



Shifting Priorities: What is Civil-military cooperation?



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With the withdrawal of most Western intervention forces from Mali, another stabilisation mission ends unsuccessfully (Bundesregierung, 2023). Events like these raise questions about the future of Western peacekeeping and stabilisation. A central point of discussion is the so-called Civil-Military Cooperation, a military function where military forces collaborate with civilian organisations and the population to achieve mutually beneficial objectives, often in areas affected by conflict, disaster, or instability. This article describes civil-military cooperation and its importance in international peacekeeping. The paper draws on previous collaboration and personal communication with the Civil-military Cooperation Centre of Excellence (CCOE), one of 28 NATO-accredited Centers of Excellence (COEs). It provides an understanding of the definitions and debates surrounding civil-military cooperation, the CCOE's understanding and contribution to civil-military cooperation, and delivers the foundation for civil-military cooperation policy. The introduction introduces NATO-accredited Centres of Excellence and the CCOE. The second part provides an overview of the different academic discussions and defines civil-military cooperation. Finally, the last part explains NATO's understanding of civil-military cooperation beyond stabilisation missions.

1. Introduction: Civil-military cooperation and the Civil-Military Cooperation Centre of Excellence

NATO-accredited Centres of Excellence (COEs) are international military organisations dedicated to enhancing the capabilities of NATO members and partner countries (NATO, 2024). These COEs focus on a wide range of specialised areas such as cy-

ber defence, counterintelligence, and energy security. They play a crucial role in training and educating military leaders and specialists, developing doctrines, and improving interoperability among NATO forces. Operating independently of direct NATO funding and command structures, COEs are funded nationally or multi-nationally. Their work includes education and training, analysis and lessons learned, doctrine development and standardisation, and concept development and experimentation (NATO, 2024). Currently, 28 NATO-accredited COEs support NATO's transformation efforts.

Within this framework, the CCOE in The Hague (Netherlands) is a NATO-accredited, multinational organisation that provides expertise in civil-military cooperation. It delivers innovative advice and specialised knowledge to both civilian and military clients (CCOE, 2024). The CCOE focuses on advanced training and education, developing concepts and doctrines, and leveraging lessons learned to enhance civil-military cooperation operations. By fostering cooperation and understanding between military and civilian entities, the CCOE aims to improve the effectiveness of NATO missions and support overall mission success through its specialised expertise (CCOE, 2024). It works with, and often for, NATO, but the CCOE does not represent or speak for NATO directly.

2. What is Civil-Military Cooperation?

Even though it is a broad idea that has existed for decades, scholars often disagree and debate over the definition of civil-military cooperation (Cusumano & Corbe, 2018). In an attempt to conceptualise the phenomenon, scholars Cusumano and Corbe have

identified a trichotomy of three related understandings of the intricate interplay between military institutions and civilian entities: civil-military relations, civil-military interaction, and civil-military cooperation. The three concepts are related, but all attempt to capture a different phenomenon. The following paragraphs will look at the different elements of the trichotomy.

First, Samuel Huntington's 'The Soldier and the State' has contributed significantly to modern academic debate on civil-military relations (1957). Huntington laid the foundation for conceptualising civil-military relations, defining it as civilian control over the military while recognising the expertise of armed forces in national security matters. In these early stages, civil-military relations have been characterised by a delicate balance between civilian oversight and military autonomy, reflecting broader societal dynamics and political imperatives.

Second, civil-military interaction is not an academic term but mainly refers to the NATO definition of "activities between military ... bodies and non-military actors to foster mutual understanding that enhance effectiveness and efficiency in crisis management and conflict prevention and resolution" (AJP-3.19, 2023, p. 16). This definition is widely regarded as a general approach for military organisations to recognise the importance of the civilian dimension for operations. Therefore, it is predominantly a military term and has received little academic attention (Cusumano & Corbe, 2018).

Third, Cusumano and Corbe have identified civil-military cooperation as the last concept in the trichotomy of understanding the interplay between military institutions and civilian entities. The authors define civil-military cooperation as a "wider set of interactions between civilian and military organisations in the theatre of military operations and peacetime alike" (Cusumano and Corbe, 2018, p. 9).

