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## Spanning "Bleeding" Boundaries: Humanitarianism, NGOs, and the Civilian-Military Nexus in the Post- Cold War Era

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The topics covered in Nancy Roberts' article are worthy of serious consideration by scholars and practitioners. The fact that little formal work has been done from the perspective of public administration theory on the organizational challenges of achieving meaningful civilian-military cooperation is noteworthy. And if the author's goal of spurring more research is met, we will all benefit.

Yet I should make clear at the outset that I am not one who can contribute directly to the public administration theoretical debate, as that is neither my professional background nor the area where my commentary can perhaps best add to this important debate. At least one other commentator, Professor Joseph Cerami, has not only a better background, but he has the past research

record, applied experience in the field, and an ongoing interest in teaching public policy and public administration to future practitioners to engage that part of the debate more directly.

While I am not apologetic about it, I come from a political science and security studies intellectual and theoretical background, and my applied work is mostly in the areas of national and international security policy and strategy. I have conducted research, written, and taught about fragile and failed states, and I will attempt to bring some of that background to bear on the issues at hand. Some of my recent work has focused on the need to integrate civilian and military capabilities in a strategic manner so as to address more effectively contemporary security challenges—including not just "traditional" but also human security challenges—in a "whole of government" (WoG) strategic effort. But even more broadly than WoG, this strategic approach requires effective cooperation and focused efforts by international governmental actors, nongovernmental actors, and even the private sector.

I also write this commentary not as a review of the article, although components of it may well read as such. The purpose is instead to offer some thoughts and perhaps some different perspectives on a topic which Roberts has rightfully identified as central to the international strategic environment of the 21st century: the civilian-military nexus. This nexus is complex and complicated. It involves not only governmental and nongovernmental civilians and the military (or military-like) actors from the United States, but also a multitude of governmental and nongovernmental actors from many countries and including international governmental actors and multinational governmental actors/coalitions that may also be multi-military in nature. The Department of De-

fense (DoD) terminology for this is joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational (JIIM) operations (naturally another acronym!). A rich debate continues over how best to achieve strategic coherence in this complex area of JIIM operations.

### **The 21st-Century International Security Environment**

The international reality today is that the need for such operations stems directly from the types of threats, challenges, and even opportunities extant in the strategic security environment. Whether confronting humanitarian disasters such as the 2004 tsunami, insurgencies such as that in Iraq after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, or the "failed state" phenomenon perhaps well illustrated by Somalia in the mid-1990s, international responses must increasingly bring a wide range of capabilities to bear nearly simultaneously in order to address the multiple dimensions of these crises.

In a "perfect" world, the crisis would be neatly limited to a single dimension with a clear and easily distinguished set of capabilities necessary for addressing it. In the context of the current discussion, we could try to imagine a "purely humanitarian crisis." And if the world were even more "perfect," the capabilities to respond completely and effectively would all reside in a single organization, thereby making both the nature of the challenge and the response much easier to analyze and address.

Unfortunately, I believe that such a "perfect" world has never existed and certainly does not today. The crises we are called upon to address—whether spawned by acts of nature or choices made by humans—frequently combine elements of this range of characteristics. I believe that the "domain conflicts" addressed in this article are at least as much a function of the complexity of these 21st-

century challenges as they are a simple result of organizations competing with one another for domain space. That said, it becomes even more urgent that we find ways to integrate and coordinate across the different organizations (and, more generally, the "places") where the necessary capabilities reside.

It is, of course, tempting to some to think that some kind of mega-organizational approach to these complex challenges is the answer—a global-level organization with clear lines of authority and a chain of command. But while Roberts is generally correct in asserting that the hierarchical organizations and formal chains of command in the military are frequently an organizational advantage (or at least a common starting point) for achieving military coordination, even international military cooperation can be frustrating, dangerous, and plagued by an inability to achieve two of the central concepts I will address: namely, unity of purpose and unity of effort. This is so in no small part because military action, like all of what we are talking about here, is ultimately guided by policy, and policy is by definition political. A fundamental problem is that these complex challenges also will necessarily cut across different political and policy domains.

