Civil-Military Cooperation in Disaster and Emergency Response
Practices, Challenges, and Opportunities

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Abstract: Civilian authorities increasingly request military involvement in national emergencies and (inter)national disasters. This article aims to contribute to our understanding of these new civil-military interactions. The authors first reflect on three themes: (1) guidelines, principles, and goals of civil-military cooperation; (2) domain consensus through civil-military agreement on the allocation of areas of responsibility; and (3) militarization processes. The authors describe how these themes feature in traditional, expeditionary civil-military cooperation and in these new civil-military partnerships. Next, the authors consider the effects of the growing military role in emergencies and disasters on civil-military relations. The article concludes with some recommendations and a research agenda.

Keywords: civil-military cooperation, disaster, crisis, emergency, civil-military relations, militarization

Introduction

Civil-military cooperation has been an important element of military missions for decades. Still, research by military scholars has demonstrated that it remains contentious and challenging. Civilian and military actors are very different in terms of their organizational cultures, structures, and operational approaches, which complicate their collaborative efforts.[1] Moreover, military interference in humanitarian activities has been criticized by civilian partners as mission creep and deplored for blurring the boundaries between

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military and humanitarian domains of responsibility.[2] Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations will therefore often keep armed forces at a distance when operating in conflict settings or other volatile areas.

While civil-military cooperation is still neither self-evident nor undisputed in expeditionary contexts, a new field of civil-military interactions has emerged. Civilian authorities increasingly request military involvement in national emergencies and (inter)national disasters.[3] Apart from practical reasons (e.g., an urgent need for military capabilities), civilian leadership may also have political motivations to call for military assistance in the aftermath of disasters, such as the fact that it shows to the public that leadership is committed to a fast and efficient resolution of the crisis or to divert attention from failed disaster preparation and prevention. Regardless of the reasons, the armed forces will have to cooperate with local authorities, police, fire brigades, and emergency medical services in response to large-scale or complex accidents and disasters in their home country. Troops might also be deployed to support border management, when large numbers of refugees are arriving, such as in Australia (e.g., Operation Resolute) and in Europe (e.g., during the 2015 European Union [EU] refugee crisis). And in an international context, military units provided assistance in the aftermath of hurricanes (e.g., Hurricane Dorian in the Bahamas) and earthquakes (e.g., in Haiti) to alleviate human suffering and provide much-needed relief.[4]

In this article, the authors take the normative position that civil-military cooperation will often be necessary, as many contemporary crises can hardly be addressed by one governmental actor alone. Instead, contemporary crises require collaboration between various organizations due to their scale and complexity.[5] These crises require a so-called whole-of-government approach, in which public crisis agencies, often even supported by private companies, coordinate their activities and work side-by-side, since neither of them could solve the disaster on its own.[6] The interorganizational effort, if well-coordinated, will be more comprehensive and efficient than what any single organization could achieve. Increasingly, the armed forces are a key player because they have resources and skills that may often be of crucial importance to manage and resolve emergencies and disasters. Inadequate cooperation between civilian and military coactors can lead to failing response efforts, causing existing crises to deepen or worsen. Thus, there is a need to improve collaboration between civilian and military actors.

There is ample research on interorganizational cooperation during disasters and on civil-military cooperation in expeditionary (conflict) settings, but studies on civil-military cooperation in (inter)national disasters and emergencies remain rare, even though these civil-military interactions will face their unique challenges and have their own dynamics. This article aims to contribute to the understanding of the complexity of these civil-military interactions, compare expeditionary to new forms of civil-military cooperation, and provide recom-

mendations as well as a research agenda. To this end, the authors first reflect on three themes: (1) guidelines, principles, and goals of civil-military cooperation; (2) domain consensus through civil-military agreement on the allocation of areas of responsibility; and (3) militarization processes. This article describes how these themes have traditionally been characterized by distinctions and divisions between civilian and military actors, and the authors discuss the relevance of these themes in new civil-military partnerships. Next, the authors consider the effects of the growing military role in emergencies and disasters on civil-military relations. Finally, this article offers some recommendations and raise questions to be explored in future research.

Before moving on to the next section, it is important to emphasize that the relations between civilian and military leaders and organizations differ considerably by country. While many Western countries allocate similar roles to their armed forces, historical and cultural distinctions remain and should not be ignored. This means that analyses of civil-military cooperation and policy recommendations require caution. The authors will reflect more on this near the end of the article.