The conceptualisation of civil-military cooperation has undergone significant paradigm shifts, adjusting to the geopolitical realities of the world (Zaalberg, 2007). While 1960s literature on civil-military relations is almost exclusively dedicated to domestic relations between a nation's military and its civilians, civil-military cooperation emerged out of a need for conceptualising the relationship between a foreign military in a foreign country (Franke, 2006). Until the end of the Cold War, interstate wars were considered the norm (Lee Ray, 2002). International interventionism and its different forms and shapes, like peacekeeping, insurgency, or stabilisation missions, remained unusual and, therefore, understudied. Hence, civil-military relations literature reflected this through a focus on domestic civil-military relations (Franke, 2006). However, with the end of the Cold War and the rise of terrorism and intrastate warfare, understanding relations between international military intervention forces and foreign non-military actors became more relevant (Rajan, 2000).

Following the events of 9/11 and the rise of international terrorism, conflicts have become increasingly complex, requiring a comprehensive understanding of state and non-state actors within economic, political, and social institutions (Kaldor, 2012). Mary Kaldor defined these complex conflicts as 'new wars,' where the lines between war, mass atrocities, and organised crime blur (2012). In these 'new wars,' civilians play a more important role. Aside from civilian casualties during combat, they can become pawns within modern warfare itself (Rothbart et al., 2012), either as victims of crimes against humanity or as perpetrators within terrorist organisations or other non-state armed groups (Moser & Clark, 2001). Within this complex

network between civilians, non-state armed groups, national militaries, international alliances, and NGOs, every actor aims for their own personal goals (Rietjens, 2023). Hence, in this new war framework, coordination and alignment with other actors is crucial but also difficult to achieve. Out of this need for coordination, civil-military cooperation emerged as a concept (Rietjens & De Werd, 2023). Therefore, the concept recurs throughout several debates, and every debate has different definitions and understandings of civil-military cooperation (Cusumano & Corbe, 2018).

Like in the debate surrounding humanitarian aid literature, scholars define civil-military cooperation as the cooperation between militaries and civilian relief organisations to facilitate humanitarian aid, social reconstruction, and protection of civilians (Winslow, 2002). When looking at Western counterinsurgency missions, civil-military cooperation is defined as the counterinsurgency military force's role to 'winning hearts and minds' of the local civilian population (Rinelli & Duyvesteyn, 2018; Worrall, 2014). When it comes to the debate surrounding hybrid threats, civil-military cooperation can also be applied to a military's relationship with its own domestic population and how to protect the population from respective threats (Rinelli & Duyvesteyn, 2018). Furthermore, civil-military cooperation scholars Rinelli and Duyvesteyn have therefore described civil-military cooperation as a "discussion ... characterised by ambiguity, misinterpretations, and fundamentally differing definitions and conceptualisations" (2018, p. 24). Ultimately, civil-military cooperation scholars disagree with practitioners about the definition of the concept but also disagree amongst themselves about it.

Concept	Civil-military relations	Civil-military interaction	Civil-military cooperation
Explanation	A purely domestic understanding of the relationship between a domestic population and its respective military.	A purely interventionist definition referring to the relationship between a foreign intervention force and the local civilian population.	A broad and adaptable definition that attempts applicability both in domestic civil-military relations and in relations between intervention forces and the local population.
Applicability	Domestic	Interventionist	Domestic and interventionist
Term	Academic	Military	Academic and military
Origins	1960s	2000s	2000s

Table 1: The Trichotomy between civil-military relations, civil-military interaction, and civil-military cooperation

3. NATO's Understanding of Civil-military cooperation

As mentioned before, the foundation of NATO's fundamental understanding of civil-military cooperation is laid out in the Allied Joint Doctrine for Civil-military cooperation. The doctrine establishes NATO's definition of civil-military cooperation as: "A military joint function that integrates the understanding of the civil factors of the operating environment, and that enables, facilitates and conducts civil-military interaction to support the accomplishment of missions and military strategic objectives in peacetime, crisis, and conflict" (AJP-3.19, 2023, p. 17).

The abovemention quote provides insights into NATO's understanding of civil-military cooperation. The definition includes two core activities. Civil factor integration is the first core activity, which refers to the activity of understanding all civil factors possibly influenc-

ing the mission's success. This shows strong similarity to NATO's Intelligence function and includes everything, from simple things like the status of civilian infrastructure to highly complex social dynamics like religion. On the other hand, civil-military interaction as a second core activity refers to any literal interaction between NATO military staff and civilian entities. The definition also makes clear that NATO civil-military cooperation is not a humanitarian actor or an NGO; the primary objective is the mission's success (CCOE, personal communication, April 9, 2023). Considering the interaction with the non-military part of the operating environment as a means and the accomplishment of missions as the goal underlines NATO's mission-oriented understanding of civil-military cooperation. The mission's success is the primary objective, with successful cooperation between military and civilian entities being the means rather than the goal itself.

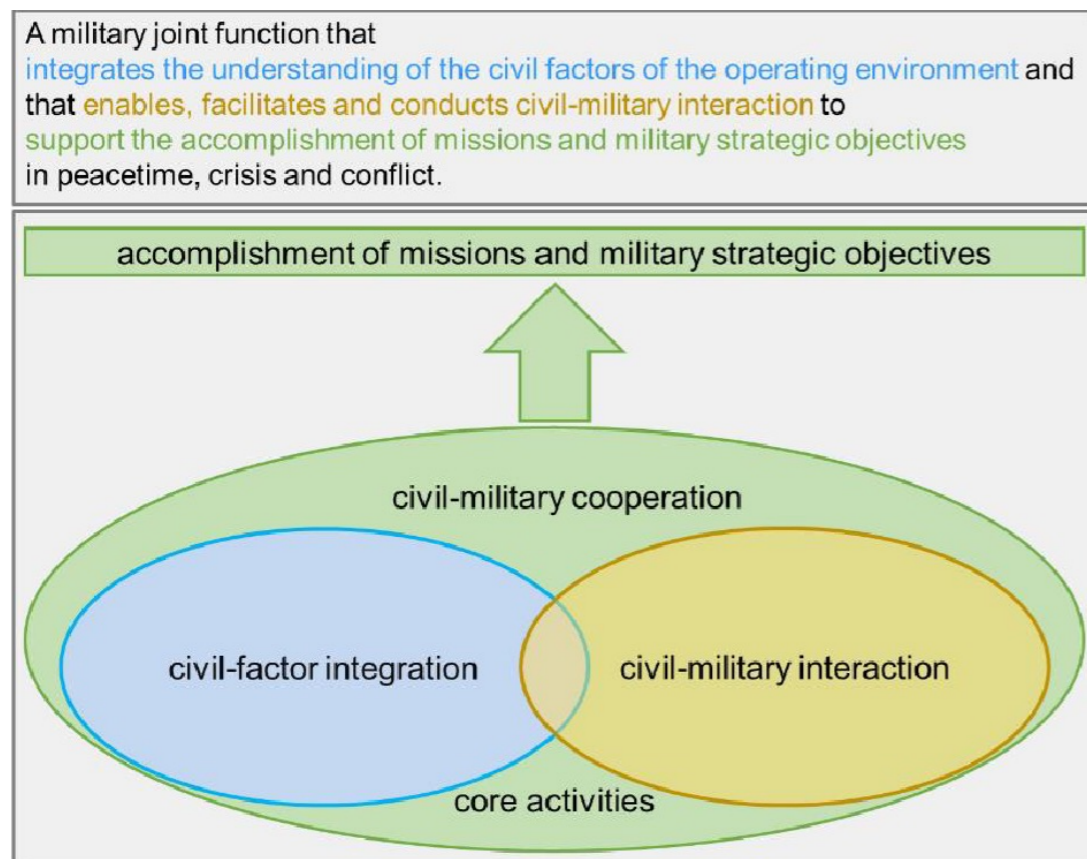


Figure 1: NATO Definition of Civil-Military Cooperation and Core Activities. From (AJP-3.19, 17 by NATO STANDARDIZATION OFFICE (NSO), 2023.

