



Clash of Organisational Cultures?

The Challenge of Integrating Civilian and Military Efforts in Stabilisation Operations

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That the war in Afghanistan 'cannot be won by military means alone' has become the mantra of politicians, strategists, practitioners and scholars alike. It is consistently emphasised that 'success' in Afghanistan will not come in the form of a military victory, but through political and socio-economic progress that ultimately erodes the insurgents' cause. The prevailing view is that military force on its own is an insufficient – and in some regards inappropriate – instrument to achieve these aims and therefore needs to be integrated with efforts that are mainly civilian in nature. Yet, despite widespread consensus over the need for an holistic approach in theory, the implementation of comprehensive or whole-of-government strategies has given rise to debate, controversy and concern in practice.

The argument that success in recent military interventions depends upon the right combination of hard and soft power conveys the idea of the three Ds of defence, diplomacy, and development as 'instruments' in the toolkits of governments. Recent US military doctrine provides a good example thereof: '... military forces have to operate with the other instruments of national power to forge unity of effort through a whole of government approach'.¹ In reality, that the three Ds stand for elaborate bureaucracies with priorities, values, and interests of their own, and therefore do not necessarily collaborate smoothly when asked to, is well understood. Consequently, co-operation failures are often attributed to the dysfunctional aspects of bureaucracy, which are colloquially referred to as 'turf wars' or 'bureaucratic unrest'.²

This essay takes a critical stance toward the vision of military and non-military organisations as readily combined 'instruments of state power'. Yet it also rejects the idea that resistance to greater integration by military or civilian agencies is necessarily petty, or a function of entrenched interests and bureaucratic politics. Instead, it advocates greater consideration for organisational culture as a source of obstacles to co-operation between military and civilian organisations in the context of complex interventions.

The decision of Western states to intervene in so-called failed or failing states is based on a conflation of national security imperatives, such as denying safe havens to global terrorist networks, with human security thinking reflected in the pressure on political leaders 'to do something' against oppression and suffering in other parts of the world. The resulting complex interventions have placed high demands on military and civilian agencies to co-operate effectively. The debate over how much integration between military and civilian functions is *needed* – but equally how much integration is *desirable* – is therefore timely and crucial.

Integration of Civilian and Military Efforts: What is at Stake?

So-called Phase IV operations, which describe activities conducted in the aftermath of combat operations to stabilise the area of operations and prepare the return to civilian control, require a combination of expertise from both the military and civilian arms of government.³ This is evident for instance in the strategy for the future of



An Afghan National Policeman receives water from a child during an ISAF humanitarian mission near Bala Murghab, 3 October 2008. *Photo courtesy of Department of Defense/Laura K Smith.*

Afghanistan, the 'Afghanistan Compact'. Of the three pillars identified, only one – security – relies heavily on the military, whereas the others – governance, rule of law and human rights, and economic and social development – require substantive input from civilian government agencies as well as non-governmental organisations.⁴

The ambitious goal of rebuilding a nation's physical and institutional infrastructure while the host government's authority remains contested by violent means defies the idea of a sequential evolution from military intervention to civilian-led rehabilitation processes. The campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan have shown to what extent 'post-conflict reconstruction' as a separate phase following upon combat operations is an abstract concept, out of touch with reality. Similarly, UN peacekeeping in the post-Cold War era has increasingly run into conceptual difficulties because in many missions there seemed to be no real peace to keep.

The notion of 'stabilisation' or 'stability operations' has emerged precisely because of the difficulty to categorise activities that fall into a grey zone in between military and civilian responsibilities, or 'permissive' and 'non-

permissive' environments. Yet the concept has come under heavy criticism from both military and civilian actors. Some military experts warn that a focus on nation-building and the safeguarding of civilians in lawless areas threatens the maintenance of crucial war-fighting skills. Civilians on the other hand are wary about the growing militarisation of foreign assistance and increasing intrusion of the military into 'humanitarian space'.⁵

The reality on the ground suggests that a neat delineation of roles and tasks between the military and civilian agencies in twenty-first century interventions is very difficult to establish. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that each conflict – or each theatre of operation in military parlance – has unique characteristics. This situation has led to two parallel, but somewhat contradictory trends. On the one hand, a vocabulary of 'comprehensiveness' has emerged both within inter-governmental institutions such as NATO or the EU and individual member states; on the other hand, military and non-military organisations have sought to clarify and delineate their respective roles and spheres of responsibility in the form of doctrine, strategy papers and complex task matrices.⁶ The growing body of

shared terminology may thus distract from the persistence of highly divisive issues beneath the surface.

The idea of 'comprehensiveness' to some extent obscures important step-changes between co-ordination, co-operation, and integration of civilian and military functions. This conceptual confusion in turn allows individual organisations that are being pushed towards co-operation to outwardly respond to these demands while simultaneously seeking to safeguard their own interests. However, the practical implementation of so-called comprehensive responses is likely to bring the different meanings and value attached to the idea of co-operation by individual organisations to the fore.

