

The Role of European Military's in International Disaster Relief: NATO and EU Capabilities and Capacities

*Julian Lindley-French*¹

“Japan is one of the best-prepared countries in the world to cope with disasters, but the sheer magnitude of this earthquake and the tsunami means that international assistance is needed. We are responding to the call as urgently as possible...Europe’s civil protection system has been fully mobilised to help Japan overcome this immense tragedy.”

Kristalina Georgieva, EU Commissioner for International Cooperation, Humanitarian aid and Crisis Response.²

The Strategic Context of European Military Action in International Disaster Relief

The tsunami and associated tragedies suffered by the Japanese people in 2011 was a wake-up call for Europeans. Europe was simply unable to offer much more support than the rhetorical. The Japanese people had the right to expect more from its European friends. Whilst the EU mobilised the Civil Protection System much more could have been done to alleviate the suffering of the Japanese people.

This article considers the role of European militaries in international disaster relief, with a specific focus on NATO and the EU. The emphasis will be on the relationship between civil-emergency planning at both organisations and the operationalization of the so-called Comprehensive Approach, the generation, provision and application of civil-military services, expertise, structures and resources over time and distance in partnership with host-nations, host regions, allied and partner governments and institutions, both governmental and non-governmental and operating normally under United Nations mandate.

Equally, the role of Europe’s military is necessarily set against the back-drop of an operational tempo and military task-list that over the past decade has done

¹ Eisenhower Professor of Defence Strategy at the Netherlands Defence Academy.

² “Japan earthquake/tsunami: the Commission activates Europe’s civil protection system,” March 11, 2011, <<http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?Reference=IP/11/312>>.

much to denude European forces from an ability to intervene beyond Europe's borders whatever the imperative. The sheer scale of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, allied to the profound difficulties faced by European economies has led to an intervention fatigue that afflicts stabilisation and reconstruction operations in particular, but also extends to the use of military forces in disaster relief. The result is a capability-capacity crunch in which stretched Canadian and NATO European forces are too often forced to make a choice between small, lethal and expensive professional military forces or larger, cheaper, more ponderous stabilisation and reconstruction forces.

Attempts have been made to adopt Comprehensive, Integrated or Whole-of-Government Approaches to generate more effect across the crisis spectrum but such efforts have only met with partial success, either because of profound cultural differences between civilian and military personnel, even within a single government, the lack of sufficient deployable civilians to offset the preponderance of military personnel, or the simple lack of forces and resources. Europe's armed forces remain the centre of planning and deployability upon which all operations are dependent, including international disaster relief, and they are wearing out at an alarming rate—both people and equipment.

The Alliance effort in Afghanistan NATO could have delivered far more forces and resources to theatre (both civil and military) at far less cost had political and military cohesion been tighter. This dilemma extends to the role of military forces in disaster relief where too often an imbalance in both political will, capabilities and capacities undermines effective and sustained deployments and the very principle of interventionism across the crisis spectrum in all but the most extreme of cases. And yet, the ability to conduct such operations remains and will remain the very essence of both NATO and the EU.

NATO, the EU and International Disaster Relief

Perhaps it is a mark of Afghanistan-fatigue that the only oblique reference is made in the 2010 Strategic Concept to NATO's role in international disaster relief as a commitment to enhance integrated civilian-military planning throughout the crisis spectrum. The emphasis of NATO's vision is very much with preventing, deterring and responding to man-made threats. And yet, NATO's role in the aftermath of the 2009 Pakistan earthquake and 2010 floods demonstrated the importance of an

effective military response to humanitarian crises, not simply because of the military resources that the Alliance could bring to bear, but the civil-military planning power NATO was able to generate.

In line with the EU the Alliance relies on its members to provide the bulk of forces and resources for what is termed Civil Emergency Planning (CEP) through the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Co-ordination Centre (EADRCC). To that end the Alliance acts as an information brokerage for its member nations collecting, analysing and sharing information about national planning structures and resources. The aim is to ensure member nations are best prepared to cope with the consequences of crisis, disaster or conflict.

Both the Alliance and the Union see all such dangers as a threat to security and stability and whilst the onus remains on the nations, there is acceptance that many disasters will require more than national responses. NATO and the EU also acknowledge the primacy of the UN's role in co-ordinating international disaster relief, but both NATO and the EU see their role as a) effective first responders; and b) key to the rapid use of civilian and military resources.