### **The Need for Civilian-Military Cooperation**

Roberts states early on that "civilian and military organizations are being thrown by mission and mandate into interdependencies." A corollary of this is that the boundaries between the civilian and military realms are more blurred today than in the past, as is "the dividing line between soldiers and civilians." But as stated in the opening of this commentary, it is also important to understand that the nature of the threats and chal-

lenges (and opportunities to shape the environment going forward) has driven this convergence. The missions and mandates derive from those fundamental shifts in the strategic security environment. This point is not simply one of semantics, as it lies at the root of the question we need to answer: Are these the real security threats we are most likely to face not only in current crisis situations but for years to come? How we answer that question will shape how we look at the need for broader answers to the questions emanating from the civilian-military nexus. For example, do we need to consider substantial reorganization of the national and international security architecture with which we operate (Dorff 2006)? I believe that these challenges are long term and fundamental to the 21st-century international strategic environment, and our approaches to addressing the organizational issues should be equally long term and not fundamentally ad hoc.

Several years ago, I was working closely with Creative Associates International, Inc. (CAII) (<http://www.caii.com>) on this very problem. Historically engaged in conducting education and development assistance around the globe, CAII was one of the first companies of its kind to recognize the blurring of the distinction between traditional definitions of "security" and "development." In response to that recognition, they conducted some pioneering strategic thinking and planning in this area. The following diagram, figure 1, was developed by CAII to convey the complexities of the still-emerging strategic environment. I reproduce it here because CAII deserves credit for being out in front on this issue, and also because it helps to reinforce my point—in agreement with Roberts—about the fundamental and long-term need to address the civilian-military cooperation complexities and challenges.



**Figure 1 Stabilization Challenge**

Source: Creative Associates International, Inc. Reprinted here with permission.

There are a few points that derive from this graphic that bear directly on the article that has spawned this discussion. First, there are no clear dividing lines between the "battle space" and the "humanitarian space."<sup>1</sup> Although this graphic points to the "stabilization space" as being in the nexus between the two, it is important to recognize that "stabilization" is required across the entire range of crises we are discussing. In the aftermath of the Indonesia tsunami, the inability of some local and national governments to govern effectively opened the doors not only for increased natural human tragedy but also exploitation by nefarious actors. In Somalia in the 1990s, attempts to provide food as a matter of humanitarian relief led to efforts by those competing for authority to "govern" to seize the food and control its distribution as another form of "combat." And the formal efforts to reconstruct post-

Saddam Iraq were, of course, the target of insurgents whose goals had little to do with making Iraq a better place to live for all Iraqis. In all of these cases, there were needs to carry out humanitarian relief, stabilization and reconstruction, and combat operations concurrently.

Second, the kinds of divisions that might exist between the humanitarian and battle spaces shift over time and often remain highly fluid. Consequently, while it is useful to work with the typology of civilian-military operations developed by Roberts in this article, the operational and, hence, strategic dilemma is that the theoretically useful quadrants in such a typology do not remain equally distinct in practice. This suggests that we must have either a single organization with the ability to conduct all the operations in an integrated fashion or find ways

to integrate the capabilities of multiple organizations in a strategically coherent manner (hence, the need for "coordination").

A further option in this area would be, of course, the consolidation of some capabilities, meaning that some organizations would take on a number of the capabilities but not necessarily all of them. I believe that current debates within the U.S. military about the range of capabilities they should be able to perform is more properly understood from this perspective as opposed to a desire to do everything or a result of unwanted mission creep. From an organizational perspective, then, and perhaps something that the public administration community needs to help policymakers and practitioners wrestle with, is whether the organizational architecture largely created by the National Security Act of 1947 is still appropriate for designing and implementing the kind of integrated strategy we need. Perhaps what is needed, among other things, is a new organizational architecture designed around the threats, challenges, and opportunities we see as characterizing the 21st-century international security environment.<sup>2</sup>