Why Organisational Culture?

In the context of current interventions, effective civil-military co-operation is unlikely to be achieved on the basis of a matrix dividing tasks and allocating resources between individual agencies. In a recent lecture, General John Craddock compared the interplay of civilian and military efforts to a soccer game where each player has an assigned role, but 'due to the fluidity of the game, these roles are not distinct, rather the borders between those roles are often blurred'.⁷



This is where an analysis based on organisational culture can bring additional insight. To pick up the analogy, without a better understanding of each individual player's rationale and motivation for playing his part in a specific way, it will be difficult to work with overlapping roles.

Cultural differences between military and civilian organisations are regularly listed as a reason why co-operation between the two sides is not easily achieved. Accounts of military-NGO relations in particular tend to sum up the cultural dimension as a clash between hierarchically and horizontally organised entities. The argument made in this essay, however, is that organisational culture is more than just a bullet point on a list of possible impediments to co-operation. The concept of organisational culture refers to collectively held beliefs, symbols, rituals and practices, which give meaning to the critical aspects of an organisation's purpose and goals and often provide a specific language.⁸ Organisational culture not only informs the nature of templates, routines and standard practices that a given organisation develops in the pursuit of its mission; it is also reflected in the choice of resources and capabilities deemed worth acquiring or maintaining by the organisation. Furthermore, organisations are instilled with a sense of identity and purpose, which may not coincide with the roles and functions they are implicitly or explicitly assigned in a joint or 'comprehensive' approach.

Culture has no conceptual validity if taken as a catch-all phrase to explain any sort of behaviour that does not have an immediately visible explanation. However, the concept of organisational culture offers several advantages when used as shorthand for the way in which organisations define their interests and priorities; how they identify problems and ways to solve them; and the value and meaning they attach the surrounding environment.

First, it may inspire alternative institutional responses. A focus on culture draws attention to the fact that effective co-operation may require more than the removal of technical barriers or

harmonisation of standard operating procedures. Existing institutional mechanisms designed to overcome parochial interests and governmental 'stovepiping' may not succeed if they fail to integrate an understanding of cultural differences.

Second, current debates downplay the importance of cultural divides by representing the problem as primarily one of 'interagency co-ordination'. An approach based on organisational culture on the other hand provides an opportunity to explore the significance of the main divide that is implicitly acknowledged in the term '*civil-military co-operation*'.

Third, the perspective of organisational culture allows for a critical appreciation of best practices and perceived lessons learned. For instance, it has become a default policy recommendation that joint training will lessen cultural divides by reducing misperception and building bridges between military and civilian personnel. However, what is also needed is an understanding of why these cultural barriers exist in the first place and whether it always makes sense to tear them down.

Key Challenges for Greater Integration of Efforts in Stabilisation Operations

The following key issues are likely to animate the debate over effective integration of civilian and military efforts in state-building and counter-insurgency operations:

- Leadership
- Deployable expertise
- Interoperability.

First, unified leadership – or 'unity of command' – has been among the most frequently cited requirements for greater synergy between civilian and military efforts. Beyond this generic assertion, however, there is little agreement on an appropriate model. The instinctive association of 'unity of effort' with 'unity of command' in the military mindset makes it difficult for the military to consider alternatives to a hierarchically organised chain of command with a

single decision-maker at the top. In addition, the propensity of military personnel to 'take charge' creates a mental barrier to participation in processes that are not military-led. As General Sir David Richards put it, 'We can set the conditions but are often powerless to implement key parts of the overall plan. This is hugely frustrating'.⁹ Civil servants, on the other hand, are more comfortable with fluid hierarchies, committee-based structures and decisions made on the basis of consensus. Diplomats, by nature of their profession, are more familiar with processes for which they have to ensure buy-in rather than direct leadership. Hence they may not be in a position to offer the rapid and unequivocal decisions that the military are looking for.

Proper recognition of these differences might open the possibility of achieving unity of effort without getting stuck in institutional debates over unity of command. It may be more feasible to teach the military how to think in an integrated way about the security, developmental and political challenges of the operational environment than attempting to integrate military and civilian lines of activity. In order for this to function, civilian agencies will have to offer a way of reconciling their project templates and standards, which tend to be based on the expectation of a reasonably benign environment, with the realities of a counter-insurgency campaign.

Second, choosing the right organisation for stabilisation tasks at first sight appears to be a function of capacity, expertise, and deployability. The current focus on 'delivery' and 'deployable experts' however raises the question whether expertise can simply be treated as an abstract 'commodity' that is deliverable by any organisation ready to do so. Organisations act as repositories of specific cultural dispositions that have evolved over time around the exercise of a specialised function. Turning development experts into combat units or running diplomatic establishments in the image of military headquarters cannot be the answer to the problem. It seems equally impracticable and unwise to transform

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military establishments into giant development agencies. The challenge is to solve the problem of deployability without sacrificing the development of specialist expertise and intellectual diversity within the institutional architecture.