Guidelines, Principles, and Goals

In expeditionary contexts, humanitarian organizations and armed forces perform fundamentally different tasks and roles, based on distinct principles, responsibilities, motivations, and approaches. These different tasks and roles are not always clear to others in the partnership, which can lead to unclear working relations, in which mutual distrust easily arises.[7] Civilian and military institutions have for many years tried to develop guidelines for the management of civil-military cooperation to reduce complex relationships in the field, but often remain wary in practice about opportunistic behaviors by the other.

From a civilian point of view, civil-military collaboration needs to serve humanitarian interests. According to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), which is a civilian interorganizational network coordinating humanitarian assistance in crises, civil-military cooperation consists of "the essential dialogue and interaction between civilian and military actors . . . necessary to protect and promote humanitarian principles, avoid competition, minimize inconsistency, and, when appropriate, pursue common goals."[8] Interactions can vary from coexistence to full-fledged cooperation, but it always revolves around *humanitarian* goals and principles, essential to saving lives and alleviating human suffering. At the level of the operators in the field, it is difficult to strike the right balance between a necessary and appropriate level of cooperation with the military, because civilian and military action must remain distinct but can be complementary and both can mutually benefit from increased cooperation. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs adopts the premise that military deployment and resources must complement and support the work of humanitarian organizations. The division of tasks and responsibilities and management of this cooperation are regulated by the Last Resort prin-

ciple: (1) military means are unique capabilities for which there are no civilian alternatives; (2) they are available in time to meet an urgent demand; (3) they are controlled by civilians; and (4) deployment is temporary and limited in scale.[9]

The perspective of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is very different in this regard, because it views civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) as essentially about achieving *military* goals.[10] NATO's CIMIC includes supporting local authorities, as well as coordination and planning with civilian actors, including humanitarian organizations. CIMIC activities, however, serve the military mission, follow military priorities, and focus on reaching political goals, thereby deviating from humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. Over time, NATO has adopted the belief that military operations sometimes must be integrated with civilian and political elements to achieve lasting peace and stability in fragile regions. This comprehensive approach (CA) sees military operations as Joint and comprehensive enterprises. Still, the primary goal is the achievement of political goals and military interests remain key in this approach. Likewise, in *Civil-Military Operations*, Joint Publication 3-57 by the U.S. Chairman of Joints Chiefs of Staff, it describes civil-military operations as "activities performed by military forces to establish, maintain, influence, or exploit relationships between military forces and indigenous populations and institutions" with a stable operational environment as its main objective.[11]

The number of concepts and definitions in doctrines and other documents is daunting, but the most important observations are that civil-military cooperation does not constitute an end in itself in any guideline or directive and intended goals clearly differ per institution.[12] Likewise, views on management, role distribution, and positioning of civilian and military partners vary, because civilian and military actors in expeditionary contexts primarily attempt to resolve the complexity of civil-military contexts by subordinating the other partner to their own interests and goals.

In emergencies and disasters, particularly in a domestic context, goals and interests may well be more aligned, because both civilian and military actors aim to manage and resolve the crisis. To some extent, the partnership is indeed less complex, because partners are more familiar, can work together on a more permanent basis, and manage to formulate clearer guidelines. Generally, for instance, guidelines prescribe that military personnel are only deployed on the request of civilian authorities and remain subordinate to these civilian authorities throughout the response operations. Besides, there is a clear interdependence in these partnerships. During large-scale disasters, whether it is Hurricane Katrina, the 2010 Haiti earthquake, Australian bushfires, or the global COVID-19 crisis, civilian organizations are overwhelmed and lack resources or adequate security. The military, particularly in the early stages of the response, is one of the few organizations who can offer vast resources or establish a secure operating environment and is therefore likely to be called on for assistance by NGOs, first response organizations, and local authorities.

Yet, important differences remain. For instance, organizational cultures and structures are still quite different. Also, the principles for operations are distinct. While the police, for example, aim to be a community organization, military principles of using overwhelming force to resolve a crisis situation, such as a terrorist threat or riots, may not sit well with police approaches to these issues.[13] In addition, organizational interests do not disappear and might pit organizations against each other, even during disasters and emergencies.[14] Therefore, these themes remain important issues for civil-military cooperation in new areas of cooperation as well.

