Analyzing the Effectiveness of Australian Civil Military Cooperation (CIMIC) after 15 Years of ‘Small Wars’

Mark Smith

Since 1999, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) has conducted over 117 operations across nearly the full spectrum of so called ‘small wars’. [1] These operations have included domestic support tasks such as border protection and disaster response, regional offshore security and stability interventions and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HADR) operations, and contributions to combat operations in support of a coalition of nations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Addressing the complex problems presented by these operations has required more than military force; it has demanded the simultaneous application of diplomatic, informational, military and economic instruments of national power to achieve national strategic objectives. [2] The shift from a sequential to parallel application of national power to complex interventions is likely to continue given the ‘Whole-of-Government’ approach emphasized in the 2013 Australian Defence White Paper. [3] Throughout these operations the ADF has demonstrated that it is capable of effectively interacting with other government agencies (OGA), the Host Nation (HN), International Organizations (IO) and non-government organizations (NGOs) to provide flexible solutions appropriate to each operation.

This article will analyze the effectiveness of the ADF’s interaction with other agencies on operations. However, rather than focus simply on well understood variables such as mission accomplishment, interagency approaches, and organizational culture barriers, this article will adopt a thematic analysis, drawing on the lessons of several different types of operations since 1999. [4] After first establishing criteria to measure effectiveness based on the ADF’s Civil Military Cooperation (CIMIC) doctrine, the article will use three themes to illustrate the effectiveness of the ADF’s interactions with OGAs and NGOs. The first theme considers the influence of different agencies’ political objectives and mandates on the effectiveness of interactions. The second considers the impact of operational environment, particularly how it may restrict other agencies’ freedom of action. Finally, the third theme considers broader learning and adaptation across different organizations to overcome systemic issues. The paper concludes that the ADF’s interaction has been effective in that it tailored the mode and degree of coordination with OGAs and NGOs, cognizant of the political and operational influences on that interaction. Sometimes this has meant that a limited (coordinating) approach is used; other times a close, cooperative approach is possible.

It is necessary to provide a framework by which the effectiveness of interaction can be measured. Since
most post-operational reports are classified, this paper will use elements of the CIMIC framework to
evaluate the effectiveness of the ADF’s interaction with other agencies. The ADF’s interaction with
other agencies extends beyond civil-military cooperation and conducts temporary assignments and liaison
officer exchange; nevertheless, CIMIC provides a useful prism for analysis. Doctrinally, the ADF defines
CIMIC as

the coordination and cooperation, in support of the mission, between the commander and
the civil dimension, including the national population and local authorities, as well as
international, national and non-governmental organizations[ sic] and agencies.

These terms refer to the effectiveness of the process of interaction – they are separate to the concept of
achievement of the mission itself. Further clarity is provided with respect to the terms ‘coordination’ and
‘cooperation’ by the Australian Civil-Military Centre. Their Whole-of-Government doctrine defines
coordination between agencies as existing on a spectrum from co-existence to cooperation. Coexistence
is merely de-conflicting activities to minimize competition, while cooperation is meaningful collaboration
which delivers effective and efficient combined efforts. This paper advocates that effective interaction
by the ADF is not one which automatically generates the ‘most’ coordination but rather is one that is
sufficiently insightful to provide a tailored solution to the context of each particular operation. Critics such
as Alan Ryan have argued that the ad-hoc approach of the ADF to its interactions with OGAs and NGOs
in missions such as the Australian-led International Force to East Timor (INTERFET) in 1999 undermined
their effectiveness. However, a more nuanced consideration challenges this perspective. First, every
operation has a different context and requires different levels of interaction with the military. Clausewitz’s
maxim that ‘it is simply not possible to construct a model for the art of war as a scaffolding on which a
commander can rely for support at any time’ is applicable to the CIMIC environment. Second, such
criticism typically focuses on CIMIC as simply personnel and structures, and fails to appreciate that it is
an integrated non-kinetic effect which can be generated in different measure through a variety of
mechanisms.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of the ADF’s interaction should not simply be measured
by the ultimate ‘success’ of the mission, as this is a complex interplay of a myriad of factors. Rather, its
measure should be whether the nature and degree of interaction was appropriate to the operation – in
particular whether it accommodated each agency’s political objective and mandate, their relative
contribution to the operational area and freedom of action, and the degree to which they were able to learn
and adapt.