For the Alliance effective civil-military co-operation is critical. To foster such a partnership civil emergency planning in NATO focuses on five areas: civil support for Article 5 operations in support of collective defence; support for non-Article 5 operations, such as crisis response; support for national authorities in civil emergencies, support for national authorities in the protection of populations against the effects of weapons of mass destruction; and co-operation with Partner countries in preparing for dealing with disasters.

Although the EU mechanisms are not the same as those of NATO a similar approach is adopted. Like NATO the Union sees its role as one of co-ordination to ensure emergency relief and assistance can be delivered rapidly. That includes a military component. Central to the effort is the EU's Monitoring and Information Centre (MIC). This is a system that constantly monitors world-wide for disasters and emergencies and co-ordinates all EU resources, be the cause natural or man-made. The European Commission would like to see the MIC transformed into an operational headquarters, but given the costs associated with such a step change and the pressures on national budgets such a development is not likely in the near future. That said, in October 2010 the Commission put forward detailed proposals to reinforce the EU's disaster response capacity, focused mainly on the creation of a voluntary pool made up of Member States' experts and assets to be placed on

standby for deployment in EU operations. Additionally, the Commission is seeking to establish a European Emergency Response Centre (EERC) to co-ordinate all civilian aspects of EU disaster response.

Central to the EU effort is the Civil Protection Mechanism which was triggered by the 2011 tsunami in Japan. This is a co-operation mechanism designed to enhance the co-ordination of civil protection assistance during emergencies with the focus on early intervention. The Mechanism is designed to respond to all manner of emergencies ranging from the natural, technological, radiological or environmental and includes responding to diverse challenges such as maritime pollution or the consequences of an act of terrorism. It is also designed to respond to disasters both within the EU and beyond its borders.

The Mechanism is similar to that of the operational planning role of NATO's Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) and combines nine elements and actions much of which base their systems on the pioneering work done by the British under the rubric of the Comprehensive or Integrated Approach. The focus is on providing information about where resources, personnel and equipment might exist rather than having direct control over such capabilities, with the emphasis on enabling rather than leading.

The nine elements and actions can be thus summarised: the rapid compilation of an inventory of assistance and intervention teams available in EU countries; early establishment of training programmes for intervention teams; workshops, seminars and pilot projects on the main aspects of intervention; early establishment of assessment and co-ordination teams; early establishment of a Monitoring and Information Centre (MIC) and a common communication and information system; early establishment of a Common Emergency Communication and Information System (CECIS) between the MIC and key participating EU member-states; development of detection and early warning systems; access to equipment and transport by providing information on the resources available from EU countries and identifying resources available from other sources; and making (if necessary) additional transport resources available.

EU member—states are required to identify intervention teams within twelve hours of a request for assistance, select experts who could take part, develop what are called 'interoperable intervention modules' so that the resources of more than one member-state can be employed, and consider additional specialised assistance that might be needed.

Both recent stabilisation and reconstruction operations and military interventions in the event of disasters have demonstrated that however well-elaborated on paper such planning the lack of critical capabilities such as fast strategic lift or heavy lift helicopters can lead to failure. Be it NATO's core defence function, effective crisis management or the implied disaster relief role under co-operative security all NATO's forces aspire to be both deployable and manoeuvrable. This is of course the essence of effective disaster relief and response.

In that light both NATO and the EU are grappling with how best to improve the role of armed forces in international disaster relief. For Europeans this causes a particular set of challenges as such forces are by and large the same be they deployed under a NATO or EU flag. Both institutions also seek to develop critical capability and capacity areas such as the reorientation of staffs towards planning, training and exercising; ensuring all forces offered for missions are deployable and sustainable; effective interoperability based on affordable C4ISR; implementation and operationalization of the Comprehensive Approach with a systematic development project to that end; and conflict prevention. And yet all of this costs money.

Capability and Affordability in Disaster Relief

Effective interoperability between armed forces and between military and civilian personnel is the key to effective and timely international disaster relief. Indeed, if there was one strategic 'product' which is the unique selling point of NATO it is interoperability standards, particularly those pertaining to command and control and all NATO strategic and deployable headquarters are considering how best to enhance that 'product' in light of the Strategic Concept.³

Equally, because intervention is so expensive the issue of cost must be confronted. For most Europeans the most important strategic event in Europe in 2010 was neither the Strategic Concept nor the Franco-British defence treaty, important though they were, but rather the Irish debt crisis and the threat of financial and economic contagion in the Eurozone. Sound strategic judgement will thus be

³ The nearest the 2010 NATO Strategic Concept comes to addressing international military disaster relief is when it states, "Key environmental and resource constraints, including health risks, climate change, water scarcity and increasing energy needs will further shape the future security environment in areas of concern to NATO and have the potential to significantly affect NATO planning and operations." See "Strategic Concept For the Defence and Security of The Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation," November 2010 (Brussels: NATO).

much more difficult to achieve if the right investment choices on critical capabilities pertinent to effective disaster relief are to be made.

