

The U.S. Military's Expanding Role in Foreign Assistance

Problem

The U.S. Armed Forces may provide important lift capacity during large-scale humanitarian crises. But the military's expanded involvement in humanitarian and development activities has compromised the security of NGO workers, while also having uncertain impact on the lives of vulnerable people.

Recommendations & Actions

In humanitarian and development work, differences in mandate, expertise and training make the military a poor substitute for civilian experts from the U.S. government, the United Nations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Military involvement in providing development assistance does not increase security and stability. In some cases it has been counterproductive, increasing risks to aid workers and undermining sustainable development efforts. The U.S. military should focus on its mandate and strengths, including combat operations, security sector reform, maritime security and military-to-military training.

U.S. Armed Forces should, as a rule, be used in disaster relief as a last resort in situations requiring large lift capacity, under civilian humanitarian leadership. The military's development and humanitarian efforts should be limited in geographic and programmatic scope. There should be close collaboration with U.S. State Department and USAID specialists to ensure that the aid provided is effective and aligns with broader foreign policy and development goals.

Congress and the administration should:

1. Conduct a thorough review of the appropriateness of Department of Defense authorities in the humanitarian and development realm. Clear parameters for its operations should be developed in the National Defense Authorization Act to reduce duplication and overlap with civilian agencies and ensure that any benefits are in line with the significant costs.
2. Rebuild civilian personnel and resources at the Department of State, and particularly development and humanitarian professionals at USAID, by providing substantial support to their operational capacity in the international affairs budget. The overall aim should be to ensure that civilian agencies have the mandates, funding and personnel needed to lead U.S. diplomatic, humanitarian, and development efforts.

Results

These steps will foster a means of U.S. humanitarian response that is in keeping with internationally agreed principles and standards, while addressing the imbalance among the three pillars of national security: defense, diplomacy and development. The recommendations will eliminate duplicative Department of Defense programs, thus freeing up military resources for tasks critical to its core mission.

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Background

Since 1998, the Department of Defense (DoD) share of U.S. official development assistance (ODA) has increased from 3.5 percent to 22 percent. During that time, the DoD has dramatically expanded its relief, development and reconstruction assistance through programs such as Section 1207/1210, the Commanders' Emergency Response Program (CERP) and the Combatant Commanders' Initiative Fund, as well as through the activities of the regional combatant commands and the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs).

NGOs take a different approach to relief and development than the military. NGOs generally make a long-term commitment to a situation, acquire a deep understanding of local societies, employ largely local staff and design projects with community participation and cultural sensitivity to ensure sustainability. As a result, instead of using weapons or armed guards for their security, NGOs rely on an "acceptance" model that rests upon perceived impartiality and the trust of the communities in which they work.¹ In conflict situations, NGO staff generally need to keep their distance from the military unless they deem cooperation necessary to address the needs of vulnerable populations. This is not an expression of hostility to the military, but instead a necessary and vital measure for their security, which depends on the community's trust in their neutrality and independence from political and military actors.

Issues

The impact of this expansion on the work of humanitarian NGOs has been significant. The primary focus of military efforts is on security objectives that its humanitarian and development efforts presumably advance. Quick-impact projects and other force protection activities motivated by security objectives, however, often undermine sustainable development projects and relationships built by NGO workers. Well-intended projects may have negative consequences and are often unsustainable due to the military's short-term goals and quick turnover rate. Relief activities by the military can also compromise the security of NGO staff in or near conflict areas by blurring the lines between humanitarian and military personnel.

Further, the actual impact on vulnerable people of DoD's humanitarian and development work is at best unclear. The February 2012 Government Accountability Office report on the humanitarian and development assistance efforts of the U.S. military concluded that problems of coordination with civilian agencies, poor data management and limited program evaluations plagued these efforts and there is little evidence of positive impact.² Value for taxpayer dollars of DoD efforts is questionable

and the security value is unproven. Evaluations by as diverse institutions as the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the U.K. Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst and Tufts University have found that aid driven by short-term military objectives in Afghanistan was ineffective and even counterproductive in terms of military objectives.³ Projects often fuelled corruption and the war economy, undermining wider strategic objectives.

Since 2004 InterAction members have been in a regular dialogue with senior officials of the Department of Defense through a civil-military working group under the auspices of the United States Institute of Peace. The landmark achievement of this working group is agreement on *Guidelines for Relations Between U.S. Armed Forces and Non-Governmental Humanitarian Organizations in Hostile or Potentially Hostile Environments*.⁴ They include protocols for communications and conduct when U.S. military forces and NGOs are operating in the same space. They are perhaps best known for the agreement ensuring that U.S. military personnel wear uniforms when conducting relief activities to avoid being mistaken for non-governmental humanitarian organization representatives. In addition, they recommend that, to the extent practical, humanitarian relief personnel avoid traveling in U.S. Armed Forces vehicles, with the exception of liaison personnel. While the guidelines represent a significant advance in mutual understanding at the leadership level, substantial efforts are still required to insert them in the U.S. military's doctrine and training.

Conclusion

The most useful humanitarian role for the military is in responding to natural disasters where their logistical resources, air and marine transport capabilities, and engineering services fill important gaps. The agreed international principle is that such efforts should be mounted when there is genuine need due to lack of civilian capacity, and only then under civilian coordination, whether by the U.S. Chief of Mission in country, USAID, or the United Nations during a large-scale international response.

1 See the Acceptance Research website at <http://acceptanceresearch.org> for more information.

2 "Humanitarian and Development Assistance: Project Evaluations and Better Information Sharing Needed to Manage the Military's Efforts," United States Government Accountability Office, February 2012.

3 "Winning Hearts and Minds? Examining the Relationship between Aid and Security in Afghanistan," Tufts University Feinstein International Center. <http://sites.tufts.edu/feinstein/2012/winning-hearts-and-minds>.

4 Available online at <http://www.usip.org/publications/guidelines-relations-between-us-armed-forces-and-nghos-hostile-or-potentially-hostile-envi>.



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