The effectiveness of the ADF’s interaction with OGA and NGO has been sufficient to accommodate the
demands of its operations, but history demonstrates that effectiveness is enhanced when the various
agencies’ political objectives and mandates are aligned. In the case of disaster relief operations, the
ADF’s objective is more likely to align with the mandates of other agencies, which potentially affords
higher levels of cooperation. For example, following the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami, the ADF conducted
Operation Sumatra Assist to provide HADR to Banda Aceh. The purpose of the mission was ‘to save lives
and reduce threats to survivors whilst enhanc[ing] [Australia’s] relationship with Indonesia’. This
mission aligned with the political objectives of Indonesia, other nations, Australia’s OGA which included
the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) and Australian Federal Police (AFP), and
many of the 109 NGOs operating in Aceh. The United Nations later described the high level of
cooperation achieved as being essential to ‘bridge the humanitarian gap between the disaster needs…and
the resources available to meet them’ and is an example of the ADF being highly effective in its
interactions with OGAs and NGOs.
Such alignment is not always possible, particularly in areas of conflict and instability. In these situations the different political objectives and mandates of stakeholders require the ADF to adopt a more nuanced approach to its interaction with other agencies. Doctrinally, the ADF’s CIMIC philosophy presumes that all interactions are ‘conducted in support of the military mission’. However, OGAs and NGOs (both humanitarian and development) may have a different perspective based on their adoption of principles such as the Humanitarian Standards or the Millennium Development Goals. During Operation Slipper in Afghanistan, for example, AusAID and local NGOs were critical of the ADF’s conduct of ‘consent-winning activities’ which aimed to influence the ‘hearts and minds’ of local populations in support of the mission. They argued that these activities risked undermining longer term aid or development programming (which in the case of AusAID may extend 30 years) and increased the risk to NGOs as legitimate targets for attack. It is important to recognize differences in political objectives and mandates between agencies. Humanitarian NGO’s (who seek their own force protection through the humanitarian principles of impartiality, humanity, independence and neutrality) may refuse to interact with the ADF at all. To interact effectively with NGOs requires an understanding that, for some, co-existence is the only acceptable mode and degree of interaction with the military. A mature understanding of these differences has allowed the ADF to tailor its approach to ensure an adequate level of interaction amongst stakeholders in Afghanistan. Consequently, although the level of cooperation being lower than in other operations, a mature understanding of organizational differences has allowed the ADF to tailor its approach in Afghanistan to provide an effective level of interaction.

The operational environment also impacts upon the effectiveness of the ADF’s ability to interact with OGAs and NGOs. According to the 2013 Defence White Paper, operations in Australia’s immediate region are of greater strategic importance to Australia than those further abroad. Retired Major General Jim Molan describes the difference as one between proximate operations ‘of necessity’ and more distant ‘wars of choice’. The result is that, in operations further afield, Australia’s risk appetite is often considerably lower leading some OGAs to adopt a more risk-averse approach, or perhaps to not deploy at all. Thus, the operational environment and its level of strategic importance influence the nature and scope of interaction which the ADF is able to obtain – particularly with OGAs.

Australia’s deployment to the Solomon Islands in 2003 was made in relatively benign circumstances but the proximity of the island nation meant that its ongoing stability was assessed as strategically significant to Australia. This created an opportunity to deploy the representatives of the Department of Foreign Affairs, AFP, AusAID and the ADF. The interaction between these agencies was praised by a RAND Corporation report which highlighted ‘the extent to which the military, police, aid organizations, and foreign affairs organizations cooperated in addressing what they agreed to accomplish and constraining themselves to those areas.’ While the RAMSI mission continues today (albeit now solely a policing mission), the RAND Corporation’s praise specifically relates to the effectiveness of the interaction achieved between stakeholders but does not conflate this with mission accomplishment per se.

