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Humanitarian Assistance and Future War

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Introduction

The *2018 National Defense Strategy* (NDS) prioritizes strategic competition with China and Russia.¹ Consequently, defense practitioners have devoted increasing attention to contemplating future conflict with great-power competitors. Underlying issues that require more attention include the impact that future high-intensity warfare will have on civilians, the roles that international organizations (IOs) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) will undertake in conflict settings and the implications to the U.S. joint force's efforts in pursuing future military objectives.

This paper addresses these topics by describing relevant issues in humanitarian affairs. It also identifies useful ways for defense practitioners to think about the relationship between military and humanitarian affairs.

What Defense Practitioners Need to Know

Defense practitioners should understand four primary things about humanitarian affairs: the aggregate humanitarian needs that exist worldwide; the established multilateral system that facilitates international cooperation on humanitarian assistance; the factors underpinning the policy debate regarding what the U.S. government's role should be in alleviating suffering abroad; and actual U.S. policies on foreign humanitarian assistance.

The Needs That Exist Worldwide

According to United Nations (UN) Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock, there are over 130 million people in need of humanitarian assistance and protection.² Many of them are victims of armed conflict. In some cases, they are innocent bystanders whose lives or property are adversely affected by armed conflict—as is the case for many Ukrainians affected by the Russo-Ukrainian War. In other cases, they are targets of deliberate campaigns by armed groups to forcibly displace or cause physical suffering to civilians—as is the case with the stateless Rohingya that have been forced from their homes and/or victimized in Burma's Northern Rakhine State.

The International Humanitarian Response System

The international community cooperates to provide protection and assistance to civilian conflict victims largely through independent IOs and NGOs that operate according to the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. These principles make it possible for humanitarian organizations to maintain distinction from warring parties and to thereby mitigate security risks and gain access to areas of need. The principles are recognized in international humanitarian law and in UN General Assembly resolutions.³

Armed conflict generates substantial impacts for civilians and, as a result, humanitarian IOs and NGOs must operate in conflict settings to accomplish their missions and to uphold their mandates. The U.S. military's ability to achieve sustainable strategic outcomes therefore requires a better understanding of the relationship

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among armed conflict, humanitarian needs and humanitarian response. Sometimes, defense practitioners turn their attention to humanitarian affairs only when contemplating peace operations or post-conflict stabilization campaigns. However, humanitarian affairs are even more important to consider while planning for future interstate conflict and decisive operations.

The Policy Debate

Many people question the relevance of humanitarian suffering abroad to U.S. foreign policy interests. It is difficult to dismiss the moral dimension of this suffering, but it is fair to skeptically consider its connection with more practical U.S. national interests.

Skeptics argue that foreign humanitarian interventions are slippery slopes and that by trying to do good things, the United States risks becoming embroiled in situations abroad that can lead to deeper commitments. Eventually, the character of a limited, humanitarian U.S. military intervention can transform into a different kind of war, where military objectives and end states become unclear. The classic case cited by those that adhere to these views is the U.S. military intervention in Somalia in the early 1990s.

On the other side of the argument, advocates argue that U.S. foreign policy interests support American leadership in humanitarian affairs. Humanitarian relief helps stabilize fragile countries, thereby generating conditions where development and capacity building can occur. Most advocates of humanitarian assistance favor working through the State Department (DoS) and U.S. Agency of International Development (USAID) rather than military channels. The military can in turn play a supporting role when situations arise that require more than what civilian humanitarian efforts can accomplish independently.

These two ends of the spectrum provide a useful framework for U.S. defense practitioners to engage in meaningful civil-military dialogue to work on policy-level coordination and to advance the national decisionmaking processes. A deep understanding of the policy debate is essential to articulating the risk and potential rewards of various options. Once the national leadership sets a course, the practical task transforms from dialogue to operationalizing policy.

Current Policy

The *2017 National Security Strategy* (NSS) advocates for U.S. leadership in humanitarian assistance:

The United States will continue to lead the world in humanitarian assistance. Even as we expect others to share responsibility, the United States will continue to catalyze international responses to man-made disasters . . . We will support displaced people close to their homes to help meet their needs until they can safely and voluntarily return home.⁴

The 2017 NSS also articulates a requirement to exert U.S. leadership in multilateral forums. Humanitarian assistance in the modern world is designedly a multilateral effort; the stance articulated below constitutes policy guidance:

Authoritarian actors have long recognized the power of multilateral bodies and have used them to advance their interests and limit the freedom of their own citizens. If the United States cedes leadership of these bodies to adversaries, opportunities to shape developments that are positive for the United States will be lost . . . The United States will prioritize its efforts in those organizations that serve American interests, to ensure that they are strengthened and supportive of the United States, our allies, and our partners. Where existing institutions and rules need modernizing, the United States will lead to update them.⁵

In practice, the United States is by far the largest single-country funder of humanitarian assistance to populations in need worldwide. The international humanitarian system would not function without U.S. funding. Like-minded U.S. allies, such as Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia, look to the United States for leadership.

Within the U.S. government, two organizations share the lead in overseas humanitarian assistance. The first—the State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration—has the lead on assistance and protection for refugees, conflict victims, vulnerable migrants, asylum-seekers and stateless persons. The second is USAID’s Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance, which focuses on disaster and food assistance. These

organizations operationalize U.S. national policy for humanitarian affairs. As part of their responsibilities, they coordinate with the Department of Defense (DoD).