Breach of Domain Consensus

Civil-military cooperation in expeditionary settings is known to become more complex when actors (are perceived to) trespass into the other's domain. In the wake of stabilization strategies, such as CA, which explicitly links humanitarian, military, and political purposes, humanitarian organizations have experienced military interference in areas beyond the traditional military domain. In their perceptions, traditional domains of responsibilities have not always been respected, while proven expertise and customs are wrongly ignored.[15] This discontent further increased if the local population proved dissatisfied with the quality and nature of the military support.

In the context of disasters and emergencies, perceived breaches of domain consensus are also a frequent occurrence. In this context, as well, criticism of domain breaches are leveled against military actors. In domestic crisis management, for instance, military involvement in restoring public order (e.g., during the Los Angeles riots of 1992) and protection against terrorist threats (e.g., in France's Operation Sentinel and Belgium's Operation Vigilant Guardian both in 2015) means that the armed forces carry out activities in tasks that are traditionally fulfilled by the police.[16] Likewise, when military personnel are deployed to fight wildfires or for rescue operations during floods (e.g., in the UK and the Netherlands), they take over some of the work of the fire brigade. These organizations may see the military involvement as a threat, because it suggests that they are incapable of resolving such emergencies themselves or fear it might foreshadow a shifting of funding to the armed forces.[17] Likewise, during international disaster and emergency response, the deployment of military forces for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) are bound to be contentious when soldiers are engaged in the same activities as humanitarians, such as handing out emergency supplies and providing medical treatment. In this case as well, the military organization appropriates responsibilities, which used to be carried out by humanitarian organizations. This might even be experienced as improper competition by civilian organizations whose entire existence is based on this work and who collect donations for this very purpose.

In some cases, domain breaches are not restricted to the allocation of responsibilities but may also center around questions of accountability and lead-

ership. An interesting example comes from Hurricane Katrina. During this disaster, the military response was by some perceived to be quite fast and effective, even though others remained critical of the (initial) military contribution.[18] Afterward, a discussion emerged about whether disasters of this size should fall within the military domain of responsibility, so that the armed forces can lead and coordinate the response rather than civilian agencies that clearly had failed in launching an effective relief effort in this instance.[19] Such discussions are always contentious and complicate civil-military relationships.

This analysis shows, first, that domains are not fixed or clearly distinct. With changing emergencies and disasters, there are good reasons to reconsider the respective domains of civilian and military actors. In particular, as climate change leads to larger crises, it makes sense to see how military capabilities can be put to use in various contexts. Second, changing and overlapping domains of responsibility will inevitably result in friction and complicate civil-military cooperation.

Militarization Processes

In expeditionary missions, humanitarian actors regard violations of humanitarian principles as the main obstacle to civil-military cooperation. This happens when humanitarian aid is viewed as a means to promote politico-military strategies and objectives, such as when U.S. secretary of state Colin L. Powell described NGOs as a force multiplier that helped the U.S. government to reach its goals in Afghanistan.[20] This militarization results in three concerns.[21] The first concern is *contagion*, which refers to (the suspicion of) military-strategic use of humanitarian aid, by delivering it to only one of the parties in a conflict. Humanitarian organizations fear that, in this case, they will no longer be viewed as neutral, and thus no longer able to operate safely but will become targets themselves. A second concern is *complicity*: the fear of humanitarian organizations that by cooperating with the military, they will no longer offer the right support to affected communities or they will no longer be able to comply with the "do no harm" principle. Thirdly, there is concern that civil-military cooperation will result in the humanitarian response falling under *military command and control*. While research on this topic is scarce, these concerns complicate relationships between civilian and military actors in expeditionary settings.

In the context of disasters and emergencies, similar concerns are voiced. The militarization of response and relief in the aftermath of such situations may be problematic for civil-military relationships, because there is a fear that military organizations will effectively sidetrack civilian actors.[22] The response to the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, was militarized, as leaders increasingly employed military metaphors to describe their understanding of the situation and the measures that would need to be taken.[23] This also happened during earlier disease outbreaks, such as Ebola, Zika, and pandemic influenza.[24]

However, when a situation is typified as a war and troops are deployed, armed forces might be less inclined to cooperate with civilian partners to act

more rapidly or because they emphasize security measures in which they are the primary experts. Similarly, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the affected area was treated as a war zone to be brought back under (military) control rather than as a site rife with human suffering in need of humanitarian support. While civilian agencies need a certain level of security to operate, military organizations are usually not eager to share security-related information with civilian partners or discuss the nature of the threat and potential security mechanisms with civilians, but they prefer to act on their own expertise. Such a militarized mindset is not always conducive to building partnerships with civilian organizations, even more so when civilian and military threat perceptions differ considerably, as is often the case during infectious disease outbreaks and after hurricanes.[25]

