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The Responsibility to Protect: Is there a viable strategy?

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It is important, politically and morally, for countries to commit resources to non-conventional military operations such as post-war reconstruction or humanitarian relief. It is, however, also important for policymakers to be conscious of the difficulties in coming up with coherent strategies for military forces to be successfully deployed in such missions.

ON 10 November 2008, 59 SAF personnel were awarded the SAF Overseas Medal for their participation in overseas post-war reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq and Timor-Leste. Such operations fall under the rubric of ‘operations other than war’ (OOTW for short), which is becoming an increasingly predominant item in the agendas of most armed forces. Clearly the SAF has not been immune to this phenomenon.

OOTW also include peace operations as well as counter-terror operations. There is one feature that unites all operations that fall under the OOTW rubric – the risk factor is significantly lower than in high-intensity, force-on-force conventional military operations.

Low risk, however, does not mean no risk. It was instructive that throughout their respective post-war reconstruction deployments, SAF soldiers wore body armour and bore loaded arms. Nevertheless, within the OOTW rubric, there are different levels of risk, and the risk factors in counter-terror and peace operations tend to be higher than in post-war reconstruction.

Moral Justification for OOTW

The national commitment to such multilateral OOTW is driven by a simple, but profound idea. It is called ‘The Responsibility to Protect’, or R2P for short. This concept posits the “responsibility of states, and where they fail the international community, to protect civilians from mass atrocity crimes”.

Its appeal lies in the principle that it is “the right thing to do: our common humanity demands that the world never again sees another Holocaust, Cambodia, Rwanda or Bosnia”. It even uses the language

of state security to strengthen its appeal: “it’s in every country’s interest: states that can’t or won’t stop internal mass atrocity crimes are states that can’t or won’t stop terrorism, weapons proliferation ... and other global risks”.

This is not a diatribe against OOTW or the R2P concept. As human individuals, we do have a responsibility to protect those less capable of protecting themselves. Our common humanity gets offended every time we see starving children, or women who have been raped simply because they belong to a particular ethnic group. It is imperative that Singapore becomes more involved in such missions; this is part of our international responsibility. Singapore has to accept that the SAF will become increasingly involved in missions around the world that may appear to be someone else’s problem.

This is, however, a plea, for policymakers to be aware of the potential dangers of losing the political will and stamina to see a particular OOTW commitment through. OOTW typically last very long, and have few clear metrics of success. The failure to see it through can have disastrous consequences, both for the people we want to protect, and for the morale of the armed forces.

For us to be able to do so, many changes have to occur, especially within the military organisation. But policymakers need to be aware – they need the political will to carry through these changes, and when they commit, they need the political will to follow through to the very end.

A Viable Strategy for OOTW?

But why use military force then? Dag Hammarskjöld, arguably the greatest of the United Nations Secretary-Generals, once famously said that armed forces were the worst organisations to do peace operations, but the only ones who could do the job. The basic problem is that OOTW contains an inherent strategic tension that does not necessarily augur well for military organisations performing OOTW missions.

This tension lies in the uncertain nature of OOTW. Simply put, there is typically in any OOTW mission no clear end-state, nor a clear roadmap of how to get there. There is, in other words, no clear strategy. Any strategy is a statement of where we are, our desired destination, how we intend to get there, and provides clear indicators to tell us when we have arrived.

Generating a statement of where we are and our desired end-states is the easy part; devising a roadmap that helps us get there, and providing clear indicators to let us know when we have arrived, these are the difficult parts of strategy. Good strategy therefore needs to provide a roadmap, and identify clear indicators or metrics of success. This is where the paradox emerges – while soldiers tend not to want to think strategically, they nevertheless require good strategy if they are to be employed successfully. And it is precisely the absence of a clear roadmap that deters military organisations from getting involved in peace missions in such places crying out for humanitarian intervention as Darfur.

So what is the strategy in OOTW? The universally-desired end-state for OOTW is the maintenance of stability, order and predictability. These concepts do not mean the absence of violence; rather they mean an acceptable level of violence. But how do we define what is acceptable? This is ultimately a political decision.

Military best-suited for keeping order?

The next question is whether or not the military organisation is necessarily the best instrument with which to create such conditions of stability, order and predictability. OOTW missions typically require a whole range of skill sets – law enforcement, logistics management, civil engineering, and urban planning, among others. None of these skill sets are the sole proprietorship of the military

organisation.

So why use the military organisation? There are several answers. Military organisations tend to be the largest state organisation, comprising a large body of (relatively) well-trained, (relatively) well-disciplined human resources. Military organisations tend to be extremely competent in planning and coordinating disparate activities into a coherent game plan. Soldiers tend to be adaptive, requiring minimum time to acquire new skill sets to suit the particular mission they are deployed in. Finally, soldiers also tend to adapt easily to less than comfortable surroundings.

If this is so, what then is so bad about using the military organisation for OOTW? The answer lies in the paradox identified earlier. Soldiers need good strategy if they are to be deployed successfully, even though most soldiers do not like to think strategically. This dislike for thinking strategically derives from the military mindset, which is problem-solving in nature. Such mindsets tend to like discrete tasks – with clear starting and ending points. A soldier deployed in a defensive mission can at least identify his main metric of success – when the aggressor retreats.

OOTW, on the other hand, tend to have vague, if indeed any, metrics of success. And where soldiers are unable to identify the metrics of success, where they cannot see the destination, when one day merges seamlessly into the next without any clear distinction, morale typically then begins to sag.

The real danger emerges when this leads to disintegration of the political will to carry on. Deploying the military organisation in OOTW is, in other words, a potential recipe for the shredding of morale, and morale is integral to any mission success for the military organisation.

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