Another critical issue that emerged from the CAII work in this area grew out of workshops and discussions held with all of the practitioner community, especially the humanitarian organizations whose approach to operational security was profoundly different from the security thinking of other organizations. While Cerami may be much better suited than I to articulate this clearly, I understand it this way: For such organizations, the personal safety and security of their people derive from the personal relationships they build with the individuals and groups they serve on the ground, with a resulting deep trust and faith in the neutrality of those organizations. Were those organizations to participate too closely with military

organizations, they would (as Roberts notes) jeopardize not only their ability to carry out their missions, but they would actually place their employees at greater personal risk. The trust they build with clients builds operational freedom and security; operational freedom and security from the traditional military and police perspective derive from the ability to enforce them with the use of force if necessary. This is one of the strongest and most perplexing differences between many of the actors with humanitarian space capabilities and those with battle space capabilities. Integrating or "coordinating" across them is no small challenge.

### **Operational Challenges in the 21st-Century International Security Environment**

Roberts points to operational challenges arising from (1) the "temporal coincidence or sequencing of humanitarian and military operations in any given theatre of operation," and (2) the military perception that "humanitarian aid dispensed during a conflict is not a neutral act" and the civilian view that the military wants to "politicize humanitarianism." I am not sure these characterizations are accurate even though I do not disagree that they do at times exist in the minds of some.

But the crucial issue in the former, as I argue here, is that it is very rare today that the military and humanitarian operations can in fact be clearly sequenced. It is precisely the "temporal coincidence" that is most frequent in many, if not all, of the theater operations. And, in the latter, the perception that matters most, in my opinion, is not that of the military or even the civilians but that of the combatants. This is what I discussed in the example of Somalia where the warlord combatants—not just Aideed—saw the distribution of humanitarian aid as part of the conflict. That is because the provision of such

aid is by definition "political" to many of these actors; hence, humanitarianism in such fragile or failed states (or, perhaps better, "contested states") does not have to be politicized by the military.

Now, that is not to say that the decision to "attempt to apprehend the warlord Mohammed Aided" did not have the effect Roberts identifies. It is rather to say that the "politicization of humanitarianism" already existed before the decision to go after Aided. It was a function of the very nature of the acts of providing aid and comfort to civilians in societies that are contested or in which an absence or profound weakness of effective legitimate governance prevails (for more elaboration on this, see my arguments in Dorff 2005).

The point I am simply adding to the discussion here is that even if the perceptions and misperceptions among civilian and military actors are a serious problem, the very real clash on the field of operations among warlords competing for power or an insurgency trying to bring down a government will make a clear distinction between "humanitarian space" and "battle space" virtually impossible to sustain. The "indigenous combatants" that frequently lead to the need for a foreign military presence—U.S., United Nations (UN), or other—will do whatever they can to blur this distinction, just as Roberts points out. And, clearly, the proliferation of civilian organizations, their wide dispersion, their competition for funding and media coverage, and an at times freewheeling independence (the desire to act in a country without consent from any entity because of the overriding importance of human security) virtually guarantee that it will continue to be "difficult for civilians to coordinate with one another to establish humanitarian space, let alone coordinate as a whole with military operations."

Finally, Roberts' characterization of the potential conflicts between civilian and military organizations in Quadrant IV operations when the "military engages in humanitarian efforts" is also accurate. But, here again, the reality today is that many "enemies" are unlikely to allow a "neutral, non-politicized distribution of humanitarian assistance." This raises the complex issue often embodied in the expression that a military can win the war but not the peace. As recent experience in Iraq has recalled, a failure to protect the population during and after major combat operations can have precisely that outcome. As a consequence, there is today a much greater awareness that security and stability go hand-in-hand. So if the responsibility for those two components are either divided between two different organizations (civilian and military) or between multiple organizations (military, police, and numerous civilian organizations, including government agencies, international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations [NGOs]), the likelihood of achieving a coordinated strategic-level effort, effectively implemented so as to achieve a strategic-level victory that includes a post-combat "peace," seems very low indeed.