In addition, military personnel are trained to see and counter security threats. Disasters and emergencies may indeed produce security threats but first and foremost create situations in which people require humanitarian aid and relief. A strict militarized focus on countering threats can impede the humanitarian work of civilians, fostering anger and frustration among affected populations who feel they are treated as criminals rather than victims, as happened in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.[26] An angry population, feeling slighted by its government and lacking basic services, might well avoid cooperation with public agencies and feel a need to take care of itself (e.g., taking food, water, and medicine from stores). In this way, a security approach becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, as a militarized response to a disaster produces the threats (e.g., looting) it wished to contain. Similarly, in EU border management, the militarized treatment of refugees reinforces their image as security threats to the general public, leading to further security measures, resulting in a vicious cycle of threat perceptions and militarized responses.[27] Such militarized responses to disasters estrange humanitarian and other civilian actors from the armed forces. The different approaches that civilian and military actors intuitively adopt when responding to situations of chaos and crisis are therefore potentially complicating their interactions.

Complexity of the Collaboration and Civil-Military Relations

Major obstacles to civil-military cooperation stem from three distinctions between both sides: they adopt different goals and principles, they compete over domains of responsibility, and they have incongruent ideas about the need for militarized approaches in emergencies and disasters. These obstacles influence the intentions and opportunities for cooperation between actors during the responses to disasters and emergencies as much as in expeditionary contexts. As such, it is important to recognize and accept that civil-military cooperation will always be characterized by an element of conflict.[28] This is not a problem that can simply be resolved, nor is it only problematical. In fact, it is precisely this element of conflict that will stimulate critical thinking, which is necessary

to generate innovation and creativity to solve the multifaceted and complex problems that these civil-military partnerships are facing.

Unfortunately, today's dominant response seems to consist of trying to reduce this complexity with an illusion of control: ever more detailed and stricter guidelines, definitions, and directives to achieve domain and goal consensus.[29] In the meantime, the discretionary space for operators in the field is reducing and spontaneous civil-military cooperative efforts in response to urgent needs are viewed with skepticism or reversed. This is a regrettable trend. The authors believe that it is important to consider and discuss the military's position in our societies by reflecting on its strengths in managing disasters and emergencies and debating the control mechanisms that are needed as its role in these new operational contexts are growing. This requires open dialogue, which will only be possible in a democratic country.

To do so, the authors move back to the key question in the research field of civil-military relations (CMR), which can be formulated as: How does a society ensure that its soldiers will do what its democratically elected leaders want? This remains an essential question to ask when military tasks are expanding, because we must consider how "those with weapons" should relate to "those without weapons."[30] Generally, two main camps have formed in response to this question.

Some scholars are in favor of *objective civilian control*, which is based on a strict separation between military and civilian spheres.[31] Military professionals are expected to strictly follow political decisions, but there is limited civilian interference in military affairs in turn. With such a strict separation, a society runs the risk of its military and civilian actors growing apart, developing ever-diverging views, and political leadership ignoring important military expertise and threat assessments. Other scholars, therefore, prefer *subjective civil control*, which is based on active military citizenship, through which soldiers are immersed in the civilian domain and socialized in such a way that they are willing to do what their society demands.[32] The type of civilian control that a society selects will affect the practices of civil-military cooperation. Whereas a too strict separation between civilian and military domains can endanger cooperation when necessary, overactive military citizenship can lead to a blurring of civilian and military areas of responsibility.

Societies differ in how they deal with this dilemma. Civil-military relations are influenced by national cultures and histories, and therein lies an explanation for the differences.[33] The most relevant model for civil-military relations in every society arises from a dialogue between soldiers, politicians, and civilians.[34] Over time, the importance of engaging in this dialogue has increased, particularly given that military roles are diversifying and military involvement in new contexts evokes novel questions on how to ensure civilian control. Indeed, although historically and culturally embedded views on the position of armed forces in society seem stable, they can adapt to specific local developments.[35] Terrorist threats, for example, appear to lead to a society temporarily and locally

accepting a rapprochement between civilian and military actors.[36] As a result of terrorist attacks, the national military footprint increased in many European countries, while there were few complaints about trespassing of domains or conflicting goals and principles. In addition, it seems that societies are much more eager to accept military contributions in large disasters, while similar involvement in smaller emergencies is eyed with suspicion. The unprecedented military activities during the COVID-19 crisis are testimony to this.[37] Even the nature of the situation matters: military involvement in wildfires and floods is generally perceived to be less threatening and concerns about a weakening of civilian control are mostly absent, but military operations in restoring public order or fighting crime remains very contentious.

