

**Climate Change and the Military  
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***Climate Change and Military Support to Civilian Authorities***

*by*

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**Climate change and military capabilities**

Climate change is considered recently as one of the critical forces shaping the 21st century. Together with globalization, population growth and technological change, climate change will fundamentally alter the way we live, but also the risks we face and how we shall interact in an increasingly interdependent world. Global warming is a grave and growing threat. The impacts of climate change, particularly the growing risks of natural disasters and the damaging effects on development for already fragile states, may increase the pressure for military forces to participate in growing numbers of humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and evacuation operations. The demand for foreign interventions of all kinds – financial aid, civil support, humanitarian assistance, but also military intervention – seems likely to grow more than would be the case if there were no climate change. This will put increasing pressure on governments and international bodies, which might be hard pressed to find both resources and remedies.

Focusing on military capabilities in natural disasters, according to the SIPRI publication *The Effectiveness of Foreign Military Assets in Natural Disaster*, the foreign military and defence assets which were worldwide provided during the period 1997-2006 were: communications, engineering, medical support, power supply and distribution, search and rescue, transport, logistics and coordination, sea and inland water, and water and sanitation. Among those assets, air transport, logistics and coordination, medical support and expert personnel were mostly deployed. In recent years, for example, Dutch armed forces have been involved in international humanitarian operations in New Orleans (United States), Pakistan and Asia after the tsunami.

The specific conflict constellations, the failure of disaster management systems after extreme weather events and increasing environmental migration will be almost impossible to manage without support from military capacities and therefore pose a challenge to classic security policy. In this context, a well-functioning cooperation between development and security policy will be crucial as civilian conflict management and reconstruction assistance are reliant on a minimum level of security.

One of the key variables that influence contributing countries' policies on sending military assets for international disaster relief assistance is their national strategic culture, which relates to the perceived and actual role of the military in the society and the world. In some

countries, it is considered normal for the armed forces to play a central part in response to natural or man-made disasters. In others, disaster relief is considered as an inappropriate role for armed forces.

### **Oslo Guidelines**

It has also to be mentioned, that civilian humanitarian actors are often concerned about being too closely associated with a military force, even in peace time. However there is a growing acceptance in the humanitarian community that military assets can play an appropriate role in supporting natural disaster responses. While humanitarian relief is and should remain a predominantly civilian function, military assets can play a valuable role in natural disaster relief.

The Oslo Guidelines, which were formulated in 1994, are intended to address the need for principles and standards and to provide improved coordination in the use of military and civil defence assets in response to natural, technological and environmental emergencies in peacetime. The Oslo Guidelines stipulate that all humanitarian assistance must be provided in accordance with the core principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality and with full respect for the sovereignty of states.

It has been recommended that steps should be taken to improve the capacity of military commanders and forces in potential contributing countries to take part in natural disaster relief alongside humanitarian actors. Examples are military training and ensuring that military doctrines, standard operating procedures and field manuals adequately reference humanitarian principles and elements of the Oslo Guidelines. In addition, it has been recommended that humanitarian actors should be involved in the design of military training on humanitarian assistance and disaster response.

However, as I mentioned before, the Oslo Guidelines are designed to be applied to operations that take place in peacetime. However, many of the major natural disasters that provoked an international humanitarian response in recent years occurred in areas with pre-existing conflicts, such as Aceh province in Indonesia, Haiti, Kashmir and Sri Lanka. The question arises how relevant the guidelines are when a natural disaster takes place in the context of a complex emergency situation. Foreign troops can run the risk of becoming associated with one of the conflict parties.

### **The responsibility to protect**

The impacts of unabated climate change, severe environmental degradation and environmentally-induced conflicts can be regarded as a threat to international security and world peace. Presumably, therefore, the Security Council is authorized to take action in cases of widespread destruction of natural environmental goods and grave violations of international environmental law and can apply appropriate sanctions against the states responsible. The Security Council now having debated in depth the security policy implications of climate change for the first time in April 2007, the question which arises is whether and how the Security Council's mandate can be appropriately adapted to meet these challenges. One option is to invoke the principle of the 'responsibility to protect' by means of which the United Nations claims high moral authority. The concept of the 'responsibility to protect' was unanimously endorsed by 150 heads of state and

government at the 2005 UN World Summit, and means that when governments are not willing or able to protect their people, the UN has the right to intervene.

After the cyclone Nargis slammed into Burma on May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2008 the Burmese junta did not let the international relief agencies do their work. The generals, in effectively denying relief to hundreds of thousands of people at real and immediate risk of death, can itself be characterized as a crime against humanity, where the responsibility to protect principle does cut in. However, as France suggested invoking a U.N. ‘responsibility to protect’ resolution in the Security Council, which authorized the delivery of aid and imposes this on the Burmese government, China, Vietnam, South Africa and Russia argued against the Security Council getting involved, while they considered this as an interference in the domestic affairs of Burma. There is still a big gap between political declarations and practice!

### **Effectiveness**

Military assets have been an integral part of the international community’s humanitarian responses to many major, rapid-onset natural disasters, and they are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. The SIPRI study, I mentioned before, distinguishes six areas that influence the effectiveness and desirability of deploying military assets in response to a natural disaster. Those six interconnected aspects of effectiveness are:

1. *Timeliness*: seems to be the main factor affecting the effectiveness of foreign military assets in a natural disaster response, especially in the first days and weeks of the operation. Under the Oslo Guidelines, military assets may in principle only be employed for emergence humanitarian aid in the absence of any available civilian alternative. After a certain lapse of time, civilian personnel can take over the humanitarian tasks.
2. *Appropriateness and competence*: needs assessments are very important.
3. *Efficiency*: depends not only on the efficiency with which it carries out its assigned tasks but also on how well its capabilities are used within the larger operation.
4. *Absorptive capacity*: while individual military assets tend to be relatively self-sufficient and thus to place a small burden on absorptive capacity, the arrival of large numbers of foreign military assets from different countries and with overlapping capabilities can cause serious problems.
5. *Coordination*: between civilian humanitarian actors and military assets has been one of the greatest challenges created by the increasing deployment of foreign military assets. Differences in cultures, priorities and operating modes have an impact not least on information sharing. This role is best and most suitably carried out by the United Nations, led by OCHA.
6. *Costs*: of deploying military assets are generally higher than for civilian assets. This has caused concerns that foreign military assets are placing a disproportionate burden on humanitarian funds. However, in several countries their defence

ministries cover some or all of the costs deploying military assets for overseas relief.

### **Final remarks**

Floods, droughts and hurricanes will undoubtedly lead to an increase in humanitarian crises. Armed forces will face increased demands to deploy as part of crisis management efforts as a result of the increase in frequency and severity of extreme weather events like hurricanes and earthquakes, aggravated by sea-level rise.

Military equipment policy must also take account of the extreme climatological conditions in which the armed forces often operate, a factor that climate change is exacerbating. In hot conditions, for example, more energy is needed for cooling, the hoist capacity of helicopters is reduced and the environment is generally dustier, which causes extra wear and tear on equipment.

The armed forces are first and foremost the State's instrument of force, intended for use in military operations. At the same time however, Ministries of Defence must leave sufficient scope for its capabilities to be made available to support the civil authorities as much as possible in upholding the law, disaster response and humanitarian relief operations. This is, after all, also a core task of the armed forces, which have many dual-use assets at their disposal and can be rapidly deployed.