Affordability will be as important as capability. To that end, new command partnerships and operational concepts will need to be forged between NATO's Allied Command Operations (ACO) and Allied Command Transformation (ACT) and beyond to both the US EUCOM and the EU if that essential balance between capability, strategy and cost is to be realised. This would place much emphasis on planning synergies. And yet, it is revealing that the British Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) and the forthcoming French and German defence cuts will be announced without any due reference to either NATO's Strategic Concept or the EU's Force Catalogue. Therefore, unless European forces are prepared systematically to support international disaster relief the effort is likely to remain fragmented, poorly funded and reflect a parochial approach to force planning that will badly weaken both Alliance and Union capabilities and capacities for intervention in disaster relief.

Effective disaster relief also requires from the outset key civilians to be involved in interventions so that all aspects of mission success are intrinsic to force and operational planning. Embedding civilians in the military command chain is proving hard whereas the exact opposite problem is faced by the EU, where the culture is overwhelmingly civilian. This tends to lead to stove-piped thinking which is inimical to effective and timely disaster relief. Indeed, civil-military creativity and synergy is particularly crucial to effect on the ground as situations are invariably more complex than planning can predict.

To that end, both the Alliance and the Union need to re-consider the relationship between the tail and teeth to empower critical civil-military partnerships. This in turn will demand much more focus on experimental risk and innovative training and education. Indeed, if Europeans cannot afford new intervention capabilities to support effective disaster relief then necessarily the focus will need to be on enhancing the quality of Europe's deployed people and the utility and effectiveness of command chains and logistics trains. At the very least, both NATO and the EU need a new approach to exercising, training and simulation built upon a new model of security education aimed at exploiting Europe's comparative advantages—technology and trained people, both civilian and military.

A much more systematic approach will also be needed to pooling key enablers vital to effective international disaster relief. Indeed, in the space where European austerity meets grand strategy (for both are implicit in the NATO Strategic Concept

and the EU Lisbon Treaty) critical capabilities for the bigger European powers means more synergy over their development and use (hence the Franco-British treaty) whilst for the smaller powers some form of command integration will be required that goes beyond pooling C-17s/A-400Ms, or counting operational hours and their like. That will need working up and not just between small militaries.

A shift in the balance of forces will also be needed. With 75% of the world's population living less than 100 kilometres from the sea there is a need to move Europe's militaries away from a continental strategy, which has been exacerbated by operations in Afghanistan. This is equally applicable to international disaster relief, as the 2006 and 2011 tsunamis demonstrate. It is thus likely that NATO/EU navies will have to lead much of the post 2010 NATO Strategic Concept/EU force reform programmes because intervention in a globalised context will likely place a renewed emphasis on the littoral or what the British call operating at the seams. This in turn will reinforce the need for enhanced jointery with no single service owning the land, the sea or the air with civilians having as much say over the 'order of battle' as the military.

That will require European navies in particular to make a choice between Corbett and Mahan. At present Europeans have too few, large very expensive ships to exercise sea control. Effective security operations (of which disaster relief is an important part) would suggest the need for a few large, floating command hubs, allied to a greater number of smaller hulls linked into the big picture via a situational awareness model based on affordable and flexible networks reinforced by a much tighter set of relationships with the respective merchant marines of European nations. Such a reformed extended structure would also need to rely on much greater common operational funding to cover the costs of disaster relief. Today, costs lie where they fall and that is neither fair nor does it work.

NATO's Challenge

NATO's immediate challenge will be thus to re-orient away from enlargement to engagement of which effective disaster relief is a vital part. This in turn will require a complete overhaul of tail to teeth force elements through a series of post Strategic Concept momentum generators that emphasise affordable and critical capabilities and capacities.

First, the Strategic Concept needs to be employed as effective planning guidance

for all allies. This will lead to better decisions over the balance to be struck between protection and projection based on an Alliance-wide strategic assessment capability. Rapid intervention and partnership are the critical elements of international disaster relief over time and distance. Second, the NATO Response Force (NRF) should be seen NATO's first response force in the event of a disaster and used as such. This could be as part of a rotational pool of forces synchronised to also support EU Battle Groups. Strengthen the high-readiness forces (HRFs) and deployable headquarters with reformed processes so that they can better and more quickly deploy.

Command structures need to be reinforced during disaster relief through access to new knowledge communities that can better inform decision-making in the midst of a disaster and reform concepts, doctrine and interoperability, as well as enhanced shared intelligence to such an end. Critical to such an effort must and will be a programme to promote effective operational experimentation and exercising to operationalize the Comprehensive Approach. This should be done in parallel to reaching out to the EU and EUCOM to create a single conceptual framework built around knowledge commands. Specifically, a development programme is needed for Comprehensive Approach exercising and training (to include much greater programme synergy between and across Alliance defence education) for military, civilians and partners. Finally, and critically, civil-military partnerships must be fostered based on the sharing of NATO interoperability and network standards with key partners, such as Japan, with a renewed emphasis on C4ISR.

The EU's Challenge

The European External Action Service or EEAS has a budget of some €464m compared with the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office which has an equivalent budget of £1.6bn or €1.9bn, which is indicative. There are today some 3,360 diplomats supporting the EEAS with 135 diplomatic representations world-wide. In addition there are some 40,000 European diplomats deployed world-wide, with the EU disbursing 50% of all development assistance with a budget of €72bn over the 2012-2014 period.

The EU's Lisbon Treaty which came into force on 1 December 2009 strengthened CFSP and created CSDP, all of which were designed to promote common action in the event of a terrorist attack or natural disaster. Critically, the so-called Petersberg Tasks which dated back to 1992 and which comprised rescue and humanitarian

operations, peacekeeping, and the role of combat troops in peacemaking were also included and expanded to include disarmament, military advice, post-conflict stabilisation and the fight against terrorism, to include actions carried out on the territory of third countries.

However, as with all things European defence it is one step forward, one step back, which limits the use of European forces under EU command in support of international disaster relief. On 9 December, 2010 the European Council adopted a range of conclusions on European military capability development that built on the November 2010 Franco-British agreement. The message was clear; for all the strategic ambitions both explicit and implicit in CFSP defence integration, such as it is, today concerns first and foremost the effective management of defence shrinkage. To that end, the European Council emphasised an exchange of information on defence budget cuts, the exploring of capability pooling and sharing options, the further development of civil-military synergies in capability development, and post NATO Strategic Concept cooperation with the Alliance over the development of military capabilities.

Certainly, CSDP in principle could help resolve the capability-capacity crunch from which European forces suffer given the ever-expanding military task-list and the ever shrinking resource base. Moreover, on the face of it Europeans should be up to the task but with only 10% of the two million or so soldiers deployable supporting any form of expeditionary operation is now extremely difficult with the forces available painfully small. Affording high readiness, the key to effective disaster relief is made more difficult by defence cost inflation which is running at c. 5-7% per annum. Put simply, European states are essentially broke, and with many having yet to pay for past materiel which because of an unexpectedly high operational tempo over the past decade is wearing out far faster than planned.

Indeed, a 2011 CSIS report emphasised the scale of the great European defence depression.⁴ The decline in European defence spending of 1.9% per annum over the 2001-2008 period, which has accelerated over 2008-2011, has resulted in a real cut since 2001 of some 25%. The June 2009 EU Presidency report identified vital shortfalls in transport aircraft and helicopters, improved troop protection and the ability to gather quickly actionable intelligence, including by satellite. Little has changed over the interim. Today, only 5 of the 24 members of NATO Europe meet

⁴ See CSIS, "A Diminishing Transatlantic Partnership? The Impact of the Financial Crisis on European Defense and Foreign Assistance Capabilities," Washington, March 16, 2011.

the NATO minimum defence spending target of 2% GDP per annum.

Not surprisingly, all five areas of NATO capability (pertinent also to EU ambitions) are under stress, all of which have a role to play in disaster relief; deployability and mobility; sustainability and logistics, survivability, effective engagement, consultation, command and control is under stress. Of particular concern are ISTAR, air to ground surveillance, C4, PGMs, suppression of enemy air defences, strategic sea and air lift, air-to-air refuelling, deployable combat support and combat service support units, all of which would have a role to play in extended disaster relief.