Another interesting phenomenon occurs when a country agrees with the deployment of its armed forces abroad, while it would not accept such a heavy military footprint in its own country. Many Western countries, which are hesitant to allow for large-scale military deployments in their own country on historical and cultural grounds, appear to have fewer reservations in deploying troops abroad in similar crisis situations. Clearly, views on civil-military relations are not monolithic, but depend heavily on the type, nature, and context of military operations. In some cases, soldiers are strictly subordinated to civilian crisis organizations, while in other cases, the armed forces are enabled to take charge.

Civil-military cooperation efforts follow these preconceptions. When there are few reservations of military involvement in some emergencies or disasters, the armed forces may easily take a more proactive role and negotiate its role on a more equal footing with civilian counterparts. Conversely, when societies are hesitant about military interference in other emergencies and disasters, soldiers remain strictly subordinate to civilian organizations. Generally, the nature of civil-military interactions in this new area of cooperation needs to follow open dialogue. It is therefore of the utmost importance that civilians, soldiers, politicians, administrators, aid workers, companies, researchers, teachers, and students are aware of civil-military relationships and involved in designing the future of civil-military cooperation.

Recommendations and a Research Agenda

There are no universal guidelines or principles for civil-military cooperation, nor can areas of responsibility be definitively allocated to civilian and military partners. Instead, it is important to acknowledge that cooperation in crisis response is different from expeditionary civil-military cooperation in conflicts and wars. Just like some basic (albeit contested) guidelines, principles, and domain consensus on civil-military cooperation have emerged during the past decades in this latter context, national governments would do well to take the lead in (re)considering guidelines, principles, and domain consensus for civil-military cooperation in disaster and emergency response. Civilian and military roles and relations will inevitably need to differ, depending on the context of operations,

nature of the disaster, and its scale. Thus, it would be wise to invite relevant civilian crisis agencies and military units to discuss the outlines of their respective domains and the nature of the collaboration before crisis strikes on multiple governmental levels for diverse scenarios.

Still, all disasters are unique and dynamic. They produce unanticipated needs, lead to specific resource scarcities, and will see unforeseen organizations (e.g., private companies and community groups) getting involved. Much of the allocation of tasks and principles for cooperation will therefore have to be settled during the disaster or emergency. Colocation of civilian and military representatives in emergency operations centers and the exchange of liaisons are often crucial for resolving misunderstandings and rapidly coordinating organizational activities.[38]

After disasters, evaluation reports should not only focus on how well civilian and military partners communicated and coordinated during the event, but they should also consider the broader societal impact if the armed forces have taken on new or greater responsibilities during the disaster or emergency. The militarization of crisis response is not in the interest of armed forces, nor in that of civilian crisis organizations or society at large, and such effects can be monitored on a case-to-case basis.

In terms of research, attention from scholars for the military involvement in disasters and emergencies is slowly growing. These operational contexts, even more than expeditionary contexts, require civil-military collaboration, both because civilian actors are already active in these crisis settings and because military units typically operate under the supervision of civilian counterparts.

Yet, some aspects require further study. For example, it is crucial to find out how civilian and military actors coordinate and cooperate in different disasters and emergencies, because civil-military interactions may face varying complexities depending on the nature of the crisis, its size, or the context in which it takes place. At the moment, there is no research on whether earlier recommendations for improving civil-military cooperation, such as building trust through maintaining informal relations or exchanging liaisons, can be fruitfully transferred across cooperative efforts.[39] Research is also needed into how elements of immersion and separation can occur simultaneously and how civilian control varies in different contexts. The way in which historically and culturally formed traditions and sentiments influence power dynamics between civilian and military actors during cooperation practices deserves more attention in particular. It would be interesting to gain more insight into how military actors gain new tasks in emergency and disaster response and how civilian perceptions of military involvement as well as practices of civilian control evolve over time. By extension, it is useful to know to what extent civilian and military actors influence each other's approaches regarding the management of disasters and emergencies. This would enable an understanding of whether military involvement does inevitably militarize this domain or whether civilian organizations also affect military approaches and armed forces adopt civilian principles in turn.

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