However, as the operational environment becomes more dangerous or the operation’s strategic importance lessens, OGAs and NGOs may be more reluctant to work together. For example, the ADF’s initial deployment to Afghanistan was not complemented by the presence of OGAs – which clearly reduced the ADF’s ability to interact with them. Later, in 2007, OGAs deployed to Afghanistan. Even then, the OGA’s appetite for risk, particularly within the AFP, was low, which restricted them to a training role ‘behind the wire’ at the Uruzgan Provincial Police Training Centre. However, while the operating environment constrained the amount of activity that OGAs could conduct ‘outside the wire’, the employment of a senior DFAT officer as Director of the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), in conjunction with senior AFP officers, allowed meaningful collaboration to occur. Despite the increased risk in Afghanistan, the ADF and OGA’s generated an appropriate level of cooperation and
effective interacted with each other.

Lastly, examination of systemic learning and adaptation since 1999 allows a *post-hoc* analysis of the effectiveness of the ADF’s interactions.[30] Perhaps due to the small relative size of Australia’s Whole-of-Government architecture and scale of deployments, the ADF has effectively interacted with OGAs and NGOs. At the tactical level the ‘pioneering character in which actors adapt to each other’s idiosyncrasies,’ have largely allowed ‘reform in contact’ in order to maximize the ADF’s effectiveness. [31] However, examining some of Australia’s attempts to institutionalize the lessons learnt and address systemic issues in Whole-of-Government approaches is instructive in assessing the commitment to continuous improvement across the ADF, OGA and NGO.

During the ADF’s 1999 Intervention in East Timor (INTERFET), CIMIC doctrine from Vietnam was quickly reprised.[32] INTERFET used the ADF’s Civil Military Operations manual which had been rewritten in 1998 and included many lessons drawn from the 1st Australian Civil Affairs Unit which had conducted operations in Vietnam during the period 1967-71. Initially a team of four Australian officers established a CIMIC cell, but this lack of trained or experienced personnel and outdated doctrine was indicative of wider problems faced by the ADF at the time and adaptation occurred quickly. INTERFET’s Commander, Major-General Peter Cosgrove later reinforced the CIMIC team with additional officers from a US Army Civil Affairs unit. Following INTERFET, Australia has invested in developing a wider Whole-of-Government approach.[33]

The ADF’s efforts to enhance the effectiveness of its interactions with OGAs and NGOs are illustrated by the creation of formal CIMIC courses, the ongoing development of CIMIC doctrine, and the establishment of a standing CIMIC capability at the Deployable Joint Force Headquarters (DJFHQ). The CIMIC Tactical Operators Course was introduced in 2003, followed by a CIMIC Staff Officers Planning Course conducted by the ADF Warfare Centre in 2008. Since their inception, each course has trained approximately 40 and 20 personnel respectively from across the ADF, OGA and foreign military staff annually.[34] Doctrine used on Australian operations and training has been continually developed. Following the initial revision in 1998, CIMIC doctrine has been revised in 2004, 2006 and 2009 with a third version of the current capstone CIMIC doctrine Australian Defence Publication 3.11 Civil Military Cooperation is currently being prepared and scheduled for release in 2014. Importantly, DJFHQ’s CIMIC team conducts tactical CIMIC activities but also integrates CIMIC effects into the headquarters targeting cycle to deliver more effective processes and outcomes.[35] DJFHQ participates in annual exercises involving OGAs and NGOs (such as the Exercise Talisman Sabre series).[36] These activities develop habitual relationships with stakeholders who enhance the effectiveness of the ADF’s interaction and assists in preparations for future operation.

