

‘Was it good for you?’ Why Armies Engage in Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC)

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In his famous semi-autobiographical novel *Slaughterhouse Five*, which details in his unique style the terror bombing of Dresden, Kurt Vonnegut’s main character Billy Pilgrim, who has been abducted by aliens, asks a simple question, “Why?” The aliens look at Billy with a wry smile, saying, “What a *human* question. But there is no why. There is only doing; we are caught like flies in amber, caught in the moment.” This seems *a propos* of my topic today—Why do armies engage in civil-military cooperation? When I conducted my first interview for this research, I asked this question of an officer who had commanded a battle group in Bosnia. What I got was a very Vonnegut answer: “Very good question. I know I have a CIMIC cell, I just don’t know why.”

I must confess that given my background I approached the topic from a perspective on someone who understands the unique role of a military—that is, to use or threaten to use force in pursuit of political ends. So, in essence, my question was not so much one of why, so much as why bother. Let me say from the outset, then, that in what follows the military’s primary mission (the application of violence) is never in doubt. Furthermore, I will, in the interests of keeping things academically tidy, restrict my remarks to CIMIC in peace support operations.

Ni l’un, ni l’autre

If we consult the growing literature on peace support operations, written mostly in the wake of the “springtime of humanitarian intervention” that was the 1990s, we are struck by two competing claims to truth on this issue. The first, alluded to by MGen (ret’d) Mackenzie in his opening remarks, is that the Canadian Army does CIMIC because they are Canadian—intrinsically nice, sociobiologically programmed to be cooperative. We build schools and playgrounds and lead Cub Scout packs in Kosovo because we are Canadian. CIMIC is Katimivik by other means. All you have to do is watch a hockey game to see the flaws in this argument. This myth, though, is replicated around the world—just substitute ‘Scandinavian’ for Canadian and you could have the same conversation in Copenhagen or Stockholm.

The other dominant claim is that militaries do CIMIC out of sheer, naked self-interest, using each bag of corn delivered as a shield, increasing ‘force protection’ by

virtue of the impeccable logic of ‘they-won’t-bite-the-hands-that-feed-them’. This harkens back to a very cynical interpretation of previous ‘hearts and minds’ campaigns and we know how well those turned out.

If we are unsatisfied with either of these propositions, we need to dig deeper and ask what really underpins the not inconsiderable efforts that Canadian ground troops have engaged in around the world. In doing so, I have looked at the academic and professional literature and come up with a list of the ostensible reasons why militaries engage in civil-military cooperation efforts, whether they be projects, direct assistance, or cooperation with NGOs and aid agencies. Then I went out and asked CIMIC practitioners—the soldiers and officers on the ground—to find out how they saw the issue. I concentrated on those members of the Canadian Forces and other organisations that had been involved with our Bosnia and Kosovo missions. My initial research (and that is all that it is at this stage) have revealed some surprising findings: the emergence of a very sophisticated and nuanced approach to the use of CIMIC that defies any simplistic catchphrase or tag line description.

The Usual Suspects

Looking at the literature we can discern several reasons for conducting CIMIC operations on peace support operations. They range from the ridiculous to the sublime and can be grouped into two broad categories:

1. Exogenous reasons: that is, reasons that are external to military *per se*. They are political or social influences that are reflected in military operations. Within this category, the literature identifies two contributing factors:
 - a. Altruism: The very values, morals, and national attributes of the wider society permeate the military and lead it to engage in what has been called ‘military humanitarianism’; and
 - b. Evangelism: A corollary to altruism, evangelism connotes that merely helping those in need is not enough; instead, military members see the requirement to engage in CIMIC operations so they might spread the values of liberal democracy to others.
2. Endogenous Reasons: these reasons are intrinsic to the military force, and can be further broken down:
 - a. Institutional Reasons: reasons that promote the role of the military in a wider sense than that of the mission at hand; and
 - b. Operational Reasons: reasons that lead to the achievement of

mission success, how ever that may be defined.

I want to concentrate on the endogenous reasons for the remainder of this presentation.