Third, the emergence of shared terminology and a vocabulary of comprehensiveness is not necessarily a reliable indicator of whether true harmonisation of efforts is taking place. In the crucial debate over integrated planning and implementation mechanisms, there is a risk that organisations will outwardly favour integration while expecting it to occur on their own terms. The challenge of finding common ground is not solved if organisations are pushed towards signing up to joint mechanisms that they subsequently cannot 'sell' to their own constituency. Hence, the main task may not reside in the creation of a common vocabulary, but in the fostering of mutual understanding of the different meanings that different organisations attach to commonly employed terms. An obvious example thereof is the concept of security, which tends to be understood by the military in a kinetic way; by diplomats as a matter of law enforcement and public order; and by development experts in the sense of human security, a concept that embraces both the physical safety and well-being of individuals. The solution to joint planning may lie not in the development of a single, uniform approach, but in arriving at a better understanding of the different needs of each organisation to plan in a specific way. Trying to flatten the cultural differences among civilian and military organisations through standardised approaches practices and terminology carries the risk of losing the combination of specialised expertise that has made a comprehensive response necessary in the first place.

To some extent, the call for integration among organisations with fundamentally different philosophies for the purpose of stabilising a state reflects the uncertainty surrounding the project of state-building itself. The recognition that failed or failing states can be a real

threat to Western societies conflates national security interests with moral concerns for the safety and well-being of the citizens of these states. In the absence of a coherent narrative about 'why we are here' (and for how long), it seems difficult to expect the organisations involved to agree on the question of 'what are we doing here?' This uncertainty, compounded with short electoral cycles in Western democracies, makes it difficult to acknowledge state-building as an engagement that is likely to last for decades and to justify the re-allocation of resources that would follow from it.

Conclusion

The perceived security threat emanating from failing and unstable states has led to intense debates among and within Western states over the design of appropriate institutional responses to the combined challenges of weak institutions, insurgency and underdevelopment. A recurring feature in these debates has been the call for greater integration of civilian and military efforts in order to make responses more coherent or 'comprehensive'.

This essay has outlined the argument that mechanisms and structures aimed at improving co-operation between military and civilian organisations tasked with the implementation of a comprehensive response are unlikely to succeed if they merely brush over the fundamental cultural differences that exist between these organisations. It has further been argued that resistance to greater integration and harmonisation of efforts by civilian or military establishments is not automatically a sign of petty 'turf wars' or dysfunctional bureaucratic politics.

The importance of establishing a coherent narrative is insufficiently recognised in current debates over how to reshape the institutional landscape in order to address the security challenges of the twenty-first century. A common explanation for co-operation failures has been the lack of institutional structures and mechanisms to 'plug in' common plans, projects and cross-departmental responsibilities. However, the argument

presented in this essay suggests that the lack of adequate structures may be symptomatic of deeper philosophical disagreements over what the problem at hand is and how to solve it. Hence, the reason why Western nations intervening in Afghanistan have struggled to develop an effective information campaign is likely to be the lack of a shared narrative, rather than the absence of a 'lead department' for communication within their institutional architectures. The current focus on the design of inter-agency mechanisms and cross-departmental structures may convey the impression that the integration of civilian and military efforts is mainly a matter of overcoming bureaucratic resistance and inertia. Yet, the questions that need to be addressed in order for joint arrangements to become an institutional reality, rather than the brainchild of a few committed individuals, are inherently political. ■

NOTES

- 1 *US Army Field Manual 3-07, 'Stability Operations', Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington DC, 6 October 2008, p. vii.*
- 2 *Ann Scott Tyson, 'Standard Warfare May Be Eclipsed By Nation-building', Washington Post, 5 October 2008.*
- 3 *Conrad C Crane, 'Phase IV operations: where wars are really won', Military Review, (May-June 2005), p. 27.*
- 4 *As spelled out in the 'Afghanistan Compact', agreed at the London Conference on Afghanistan, London, 31 January – 1 February 2006.*
- 5 *Tyson, op.cit.*
- 6 *See for example the 'Stabilisation Tasks Matrix' (Version 1.0) of 30 June 2008, elaborated by the UK Stabilisation Unit, <<http://www.stabilisationunit.gov.uk/sins.html>>.*
- 7 *General John Craddock, Commander, US European Command and NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe, speech delivered at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) on 20 October 2008. Full transcript available at <<http://www.rusi.org/events/ref:E48EDD9A572226/info:public/infold:E48FC6E8B5C05C/>>, accessed 30 October 2008.*
- 8 *Elizabeth Kier, Imagining War: French and British Military Doctrine between the Wars (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 28.*
- 9 *Richard Norton-Taylor, 'Full interview: General David Richards', The Guardian, 27 January 2007.*