

The Role of the Military in Peace-building

Michael Clarke

The military performs an essential role in all peace-building, whether the military of the host country or a foreign military presence attempting to nurture a re-built society in another country. From Haiti and Panama to Somalia, Bosnia, Macedonia, East Timor, The Solomon Islands, Côte d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and Iraq, militaries have been engaged in post-Cold War peace-building that has demonstrated relative success, total failure, and most stages in between. On even a cursory count of significant military interventions since 1989, it is possible to identify at least 21 distinct cases. Of these, 11 were explicitly peace-keeping operations from Somalia through the former Yugoslavia to the Solomon Islands and Darfur. All of these cases became peace-building operations very quickly after initial deployments and 4 more cases began as different types of intervention (Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq and Côte d'Ivoire and also then transformed into peace support and peace-building operations. 21 cases in 20 years indicates the prevalence of military interventions in the post-Cold War world and 15 out of 21 cases either began as, or migrated towards, being peace-building operations. Though it is entirely possible that the wheel of history will continue to turn and militaries will become involved in more traditional interstate conflicts in the future, the fact remains that current trends are in the opposite direction. Sensible defence planning assumptions should therefore be based upon the expectation of more such peace-building operations.

There is, therefore, a great deal of existing history from which we can draw perspectives and lessons over the last 20 years. There is no shortage of 'lessons learned' literature, certainly in the United States, at the United Nations, and throughout European defence establishments, as well as within the global NGO community. The problem is not so much drawing lessons from all these cases as institutionally learning from them and integrating our knowledge into policy action.

Nevertheless, much of this literature has a consensus at its core regarding the characteristic problems of deploying the military in peace-building operations. We speak constantly about learning the lessons from these cases. We know that military involvement tends to create an international response vacuum; the military ends

up doing too much because other organisations leave it to do so. We know from experiences in former Yugoslavia and in Iraq and Afghanistan that UN political mandates may be very wide, but the capacity of the UN to implement such mandates is extremely limited. UN field staffs are tiny by comparison with military headquarters; their financial resources are strictly limited and all international organisations take some considerable time to establish themselves properly on the ground – all time which is vital in the first 6 months of a post-conflict peace-building operation. The same is true of other members of the international community such as the international financial institutions, the formal aid organisations and the NGO community. The fact that the military is normally present at the beginning of a peace-building operation, in numbers, with an organisational structure and in possession of an operational plan, means that there is a natural tendency for other organisations to fit around it rather than directly to replace the tasks which it performs. Military commanders from developed states (and in some cases from less developed states, too) habitually find themselves taking on post-conflict civilian roles in the acute stage of an emergency, only to find it very difficult to relinquish them 6 months or more than a year later when the appropriate civilian agencies are still not present in a post-conflict territory in sufficient size or numbers to perform the necessary functions.

We also know from previous cases that the military's presence tends to create a culture of dependency among the host population which can set real re-construction back indefinitely. In almost all post-conflict societies, the most pressing need after the acute emergency conditions have been dealt with is local employment. Lack of jobs and the decline in income which unemployment causes becomes a major problem in most societies. The sheer presence of the international community in high numbers (both military and civilian) tends to attract the skilled younger workers in a society to employment as translators, administrators, drivers, guides, and liaison officers. But though this becomes a lucrative source of personal income, it also increases a culture of dependency which is very difficult for a society to break. Whatever the nature of a military intervention and however benign the motive of the forces involved, the fact remains that most societies take on the social milieu of an "occupied people" after a year or so of extensive international presence in their country. Nothing can happen without the international authorities allowing it to happen; the military move around in a way that is often indistinguishable from an occupying power; and civil society will almost inevitably be slow to develop in the midst of a large international presence. In other words, we know that military intervention can appear to be a

substitute for proper, sequenced, economic, social and governmental re-construction, and hinder the development of these processes. Not least, we know that it can simply go wrong since it makes such high demands on the military instrument which is often not trained specifically for such politically delicate operations. The area of post-conflict re-construction is a place for professional troops only and it will test their skills and training to the limit.

In theory, it has been clear for the last 20 years that a “comprehensive approach” is the only way in which military interventions as peace-builders can achieve success. But this theory has proved extremely difficult to put into practice. In reality, interventions in the former Yugoslavia, beginning in Bosnia and Croatia in 1991 and extending rapidly to Macedonia and then Kosovo in 1999, achieved a fair degree of comprehensiveness in the approaches that were eventually found to work on the ground. Painful and difficult lessons were learned and operationalised by both the military, the United Nations and the NGO community. By the time of the Kosovo crisis in 1999, there was a well-functioning machine ready to go into action among both the military and the civil communities once the 78 day bombing campaign had come to an end. The intervention in Kosovo, however, turned out to a high-water mark of the early “comprehensive approach” and has not been repeated since. It is not too much to say that NATO and other Western world powers were conceptually further ahead on most aspects of what is now termed the ‘comprehensive approach’ in those years than they have subsequently turned out to be. The events of 2001 changed the military dynamic in many Western states and when peace-building became relevant in Afghanistan and Iraq – admittedly much bigger cases than anything in the Balkans, and undertaken in much more difficult circumstances – so much of what had been learned in the years previously seems to have been discarded and has had to be re-learned. The military and other agencies have striven to improve their performance in Afghanistan since 2006 and are now on the verge of some greater synergies than have ever been seen in that country in the last 8 years. But the fact remains that laudable though this progress is, it has got us, in a conceptual sense, back to where we were in 1999 in understanding and operationalising a “comprehensive approach”. There are many reasons why this has happened and it would repay a much longer study to contrast the “comprehensive approach” as it has been practised between 1999 and 2009.

Perhaps the problem has been that we have tried predominantly to learn as many technical lessons as we can from previous cases. This is entirely natural and many

technical lessons are there to be learned. If only we can get the training right. If only we can get the sequencing right within the international response community and produce a genuinely comprehensive approach to the problem. If we can somehow learn to better integrate the tactics of effects-based operations (EBO), disarmament, demobilisation and rehabilitation (DDR), security sector reform (SSR) with the core requirements of – merely – governance, development and social sustainability, then we will make real progress in these cases and understand properly where the military fits into it all. There is no difficulty in compiling an extensive checklist of all that needs to be done before the military, and the international community, can “declare victory and leave”. In reality, all such interventions conclude in this way and their success is measured by how credible the rest of the world regards the claims that they have left behind a functioning society that is capable of making its own decisions, rightly or wrongly, successfully or unsuccessfully, for the future.

NATO’s task in Afghanistan, for example, is not to “win” in any conventional sense since that is not a meaningful concept in this situation, but rather to “prevail” in some significant way that leaves the country essentially stable and in the hands of its own people. This means that stability will have to be judged in a regional context. All that could go right in Afghanistan will count for nothing if Pakistan becomes the new basket case of south Asia. Afghanistan also borders Iran, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and China, while both Russia and India have legitimate interests in the stability of the Afghan-Pakistan nexus.

To be successful in Afghanistan, therefore, coalition military force must be seen as both effective and legitimate in what it does. Its operations have to appeal to the pragmatists in the territories bordering Afghanistan and to gain respect, however grudging, in the country itself. If there is any single lesson from the crisis in the Balkans during the 1990s, it is not that the use of force has necessarily to be consensual or somehow impartial in a fractured society, but that it has to be perceived as effective and legitimate in equal measure. A more coherent comprehensive strategy will also require some quite unpalatable things in this particular case. It means that civilian agencies must either be prepared to operate in dangerous areas, or else that military formations take on many more civilian roles. Development cannot be sequenced behind security, following on only when security is established. Development is an intrinsic part of security in Afghanistan and has to proceed simultaneously.

Coalition forces have begun to work much more closely with local leaders and their quasi-official militias. More of this has to be done to build on the consistent

dislike of most Afghans for the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, even at the price of local corruption and the likelihood that many Afghans will switch sides occasionally as the loyalty market fluctuates. Nor can the coalition forces afford to take a gradualist approach to breaking the stranglehold that narcotics have over the government and administration of Afghanistan. Something quick and dramatic is needed to deal a fresh political deck, especially in the southern provinces. Buying up the whole opium crop for the next 2 years would do that, though it would be a one-off initiative with side effects that would have to be managed. And it would only work if other parts of the comprehensive strategy were properly operational. Training the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police is an imperative for coalition forces in Afghanistan. They are the key to break the dependency culture which has existed for 8 years now and their current planned numbers (134,000 for the ANA and 82,000 for the ANP) will almost certainly have to be doubled as quickly as possible to cope with security in the country. But that will not be possible before 2012 at the earliest. And all this is predicated upon the ability of a 42-nation international coalition to be far more militarily effective and co-ordinated under growing American leadership. The example of current challenges faced in Afghanistan is instructive since it highlights all of the technical lessons which need to be learned – and re-learned – from such complex operations in post-conflict societies.

I do not argue that we should not attempt to draw lessons at this technical level. We certainly should. But I am convinced that there are more fundamental issues of political principle to be addressed when the military becomes involved in peace-building. The military must not be used as a substitute for political engagement in a peace-building problem. There are many cases in the last 20 years of exactly this phenomenon. The military was deployed in former Yugoslavia without any clear mandate as to its role, either in the UNPROFOR context or as a series of national contingents which later took over the operational requirement. Early military action in Bosnia and Croatia was, at best, a device to buy time to build political consensus within Western Europe over what to do next. At worst, it was gesture politics which began a major military expedition without any clear rationale. The military should not, therefore, be used as the first stage of a response which merely buys time for more considered political thinking. It is intrinsic in some way to all stages of peace-building if it is relevant at all. And if the military is to be deployed, it should be deployed heavily in the early stages and drawn down thereafter, not vice-versa. There is a natural resistance to creating a heavy military involvement in the early stages of

an operation, not least because it may appear aggressive or have political implications at a regional level, but “minimum force” almost never means minimum numbers. Minimum force is far easier to apply at high, rather than low, numbers of troops. The message of minimum force and legitimate and effective action can quickly be conveyed by a large, well-organised and well-trained force comparatively easily.

There is a hard conclusion to be drawn from our ever-lengthening catalogue of contemporary cases. It is that if the military is relevant to a situation, but not fully deployed as an intrinsic part of an international response that has the overall capacity to meet the governance/developmental/social sustainability challenges, then there may be less ultimate human misery if it is not used at all – or else used to ring-fence a situation rather than intervene in it.