Equally, it is precisely the stalling of defence capabilities integration and the need for a better balance between efficiency and effectiveness at a time of austerity that drove the British and French to seek common ground over capabilities. On November 2, 2010 London and Paris agreed a Defence and Security Cooperation Treaty. On the face of it the accord is by and large military-technical: to develop co-operation between British and French Armed Forces, to promote the sharing and pooling of materials and equipment including through mutual interdependence, leading to the building of joint facilities, together with mutual access to each other's defence markets, through the promotion of industrial and technological co-operation.⁵

However, as with all things Franco-British the devil is in the strategy. This accord, like so many that has gone before, is really about the need to lead Europe back to strategy sanity and establish global reach capabilities which would be essential to effective disaster relief. The essential paradox is that austerity SHOULD lead to some integration, at least towards the tail. However, in the face of growing unemployment most European countries want to retain defence sovereignty across the defence-industrial base.

The stalling of capabilities development is thus having a profound impact on the EU's three pillars of crisis management to which disaster relief is central—conflict prevention—taking action before a conflict breaks out; a holistic approach to conflict based on the firm understanding that all conflict has its roots in social and economic factors; and effective multilateralism—taking action with partners and through co-operation.

As of September 2011 there were 14 completed CSDP missions and 14 on going

⁵ See Lindley-French J., "Britain and France: A Dialogue of Decline? Anglo-French Defence Cooperation and Implications for the European and Euro-Atlantic Security and Defence Relationships," December 2010 (London: Chatham House).

missions (6 in the Western Balkans, Caucasus and Eastern Europe, 3 in the Middle East, 1 in Central Asia and 4 in Africa) none of which are large but all of which important and all of which comprise an important civilian component. Indeed, if there is one area where theoretically the Union could very rapidly make a big difference it is effective disaster relief through the Comprehensive Approach. The key word is 'theoretically,' because to act decisively in the event of a disaster the Union still needs to far better refine its decision-making structures and overcome inner political contentions before such a goal can be realised.

Certainly, crisis management systems and structures are being refined to better enable civ-mil co-operation. In November 2009 the Crisis Management and Planning Directorate was formed to create better synergies supported between the Situation Centre, the Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability and the EU Military Staff to realise a Comprehensive Approach to crisis management. However, much more needs to be done to realise effective disaster relief, and the financial and economic context is not at all favourable.

The Role of European Militaries in International Disaster Relief: NATO and EU Capabilities and Capacities

If Europe is to play a credible military role in effective disaster relief three basic requirements will need to be met. First, a genuinely global reach capability supported by sufficient unity of effort and purpose. Second, decision-making structures are needed that can respond rapidly to disasters and afford Europeans the flexibility to adapt. Third, sufficient forces and resources must be sourced to make such a response relevant to the people suffering on the ground. Given the financial pressures on all European armed forces that will require much greater synergy between Europe's states through a much closer relationship between NATO and the EU which in turn reflects a new civil-military concept of disaster relief operations.

Therefore, both the EU and NATO (and preferably together) need to look jointly beyond 2010 at how EU Battle Groups and the NRF can be best prepared for effective interventions in support of disaster relief. To that end, the link between effects-based planning and effects-based capabilities must be properly established across both institutions. An EU-NATO Strategic Comprehensive or Integrated Approach would make the most out of the civil-military lessons learned that have emerged from operations over the past decade, possibly built around a joint EU-NATO

Comprehensive Approach Headquarters.

To afford the strategic enablers vital to rapid response much better procurement co-operation and the further harmonisation of equipment programmes are essential. The European Defence Agency (SDA) should be tasked to examine the performance of European forces in disaster relief and make recommendations as to what changes are needed in procurement or, as is more likely, how better to earmark and use existing inventories.

European military assistance for disaster relief has also thrown up the need to re-consider defence transformation. Transformation emphasises convergence on high-end, networked capability. Smart transformation (as opposed to the NATO Secretary-General's Smart Defence) should focus on enhancing the natural strengths of NATO and EU members throughout the intervention task-list. This is the only way to prevent the capabilities-conflict crunch.

To remain relevant smaller European member-states might need to lead the way towards defence integration to create real intervention effect on their limited force and resource bases and to better influence to keep the efforts of the major states within the institutional framework of both NATO and the EU.

Critical will be the ability to work with partners outside of the NATO and EU frameworks. That is likely to take two paths. First, better enable the UN and OSCE to effectively lead international disaster relief. Second, strengthen partnerships with key national partners such as Japan so that in the event of a major disaster friends can be of real and actual mutual support. If there is one lesson from the tragedy suffered by Europe's friends in Japan in 2011 it is surely that.