Institutional Reasons

1. Hegemonic Strategy: The military does CIMIC to continue its role as a dominating element of Western imperialism. In the absence of combat operations, it carries out this domination through other means. Hugo Slim has labelled these ideas as 'geopolitical conspiracy theories', but this has not convinced some of its proponents to abandon it.
2. Substitution Theory: This is a related (but less sinister) concept to the hegemonic theory. Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a lack of good old-fashioned warfighting for the army to get involved with so it turns to the next best thing—peacekeeping. And as missions have progressed, armies are finding that even that is having less and less to do with combat or violence, so in search of something to fill their days, they seized upon CIMIC as a good activity.
3. Legal Obligation: This relative novel idea is beginning to emerge as a reason (perhaps as a form *post facto* rationalisation to appease the 'warfighters'). Taken from the Law of Armed Conflict, there is an obligation for an occupying force to provide for some kind of 'governance' of the local populous. It seems to me that this reason conflates CIMIC with civil administration, but perhaps the principle still applies.
4. Domestic Legitimacy: Because the army wants to look good at home, it portrays itself in a manner in keeping with what it perceives the public (and the politicians) want. 'CIMIC as photo op' provides an opportunity to bolster, boost, or at least maintain funding and political support. To some extent, whether or not this has been an animating reason for CIMIC, it has worked, at least as far as putting the image of 'peacekeeper' rather than 'soldier' into the public consciousness.
5. Maintenance of Morale: A slightly different, but equally 'selfish' reason that has been forwarded for the militaries CIMIC activities is that keeps the troops happy. Building a school beats pulling another shift as gate guard and it allows soldiers to feel as if they have 'made a difference'. Rather than conducting their umpteenth vehicle patrol, they can build a swing set and have the cockles of their own hearts warmed by the presence of something tangible having been achieved.

Operational Reasons

1. Force Protection: As mentioned above, this sees the logic of 'feeding hands

don't get bitten' working to guarantee that the military force. The thinking behind this as a motivation for engaging in CIMIC activities seems to be "feed a man today, and he won't put a daisy chain of landmines on your cleared route tomorrow".

2. Information Operations: Perhaps an indication of the army trying to regain the initiative in this matter, there is quite a bit being written about CIMIC being a part of a larger effort to conduct Information Operations. This perspective sees CIMIC activities as part of a campaign—along with psychological operations and public/media affairs—that aims at helping commanders 'shape their environment' and fulfil their missions by harnessing a wide variety of approaches. In this sense, CIMIC is a conduit for information: it allows military forces to gather information from the population, but is also facilitates the spreading of information. Militaries can tie messages to the CIMIC activities they conduct, either directly to those participating in them or to the wider community. These aspects—using 'aid' for intelligence and making 'aid' conditional (or at least targeting aid according to anything other than purely humanitarian criteria)—rub many of the militaries potential CIMIC partners the wrong way. Representatives of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), for instance, are insistent that funds dispersed by them are not to be used in any kind of conditional fashion.

Straight from the horse's mouth...

When I interviewed people involved with CIMIC, I suspected to uncover which of the above mentioned reasons applied in their experience. I was not disappointed to find elements of almost all of these explanations (with the exception of hegemonic domination theory and legal obligation). However, what did surprise me was the extent to which some people (and I must stress that this only applies to some) of the commanders and CIMIC officers had developed their own complex and highly sophisticated understanding of the concept and process of civil-military cooperation.

First of all, those commanders, both in initial deployments and mature missions, did not see the application of force as their only means of accomplishing their goal. Many had done their homework—reading and studying the various mandates and agreements, accords and frameworks, even examining Yugoslavian jurisprudence and penal codes. They strived to understand not just the symptoms of conflict in their areas of operations, but their causes and possible solutions, too.

Secondly, CIMIC was not seen as the 'junior partner' in the operation. As one officer put it, "Why the hell else were we there?" Despite rhetoric to the contrary, military commanders are able to understand the difference between 'warfighting' and 'peacekeeping'. Fluctuations between methods and

approaches happen skilfully and sometimes without nostalgic or derisive comments about interacting (indeed, cooperating) with civilians—national, international, and local.