Interaction is most effective when both parties’ desire to do so, even thought their mandate, purpose and capacity may be different. For this reason it is important to acknowledge that learning and adaptation has not only occurred within the ADF, but has also been mirrored by other agencies seeking to enhance their interagency effectiveness. The creation of the Australian Civil-Military Centre, AFP’s International Deployment Group and AusAID’s Australian Civilian Corps has created opportunities to enhance the effectiveness of Whole-of-Government interactions.[37] The Australian Civil-Military Centre, formed in 2008, with a mission to ‘[improve] Australia’s civil-military effectiveness for conflict and disaster management overseas’): the AFP’s International Deployment Group provides an expeditionary policing function for both front line policing and capacity building; and the Australian Civilian Corps created a cadre of 500 deployable civilian experts. These agencies have signed interagency Memorandums-of-Understanding and now regularly participate in combined professional development training, exchange liaison officer and produce joint publications.[38] Australia’s Whole-of-Government approach has
matured to the point where differences in organizational perspective are regarded positively, offering diversity in thinking, and delivering superior outcomes. This attention to continuous improvement by the ADF and other agencies, while not definitive, is a post-hoc indicator of effective interaction.

Recognizing the limitations of a purely military response, Australia has increasingly employed a Whole-of-Government approach to operations, applying a variety of instruments of national power in concert. This paper has conducted a thematic analysis of the effectiveness of the ADF interactions with OGAs and NGOs focusing on three themes: political objective and mandate, the operational environment, and learning and adaptation. While certainly not perfect, the ADF’s interaction with stakeholders during operations has been effective. Each operation has required a new appreciation for the nature and degree of interaction between the military and other agencies. Sometimes this has involved mere co-existence. At other times, full cooperation was achieved. The ADF’s interaction has been effective in that it tailored the mode and degree of coordination with OGAs and NGOs cognizant of the political and operational influences. The evidence provided by the large number of operations since INTERFET in 1999 is that the ADF’s continued learning and adaptation has improved the sophistication of its interaction with other agencies, has enhanced effectiveness of missions overall and allowed Australia to synchronize her application of national power in support of the national strategic endstate.

The views expressed here are the author’s own and do not reflect those of the Australian Army, Australian Defence Force or the Australian Government.

End Notes


[5] Post Operational Reports are a formal instrument to capture lessons learned and evaluate operations. The ADF’s Operational Evaluation doctrine has been designed to capture the ADF’s performance against military objectives, typically focussing on mission effectiveness, task performance or transition criteria rather than specific interactions. Further work on designing campaign assessments and formalising the post-operational reporting process is described in Australian Government: Department of Defence, Australian Defence Doctrine Publication 00.4: Operational Evaluation (Canberra: Defence Publishing Service, 2007).
(Canberra: Defence Publishing Service, 2009), 1-3.

Civil-Military Guide to Australian Stakeholders in International Disaster and Conflict Response, 6.

Complex Emergencies (New York: Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2008), 17.


[10] Carl von Clausewitz, On War, ed. Michael Howard; and Peter Paret (Princeton, New Jersey:

[11] CIMIC effects that can be delivered are coordinated at the Joint Effects/Targeting Board and include
operational effects such as Influence, Engage, Leverage and Inform. See Mark Armstrong, 'Not Hearts

[12] Rodger Shanahan, 'How Whole is Whole of Government? The Reality of Australian Responses
to Offshore Contingencies,' Australian Army Journal 8, No. 3 (2011), 94.


Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Operations,’ in Global Legal Challenges: Command of the
Commons, Strategic Communications, and Natural Disasters: International law studies, ed. Michael D.

the Use of Foreign Military and Civil Defence Assets in Disaster Relief (Geneva, Switzerland: United

[16] Australian Government: Department of Defence,Australian Defence Doctrine Publication 3.11 :

[17] Humanitarian Standards are a voluntary code of conduct that humanitarian NGOs aim to comply
with. The standards state that NGOs activities are to be conducting impartially, independently, neutrally
and with humanity. Similar ethical models for development NGO and official aid programs have been
established by the United Nations and comprise eight international development goals. See Rebecca
Shrimpton - Peace and Stabilisation Operations Program Manager, 'Presentation to ADF Civil Military
Cooperation Staff Officers Planning Course (12 July 2010): Civil-Military Interaction in Complex
Operations ' Unclassified (Australian Defence Force Warfare Centre: Asia Pacific Civil-Military Centre of
Excellence, 2010).
[18] W. Maley, 'Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan: how they arrived and where they are going,' NATO Review, No. 3 (2007); Fred Smith, 'Personal Interview with Fred Smith-Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade deployed as Senior Political Advisor to the Provincial Reconstruction Team-Uruzgan(PRT-U),' (2013).


[20] For example, the NGO Medicines Sans Frontiers (Doctors without Borders) operates with strict neutrality and impartiality and is unlikely to interact with the ADF. See Australian Defence Doctrine Publication 3.11 : Civil-Military Cooperation- Amendment 2 (Canberra: Defence Publishing Service, 2009), 4A-9

[21] In 2006, over 45,000 NGO were registered with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. These NGO are not homogeneous, reflecting both humanitarian and development NGOs and some possessing greater capabilities than the ADF and others consisting of a single individual. See Catherine Agg, Trends in Government Support for Non-Governmental Organisations: Is the "Golden Age" of the NGO Behind Us? (New York: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2006).


[23] Jim Molan, 'Choice and necessity in Australia's way of war.'

[24] The ADF and DFAT had been involved with the Solomon Islands in 1999 and 2000 when they facilitated the Townsville Peace Accords, which was signed on 15 October 2000. This degree of personal knowledge and a subsequent combined reconnaissance had created an habitual relationship between senior Solomon Islanders and some of Australia’s government departments which would enhance effectiveness. See Australian Government: Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), 'Getting the message across – ‘No more guns'',' AusAID Focus June 2001(2001).


Post-hoc analysis is a method of examining data ‘after the fact’ in search of data which was not specified prior to the experiment. It is an analytic tool that can be used to document data that would otherwise have been missed.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Whole of Government Approaches to Fragile States, 23.


Amanda Coghlan, 'Personal Interview with Amanda Coghlan-Director Civil Military Capability, Australian Civil-Military Centre,' (2013).

Amanda Coghlan, 'Personal Interview with Amanda Coghlan-Director Civil Military Capability, Australian Civil-Military Centre,' (2013).


For example, the publication Same Space – Different Mandates – A Civil-Military Guide to Australian Stakeholders in International Disaster and Conflict Response was produced by the Australia Civil-Military Centre in collaboration with the ADF, AFP, AusAID, Australian Red Cross and the Australian Council for International Development – Australia’s peak body for NGOs. See Australian Government: Australian Civil-Military Centre, Same Space - Different Mandates: A Civil-Military Guide to Australian Stakeholders in International Disaster and Conflict Response (Australian Government Australian Civil-Military Centre, 2012).
Mark Smith

Lieutenant Colonel Mark Smith is an Australian Army Reserve Infantry officer with 20 years’ service. His service has included: Officer in Charge, Civil Military Operations Centre, Headquarters 1 Division; deployment to Timor Leste with a Combined Operations Liaison Team; deployment to Afghanistan as the commander of a mentoring team assigned to the Operations Coordination Centre in Uruzgan Province; and Operations Officer of Battle Group Cannan – one of the Australian Army Reserve’s ‘Reinforcing Battle Groups’.

He holds a Master of Military and Defence Studies, a Bachelor of Legal and Professional Studies, and credentials in business, management, policing, security and risk management. He graduated from the Australian Command and Staff College in 2013. In his civilian career, he is employed by the Queensland Police Service in its Public Safety Response Team and is also a member of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade’s Australian Civilian Corps.


Links: