Three Block Wars and Humanitarianism:

Theory, Policy and Practice

Traditionally, deployed troops have accomplished a wide range of tasks while intervening in armed conflicts. Combat operations, interpositional activities, as well as assisting civilians in meeting basic needs are all part of a military's mandate. It is not a new phenomenon for troops to rebuild schools, dig wells, give food and medical aid, manage refugee camps, evacuate civilians, as well as 'remove' insurgents, separate warring factions, uphold peace agreements, and provide security to civilian organizations. What is new however, is the term "three-block war" (3BW) to codify these activities. Developed by Gen Charles Krulak in the late 1990s, the three blocks are meant to symbolize the different types of activities, where combat fighting occurs on one city block; the separation of warring factions on another city block; and the provision of humanitarian aid to affected civilian populations on a third city block. The framework, or design of 3BW offers the military a framework for the variety of their activities in a way that makes sense to a warfare-centric profession.

3BW is the term used to categorize and explain the features of contemporary armed warfare. As combat fighting occurs on one city block, the same military may be engaged in separating warring factions on another city block, while at the same time delivering humanitarian aid to war-affected civilian populations on a third city block; this last block has traditionally been thought of as the humanitarian space in which such organizations also operate. It is within this last "block" that overlapping roles create significant tensions and complications between military and humanitarian actors.

The so-called third block was traditionally accepted as the purview of humanitarian practitioners. Yet, humanitarian/civilian practitioners are not considered in this despite international agreement for the need for integrated missions which involve all stakeholders. Certain humanitarian players have argued that the codification of humanitarian activities is a way for militaries to take over the disbursement of humanitarian aid. The result is among some of the humanitarian community a sense of defensiveness about their traditional role. For other members of the humanitarian community, there is concern about the abrogation of traditional humanitarian principles which they view as being in jeopardy with the 3BW practices. The general argument put forward by humanitarian practitioners is that the performance of humanitarian activities by military forces that are parties to the conflict actually reduces the "humanitarian space" for humanitarian organizations to conduct relief work. It has been proposed that recipients of aid and other parties to the conflict may find it difficult to distinguish between providers of humanitarian assistance and combatants. They feel as if militaries are moving into their post-conflict, post-disaster areas of expertise, and need to defend the humanitarian space.

Recent reports indicate that the level of frustration from humanitarian practitioners towards the military is on the rise due in part to the 3BW framework, which doctrinally excludes them from the very space in which they work. This event will provide a unique opportunity for humanitarian and defence stakeholders to discuss in depth the limitations, overlap, inconsistencies, and opportunities within the 3BW framework, and to determine potential paths forward which are inclusive, robust, and sophisticated.

The debate around 3BW is framed largely by defence and security studies. Opportunities for formal discourse between leading thinkers from both military and humanitarian perspectives remain absent as a result.

Due to rapid changes in the structure of violent armed conflict, actors in the humanitarian and military fields are challenged to assess how they interact in this landscape. The Pearson Peacekeeping Centre (PPC) and the Humber International Development Institute (HIDI) are jointly addressing emerging concerns between military and humanitarian organizations by providing a forum for consultation.

Multidisciplinary participants, selected by the PPC and HIDI Steering Committee, will be invited to attend a consultation in Ottawa, Canada from September 12-14, 2006. The two-day consultation will consist of small working groups and plenary sessions.

The consultation will contribute to the wider dialogue of a 3BW framework by bringing together theorists, practitioners and policy-makers from a variety of disciplines whose expertise inform this complicated and important issue.

The main event outcomes will be published in an event report and distributed to NGOs, government departments, policymakers and academics. The report will be available on the PPC website.

Selected topics from the consultation will be drawn on for content, depth of analysis and contribution to the subject matter. Key papers will be compiled into a peer-edited book, jointly published by HIDI and the PPC.
The book will be available in electronic and printed format.

In addition, event outcomes may be published within PPC occasional papers and other publications. All publications will be made available through the PPC World Reference and Research Database.

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