Ways to Think about the Relationship between Humanitarian and Military Efforts

Defense practitioners recognize that humanitarian issues, including mass migration, refugee situations, civilian casualties and natural disasters, are important facets of operational environments. However, there is a tendency to frame the relationship between humanitarian affairs and military force in distinct and conflicting ways. Depending on the operational context, the way that the relationship is framed insinuates dramatically different meanings. Practitioners' dialogue, debate and coordination is thus often unsatisfying at best and counterproductive at worst. The following framework examples illustrate this problem.

First, the phrase *civil-military coordination* often refers to official requests from DoS to DoD to support civilian-led disaster or humanitarian relief. Under most circumstances, DoS and USAID undertake humanitarian assistance without DoD assistance. However, they sometimes pursue DoD assistance on the grounds of military necessity. The relationship between humanitarian affairs and military employment in this context is straightforward. However, the applicability of this context is also relatively rare.

Second, an alternative context occurs much more frequently but is much less straightforward. This is when military and humanitarian organizations operate in shared spaces but pursue separate missions. For example, when a military organization applies force in the pursuit of military objectives, a humanitarian organization often arrives to provide relief to civilian conflict victims. Under these circumstances, coordination and deconfliction occurs on a relatively ad hoc basis and on the ground at the point of delivery.

Third, many current U.S. military practitioners' perceptions of humanitarian affairs is profoundly influenced by their formative experiences in low-intensity conflict settings such as some that have occurred in Iraq and Afghanistan. These experiences spawned a tendency to conflate humanitarian relief with military forces' interaction with civilian populations in and around conflict zones. Most military practitioners recognize that other U.S. government tools are better suited to fill this role. However, in their formative experiences, they learned that apart from DoD, U.S. expeditionary capacity was woefully inadequate, meaning that DoD had to undertake these missions by default. This perspective is reflected by recent DoD initiatives to frequently employ civil affairs capabilities and to seek expanded authorities to undertake foreign humanitarian and stabilization operations.

A fourth framework linking humanitarian and military affairs is best illustrated by the employment of the phrase *humanitarian intervention* to legitimize a military option or deployment. Such a characterization enables planners and decisionmakers to garner more support from domestic or international audiences for whatever potential intervention might be imminent.

A fifth framework is the principle that we should deliberately and consistently separate humanitarian and military activities. Military force under this framework is inherently political and so must remain distinct from apolitical humanitarian responses. Without clear distinction, recipients of humanitarian assistance might perceive that aid workers are pursuing a political agenda. Even worse, combatants might treat aid workers as legitimate targets of military force.

Other defense and security practitioners view humanitarian assistance as inherently undesirable, because humanitarian relief can delay conflict resolution. Under this sixth framework, the military and humanitarian actors are working at cross purposes. By alleviating suffering, humanitarian activities remove combatants' incentives to concede on the grounds that the costs of protracted conflict outweigh any potential benefits. This tension is particularly reticent under circumstances of limited interventions, where combatants seek a decision while using minimum force. To the extent that humanitarian efforts blunt the effects generated, those intervening powers must then increase their level of effort or accept increasing levels of risk.

A final example is the belief that under extreme future circumstances, humanitarian needs will far outstrip the capacity of the international humanitarian community. This would be the case in a particularly explosive conflict or disaster on a scale we have not experienced in the modern era. If this were to happen, or if the humanitarian system otherwise unraveled, there is the likelihood that the international community would tap into the robust and available military capacities to perform humanitarian activities.

The relationship between humanitarian affairs and the use of military force is steeped in ambiguity and, as a result, practitioner dialogue, debate and coordination suffer. Professional discourse can improve if participants define upfront which of the frameworks they are talking about. Doing so will lead to more productive and substantive discussion and, more important, increase the possibility that the necessary coordination meets the needs of the relevant parties.

Conclusion

The 2018 NDS stimulated attention by defense practitioners on the character of future interstate wars. This attention requires a better focus on the impact that future warfare will have on civilians, the roles that IOs and NGOs will undertake in future conflict settings and the implications to the U.S. joint force's efforts in pursuing future military objectives. Defense practitioners should know certain practical aspects of humanitarian affairs and should determine how to think about the relationship between humanitarian affairs and military force.

This is important particularly because the United States pursues humanitarian relief and military force through very different structures and strategies. The impacts of these two instruments of national power, however, converge suddenly on the ground at delivery. Defense practitioners should recognize—based on the parallel but uncoordinated tracks of U.S. instruments of foreign policy—the importance of situationally understanding nonmilitary tools. With improved situational understanding of the impact that military force has on civilians, and the ways in which the U.S. government operates to mitigate this impact, U.S. defense practitioners can better support the generation of sustainable strategic outcomes.



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Notes

- ¹ Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.
- ² United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Global Humanitarian Overview 2019*, 6.
- ³ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *OCHA on Message: Humanitarian Principles*, June 2012, https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/OOM-humanitarianprinciples_eng_June12.pdf.
- ⁴ The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>, 42.
- ⁵ The White House, *National Security Strategy*, 40.



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