### **Mechanisms for Achieving "Coordination"**

The discussions of "coordination strategies" and "communities of practice" are especially useful in focusing our attention on areas and questions where additional research can help identify courses of action that can be implemented in practice. But perhaps we should acknowledge that, in fact, multiple organizations can achieve strategic success even in the absence of clear coordinating strategies. The key to this is achieving some kind of overarching acceptance of shared goals and objectives. This is often required in complex strategic environments, whether in human security or in completely different

areas such as business. More structure, whether in the form of organizational hierarchy or rules, does little to address the complex problems and often serves to bog down the operations and to stifle the adaptability, innovation, and flexibility that are needed. Even a UN resolution authorizing operations is largely meaningless if that authorization is not grounded in clear and shared strategic objectives. This is to say that unity of purpose may be more important in such cases than simple unity of command, which may remain unattainable in any case. Flatter organizations are an indication that we do not always need more hierarchy, rules, or control to achieve strategic success.

In terms of communities of practice, there is indeed a lot going on. The Center for Complex Operations (CCO) is another example and one that grew out of a DoD initiative to address the complexities of the civilian-military nexus in defense, diplomacy, and development (the so-called "Three Ds"). While to date it remains largely a forum for exchanging information and ideas, especially among U.S. government agencies, the goal remains to engage the larger community of NGOs and international institutions (see the CCO homepage at <https://members.ccoportal.org/>). And while I am not necessarily an advocate for more doctrine, I am an advocate for more "joint training"—that is, formal, shared experiences learning and working together in pre-deployment settings. While it is also true that not all of the humanitarian community would want or be able to participate in such joint training, when combined with the concept of "bridging organizations" discussed below, it could contribute significantly to increasing shared strategic objectives and a more informal emergence of unity of effort (the other critical "unity" needed in such complex and friction-laden operations).

### **Some Concluding Observations**

So the fundamental question remains: What is to be done? The research suggested in this article is certainly necessary and should prove helpful as we attempt to find answers to this broad and overridingly important question. I certainly do not have those answers. But let me make a few closing observations and suggest a possible avenue to pursue. First, the military—certainly more so in the U.S. but increasingly in multinational military operations—will continue to find it very difficult to establish and maintain meaningful and clear operational distinctions between domains.

If the fluidity of movement across the spectrum of conflict remains as we have seen it recently, then the level of threat to human life is also unlikely to remain even remotely constant in the various domains. And shifts across that spectrum will not always be determined by our actions alone; the "enemy" will have a say in this, too. That suggests that a military presence of some kind—hence, military operations—will be more rather than less a part of most humanitarian operations. Even largely humanitarian relief efforts, when undertaken in contested, failed, and fragile societies (where they will be most likely to occur and most needed), will be accompanied by high levels of threat to human life, not only from a natural disaster that may have caused the need for relief but also from human efforts by those seeking to exploit the crisis for their own personal gain. Consequently, the potential for domain conflict and overall strategic failure will remain high.

Second, the military is often called into such situations not because there is an institutional or organizational desire on its part to be there, but because there is simply no realistic institutional or organizational alternative for

responding to the policy guidance that directs something be done.<sup>3</sup> In the United States today, it is currently in vogue to call for increasing civilian capabilities and capacity. The problem has been that we have seen very little movement in the direction of reorienting government agencies (State Department and USAID, as well as others) to undertake operations in the "stabilization space" as CAII defines it, and even less interest on the part of the U.S. Congress to re-source such a strategic shift.<sup>4</sup>

Third, and relatedly, efforts to reorganize or even meaningfully reorient the institutions of government to address this new international security environment and the fluidity of the threat—and, hence, the conflict spectrum—have not generated much traction. The efforts by the Project on National Security Reform (see note 2) are also notable for the fact that many of the individuals closely involved in the project prior to 2009 are now actually holding appointed positions in the U.S. government. And yet virtually no movement along any of the major lines of reorganization is as yet visible. To the best of my knowledge, there is not even a hint of an effort underway to bring that level of reorganization to reality. It would be nice if even some consolidation and coordination of the "civilian" side of the equation could be accomplished, if for no other reason than to reduce somewhat the numbers of competing civilian actors trying to operate independently in the humanitarian space. But I do not believe this will happen any time soon.

So if organizational reform or reorientation is not going to come to the rescue, is there another "organizational alternative" to consider? Let me once again go back to the work begun several years ago by CAII and which continues today, not just there but in other companies as well. I first suggested in my early work on this topic that what was

needed was a kind of "gap-bridging company" (an elaboration can be found in Dorff 2007, see especially 399-400). This would most likely be a private sector company—an NGO perhaps—that would specialize in working in the identified "stabilization space." It would require personnel and policies that accommodated both the civilian and military organizations that are likely to be found in all three spaces. But its specialty would be the ability to operate effectively in the stabilization space—or in the language of this article, to operate across the domains.

While I cannot say precisely what such an organization would look like—and perhaps research drawing on public administration and organizational theory could help here—it would be able to communicate and work effectively with both humanitarian and military organizations. While it would not have any command authority over these other organizations, it would have an enhanced ability to help forge shared purpose and shared effort across them. As noted above, it may not be unity of command that is the most important element behind strategic success in this complex security environment; unity of purpose and unity of effort may be the most important. And while unity of command may make the other two easier to achieve, there is no organizational imperative I am aware of indicating that they cannot be achieved without the former. Perhaps some of the work on chaordic organizations<sup>5</sup> and informal networks<sup>6</sup> could shed light on how certain communication patterns and the ability to find coordination nodes within such networks would help us not to eliminate domain conflict but to achieve strategic success in spite of it. Perhaps that, too, is a thought whose time has not yet come. But it might be worth thinking about and analyzing while we wait for the still elusive organizational reform to occur.

Finally, let me simply reinforce Roberts' call for the "badly needed and long overdue public administration scholarship" on these issues, and add that the research agenda needs to be collaborative and interdisciplinary if we are to make meaningful contributions to solving these very real and very important problems. In my introduction, I pointed out that I do not come from a public administration background, but I also do not apologize for the background I have and bring to this discussion. Just as the central issue of this article was the need to forge collaboration across communities of practitioners, we also need to encourage that same collaborative effort across academic disciplines and also (as this very forum highlights) across the academic and practitioner communities. If, as has too often been the case, we continue to think separately about policymaking and implementation, policy and organizations, and policy and leadership, we will most likely fail in the most important area: helping to identify sound policy that can serve as practical solutions to real problems.

## Notes

1. In fact, many argue today that especially in contemporary intrastate conflict—and especially in the failed, failing, and fragile state context—there is no such thing as neutral humanitarian space. And humanitarian actors are not perceived by the protagonists in this kind of conflict as being neutral actors. I will discuss this further below.
2. This was precisely the central theme of the April 2008 U.S. Army War College Annual Strategy Conference entitled, "Rebalancing the Instruments of National Power" (<http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/conf/panels-media-2008.cfm>). For an impressively comprehensive analysis of national security reform and many other issues related to new security strategy needs, see the study produced by the Project on National Security Reform (PNSR) entitled, "Forging a New Shield" (November 2008). This and other PNSR reports are available from their home page at <http://www.pnsr.org/>.
3. In this one respect I perhaps have a slightly different read of DoD 3000.05 than Roberts. Rather than a clarion call for the Pentagon to expand its domain, it was a codification of sorts of what had already be-

come the reality: When no one else can do it, the military must be prepared and willing to do it.

4. The popular and oft-stated observation today is that the State Department and USAID together have fewer diplomats than the military has musicians.

5. The concept of chaordic organizations was developed from the idea that there is a space between chaos and order (hence, cha-ord) in which self-organizing, self-governing, adaptive, nonlinear types of organizations can function and are based on such things as shared purpose and principles. While what we are looking at here is not exactly "chaos," the concept of achieving coordinated effort among organizations that do not want to be or cannot be "coordinated" by traditional hierarchical control structures (command) is potentially useful. See, for example, the website for "Chaordic Commons" at <http://www.chaordic.org/index.html>.

6. For a recent application of systemic network theory to humanitarian aid operations, see Seybolt 2009. Seybolt finds network theory useful "for understanding coordination problems in humanitarian crises," but also identifies some of the "primary constraints on network development..." concluding that "the humanitarian assistance system will never become a fully integrated network..." (1028-29).

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