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Civil-military cooperation. Practical aspects

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Dear Honorable Members of Parliament,

Let me start off with saying that civil-military cooperation has many meanings, definitions and levels, and is discussed quite differently in a good number of contexts. A good indicator of this is the large number of acronyms around, such as CIMIC, CMCO and CMCORD to name just a few. They all try to provide rules and procedures for the interaction of civilian and military actors, but they do so for different circumstances and with differing objectives

I suggest that, in a forum like the one here where the focus is on external stabilization and reconstruction missions, it makes sense to distinguish between three main areas of civil-military cooperation, and I will discuss practical aspects under these headings.

The first is civil-military coordination during planning and implementation of a mission. It concerns decision-making about whether to conduct a mission, how to conduct a mission and how to manage a mission. I will call this civil-military coordination.

The second area concerns the cooperation among civilian and military actors on the ground who are mandated to cooperate, whether nationally or internationally, for instance in integrated missions led by the United Nations. I am speaking here predominantly about donor government actors, such as police and development agencies. I will call this civil-military integration.

The third area is the most contentious one in public debate, though I would argue not in practical relevance. It covers the interaction between military and civilian actors, who have a choice whether to cooperate with the military, either because they are independent development or humanitarian organisations or because they are civilian beneficiaries of civilian activities by external military actors. This is often called CIMIC, or civil-military cooperation, in the wider public and I will also use this term for this type of interaction.

Let me now turn to some practical experiences and lessons to be drawn. I speak as an academic here, not a practitioner, but an academic who has followed the debate in a number of NATO and EU-member states, as well as within ESDP. On the latter I recommend a report written for the Subcommittee on Defence of the European Parliament by my colleague Hans-Georg Ehrhart, who lays out the achievements and problems in some detail.

Civil-military coordination first. The armed forces in the countries I am speaking about are all under civilian control. So there is no problem on the highest levels of decision-making.

However, there are, in many countries, deficits in the coordination of planning as well as the later management of operations. We have seen many interagency battles in many countries, as well as in international organisations, including the EU. Such battles are preferable, however, over uncoordinated parallel efforts.

It is a commonplace nowadays that security and development are crucial and need to reinforce each other.

However, if one looks at the planning and management of current missions, parallel efforts or the clear dominance of the military side are the rule. One case I point is Afghanistan.

Furthermore, planning and management is often confined to a narrow set of actors. The views of NGOs are heard but are generally not part of decision-making. While this often also serves the interest of the NGOs to stay separate, it carries the danger of biased information and decision-making.

The lesson we draw from our analysis of recent peace missions, is that civil-military coordination in planning and management needs to be improved. The EU itself is on a promising though bumpy road, and so are a number of member states. Others, however are lagging behind, as is, not surprisingly for a military alliance, NATO.

As an insert, I would like to say a few words about counterinsurgency strategies, which are advocated for instance for Afghanistan. There is a general agreement in Europe that in peace support missions the final objectives are civilian, to build peace, rule of law, etc, and that the military is one of the instruments to achieve those objectives. Counterinsurgency is the opposite. It has a military objective, victory, for which civilian means, such as development assistance, are used. Obviously, it becomes morally difficult, and I would argue, potentially disastrous for civilian organisations to participate in the planning and management of counterinsurgency operations. The flipside of this is, that than development work becomes the realm of the military. Recent calculations show that more than 20 percent of the official development assistance of the United States, or ODA, is funded by the US Department of Defense, mostly in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Let me turn to civil-military integration, the cooperation of civilian and military actors who are acting under one mandate, and therefore hopefully also one plan, on the ground.

Experience shows that this is often not occurring. This refers to both actors such as armed forces and development agencies from one country as well as to actors from different countries working supposedly within one mission.

It has in our view become very clear that close integration cannot be achieved, and also should not be aimed for. Professional cultures, e.g. between armed forces and development agencies, are quite different and rightly so. The intensity and forms of civil military integration will therefore be vary from case to case.

What however needs to occur is information and coordination of activities. This sound innocuous and simple but is very difficult in practice. The main reason is that it runs counter to bureaucratic self-interests of organisations, civilian as well as military. Institutional set-ups that combine bureaucracies, such as those set up in the UK, are an important step in the right direction.

Coordination should be firstly on the basis of professional competence. To give an example: development activities should principally be done by development experts, not armed forces. If plans or activities are conflicting, there need to be mechanisms for negotiation and compromising which respect professional expertise as well as differing interests. This can, for instance, lead to an unwillingness of development workers to share all there information with armed forces in order to protect their relations with the local population. Or it can lead to soldiers doing development projects themselves in order to improve their standing in the local population. Such activities should not be ruled out, but they should be discussed and agreed upon, if necessary on a higher level of decision making. A good principle to guide such activities on the ground is the one of “do-no-harm”. Civilian activities should not harm the military effort, and military activities should not harm the civilians and their efforts.

Finally I turn to CIMIC in the narrow sense, the cooperation of soldiers and civilian organisations on the ground in stabilization and reconstruction missions. This has been talked about very much because humanitarian and development organisations are afraid of being subjected to military objectives. There are some good reasons for this. NATO’s CIMIC doctrine, for instance, focuses, in addition to support to the civil environment, on the two objectives of information gathering and force protection.

Civilian civil society organisations need to have the liberty to stay away from civil-military cooperation of this type and seek to achieve their objectives independently. However, they should not select to do so on the basis of some ideological conviction, but on the basis of their analysis of the situation on the ground. Furthermore, they also should operate on the general

principle of “do no harm” to the military operation. In order to be able to work on the basis of these principles, development and humanitarian organisations need to know a lot about the role of civil and military actors in peace missions, both generally, and in the specific situation they are operating in. Similarly, military commanders should, as part of their pre-mission training, learn about the interests and operating modes of humanitarian and development organisations. In the field, information about activities is important. This information cannot always be detailed but it needs to be good enough not to destroy the other actor’s efforts.

I want to finish on a cautious note. Civil-military cooperation combines a number of important ideas and practices. It is crucial for success in peace missions. However, it is no panacea nor substitute for mission planning and implementation appropriate in scale and balance, ambition and legitimacy.