.

and at some points in time drawing on military assets may be necessary and acceptable; in others it may not. The point is that each context is different, and each requires a nuanced and sensitive appraisal of the merits and dangers of interaction, and the implications of that choice for agencies and affected people. A blanket embargo on the use of military capabilities anywhere, ever – or for that matter the kind of opportunistic and inconsistent engagement that so poisoned the debate in Afghanistan and Iraq – is counter-productive and dangerous. Let aid agencies use these assets where and when appropriate and acknowledge their added value, whilst remaining true to their own expertise and assessing each situation on its merits.

Effective cooperation between civilian and military actors is possible as long as both parties acknowledge their different motivations, and their roles are clearly separated and defined from the outset. Early engagement is important: building relations helps to preserve the integrity of humanitarian principles and establishing dialogue makes it easier to continue engaging. Pre-deployment training is vital, as is the need to share lessons after the event. The Swedish joint training centre for civilian–military exercises – VIKING – offers an opportunity for such early engagement. In a simulated emergency it provides practical skills in coordination and cooperation before deployment to countries where a multi-dimensional UN mission is operating. Such training helps enhance understanding of the different institutional mandates and operational procedures of the various sets of actors present in these emergencies. In a similar vein, forums such as the British Red Cross NGO Military Contact Group (NMCG) and the New Zealand Council for International Development's annual civil–military forum are crucial if agreement is to be reached over issues of responsibility and competence, and where constructive complementarity is possible (and, equally, where it is not).

Humanitarian and military actors operate in highly fluid environments that require a certain degree of flexibility. Admittedly, wanting direction, coherence and clarity – something guidelines can give – and at the same time wanting humanitarian and military actors to be more flexible and adaptable to a changing environment risks asking for mutually incompatible things. But perhaps there is a middle way. Guidelines can help in clarifying roles and responsibilities, but they can also render the dialogue artificial and removed from actual situations on the ground. To move the debate forward, the parties concerned need to look up from the parochial and often rather abstract concerns that have dominated the debate and ask themselves what form and level of interaction in a particular set of circumstances at a particular point in time best serves the needs of affected people – a group that has, hitherto, been noticeably absent from this discussion. The argument here is to shift the object of analysis and the terms of the debate from the benefits and risks of interaction for humanitarian agencies to the benefits and risks for the people humanitarian agencies are trying to help.

Conclusion

Civil–military interaction takes place in environments that are political, at times politicised, diverse, volatile and unpredictable. It also takes place between a wide range of actors with diverging objectives, methods, capabilities and approaches. It is likely that challenges will remain despite efforts to frame such interaction through guidelines, training and engagement on the policy level. Humanitarian actors are concerned that militaries are called on by their political masters to do a job they are not trained or competent to do, and cringe when militaries depict themselves as humanitarian actors. Militaries certainly do have obligations under IHL when it comes to providing assistance – a fact of which aid agencies are often unaware – but fulfilling that obligation or contributing in other ways to a humanitarian response does not make militaries humanitarian actors, and they should not portray themselves as such, or misappropriate the language of humanitarianism to describe what they are doing.

Aid agencies for their part disagree on how they should engage with militaries, ranging from those who willingly seek proximity to those who refuse to speak to the military altogether. Although aiming for a unified front would be unrealistic and undesirable, achieving a degree of coherence and defining context-specific 'red lines' would strengthen the position of humanitarian actors. Dialogue between military and humanitarian actors is essential if aid is to be provided in an effective and timely manner in conflict- and disaster-affected areas. Consistent and strategic engagement, both at headquarters and field level, would help in finding agreement on core issues of responsibility and competence, while also recognising differences in approaches and objectives.