NATO's understanding of civil-military cooperation has a scope that goes beyond most scholars' understandings. As mentioned earlier, civil-military cooperation is a fragmented field, with Huntington's understanding as the relationship between a domestic military and its respective citizens and Worrall's understanding as the relationship between a counterinsurgency force and a foreign population (Huntington, 2002; Worrall, 2014). Literature on humanitarian aid positions itself closer to Worrall, while hybrid threats scholars are embracing the domestic component of Huntington. Namely, Cusumano and Corbe have attempted to capture all of these elements as "wider interaction [...] in the theatre of military operations and peacetime alike" (2018, p. 9). Showing strong similarities to Cusumano and Corbe, the alliance applies civil-military cooperation on all of the possible understandings by establishing its applicability "in peacetime, crisis, and conflict" (AJP-3.19, 2023, p. 2). Civil-military cooperation in peacetime refers to the resilience and civil preparedness of the domestic population against foreign threats, and civil-military cooperation in crisis includes winning the hearts and minds of the population outside of NATO territory for counterinsurgency efforts. When asked about why NATO defines civil-military cooperation in such a broad manner, one member of the CCOE responded:

"Because it makes sense. When we think about Civil Factor Integration and Civil-Military Interaction, in order to avoid having difficulties during wartime and crisis, then we have to start with the build-up of our liaison network before we start with wartime and before we start with crisis. That means in peacetime. So, you are doing civil-military cooperation the entire time, and it does not depend on crisis or conflict. You have to do

civil-military cooperation in order to prepare for missions and in order to prepare for war. You have to start before the war starts, otherwise, you are too late" (CCOE, personal communication, April 10, 2023)

Civil-Military Cooperation:
A wider set of interactions between civilian and military organisations in the theatre of military operations and peacetime alike.

NATO's approach to civil-military cooperation acknowledges the different definitions and understandings surrounding civil-military cooperation. Instead of choosing one understanding, it attempts to incorporate all of them into a single definition, following the example of Cusumano and Corbe. However, this is a new development within NATO's understanding of civil-military cooperation, a concept traditionally concerned with counterinsurgency missions like Afghanistan. (CCOE, personal communication, April 23, 2023). Adapting to recent geopolitical developments, NATO civil-military cooperation attempts to cover traditional and contemporary aspects of civil-military cooperation with one definition. The recent geopolitical landscape, particularly the Russian invasion of Ukraine, has necessitated a significant adaptation in NATO's understanding of civil-military cooperation. This adaptation addresses the rise of hybrid threats, including cyber-attacks, foreign election interference, and other non-traditional forms of warfare. These developments have highlighted the need for a more comprehensive approach to civil-military cooperation, one that goes beyond crisis prevention and management to include deterrence and collective defence.

4. Conclusion

NATO's evolving definition of civil-military cooperation now reflects this broader scope. By emphasising continuous interaction between military and civilian entities, NATO aims to ensure preparedness across all phases of conflict—peacetime, crisis, and war. This approach is designed to build resilience and enhance the effectiveness of military operations through early and sustained engagement with civilian counterparts. The adaptability of civil-military cooperation to contemporary challenges underscores its enduring relevance. Facing hybrid threats, effective civil-military cooperation can provide a strategic advantage, enhancing situational awareness, fostering mutual understanding, and enabling coordinated responses to complex crises. By fostering strong civil-military relationships be-

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fore conflicts arise, NATO can mitigate risks and enhance operational outcomes, ensuring that both military and civilian actors are better prepared to address the multifaceted nature of modern conflicts.

In conclusion, the importance of civil-military cooperation extends well beyond traditional stabilisation missions. As NATO continues to adapt to new threats and challenges, the principles of civil-military cooperation will remain central to its strategy, enabling the alliance to effectively navigate the complexities of contemporary and future conflicts. However, many member states struggle to create a solid connection between civilian entities and military structures. So, the success of the alliance in applying civil-military cooperation during peacetime remains to be demonstrated.

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