Thirdly, and perhaps most interesting of all from the point of view of potential implications, some personnel saw the conflict, even ‘peace’ (or at least the idea of a ‘safe and secure environment’) has having more to do with the local populace and the community than it did with any ‘former warring faction’ or third party. The ‘defeat of an enemy’ was not seen as the definition of success for missions, but rather as a foregone conclusion. The very presence of a robust combat capable force was enough to ensure ‘victory’ at the level of the ‘armies’; NATO troops were a strong deterrent to attempts at openly breaching any agreements. However, this minimum (minimal) level of security—identified by the absence of open warfare—was easy to achieve, but sustainable solutions took more time and required different means. Just because these officers had hammers, they did not see everything as a nail. CIMIC operations were one way, in some people’s minds, of addressing the real roots of the conflict, and were conducted with this kind of approach in mind.

What is intriguing about these findings is that their genesis is difficult to trace. Almost no one whom I interviewed had consulting the CIMIC doctrine extant in the Canadian Forces, and those who did found that it was vague and ill-suited to the kinds of missions they were facing. Just exactly where the officers who saw CIMIC as a mechanism of conflict resolutions discovered the idea is unknown, but it is safe to assume that it was not the result of formal military training.

Where you are is where you end up

I’d like to close with a controversial claim. Looking at what a few officers said, and these are professional soldiers, with time in line units, trained for warfighting, not social work, it is possible to synthesis their statements and build a tentative portrait that might serve as conclusion, or at the very least a hypothesis that could serve as the starting point for further research. According to those interviewed (and I include here some short, verbatim excerpts) CIMIC is about “building credibility, building trust” and it “created a space”, “a dialogue with the community” so that commanders could determine “the needs of the population”. This created a certain “humility” which led some in the military to ask “who is more important—the army or the people [they] are trying to help?” and to look for ways to involve to involve themselves in the “governance” and “preservation of “human dignity”.

A synthesis of these kinds of statements, without putting words in anyone’s mouth, gets us to a point very similar to the concept of, dare I say it, human security—the last place where anyone in the Canadian army thought they were headed, or would even feel comfortable admitting. But maybe, if we can

escape from the 'amber' of the moment, we can see that it's not such a bad place to be after all.

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Notes:

The findings and conclusions made in this paper are based on a series of initial interviews conducted in Washington, DC; Shrivenham and London, UK; and Kingston and Ottawa, Ontario over the period June to November 2002. Until the entire study is completed, the remarks of those interviewed will remain non-attributed and anonymous.

Hugo Slim, "The Stretcher and the Drum: Civil-Military Relations in Peace Support Operations," in J. Ginifer *Beyond the Emergency* (London: Frank Cass, 1997), p. 137.

For a fuller description of this argument, see Michael Pugh, Civil-Military Relations in the Kosovo Crisis: An Emerging Hegemony?" *Security Dialogue*. 31.2, 2000, pp. 231-232 and J. Barry and A. Jeffreys, "A Bridge Too Far: Aid Agencies and the military in humanitarian response". Humanitarian Practice Network Paper #37. (London: Overseas Development Institute), pp. 6-9.

For an indicative example, see Cliff Trollope, "Manoeuvre Warfare and Mission Command in Peace Support Operations: A Practical Application," *The Army Doctrine and Training Bulletin* 5.1 (2002), pp. 32-37.

For the most part, Human Security refers to a philosophical standpoint that may inform policies of intervention. However, recent scholarship is examining the concept from the point of view of what security is, and therefore, how a process of conflict resolution might evolve *during and after* an intervention has taken place. It is not the intention of this paper to advocate a foreign policy motivated from a Human Security position, but rather to suggest that what is happening 'on the ground' is similar or parallel to a Human Security approach. See Matt McDonald, "Human Security and the Continuation of Security," *Global Security* 16.3 (2002), pp.277-295. For a critique of Human Security, see Roland Paris, "Human Security: Paradigm Shift or Hot Air?" *International Security* 26.2 (2001), pp. 87-102.