

## CCOE Online Seminar Series

### Unifying Forces: Civil Affairs & CIMIC

#### Executive Summary

Format: Online seminar

Moderators:

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Featured experts:

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Audience: Open to public; practitioners, experts, academics and advanced students

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#### Online Seminar of the NATO Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) Centre of Excellence

In this online seminar, we explored the similarities and differences between NATO CIMIC (Civil-Military Cooperation) and U.S. Civil Affairs within the context of exercises and training and interaction with authorities in the civilian environment. We further discussed how NATO CIMIC and U.S. Civil Affairs can better interoperate and learn from each other's perspectives. The discussion concluded with a productive conversation on the roles and importance of NATO CIMIC and U.S. Civil Affairs in hybrid warfare and questions from the audience on the respective roles of U.S. Civil Affairs and NATO CIMIC in preparation and conflict.

#### NATO CIMIC

NATO CIMIC is a military joint function that integrates the understanding of civil factors of the operating environment. NATO CIMIC ensures that military forces consider the impact of their actions on local civilian populations, infrastructure, and governance systems.

Its aim is to enable, facilitate, and conduct civil-military interaction, supporting the accomplishment of military missions and strategic objectives in complex environments - whether in times of peace, conflict, or crisis.

#### U.S. Civil Affairs

U.S. Civil Affairs (US FM 3-57) is about the understanding, engaging and influencing Unified Action partners and Indigenous Populations and Institutions. It is deeply committed to creating productive relationships with local authorities and civilian organisations, thus ultimately achieving the

commander of end state by working with humanitarian organisations and local governments. U.S. Civil Affairs promotes the protection of civilians in conflict and the restoration of governance and essential services.

Though NATO CIMIC and U.S. Civil Affairs share the overarching goal of enhancing civil-military coordination, they have distinct operations and mandates. While NATO CIMIC primarily focuses on military interactions with civil actors, U.S. Civil Affairs directly engages with indigenous populations and institutions, facilitating governance and stability from the ground up. Today, one of the critical areas we will focus on is how to bridge the gap between NATO CIMIC and U.S. Civil Affairs. Integration between the two is essential, not only to maximise coordination and reduce redundancy but also to respond more effectively to the ever-involving nature of modern crisis and conflict.

### **U.S. Civil Affairs and NATO CIMIC: Two sides of the same coin?**

- While both disciplines address similar challenges and work toward common objectives, their approaches differ. Some see them as “two sides of the same coin,” though others argue this analogy oversimplifies their relationship. The prioritisation of one over the other depends on the operational context.
- Effective collaboration requires mutual understanding between NATO CIMIC and U.S. Civil Affairs. Professional training and preparation are essential, given the significant consequences of their operations, particularly in mitigating the impact of warfare on civilian populations.
- U.S. Civil Affairs originated in the 1940s to rebuild post-war Europe, responding to a lack of civil resilience. In contrast, NATO CIMIC was developed in the 1990s and operates within existing governmental structures, focusing more on cooperation than reconstruction. These differing historical origins have shaped distinct operational frameworks.

### **Similarities and Differences**

- NATO CIMIC is a military joint function that overlaps with other functions, such as force protection, intelligence, and sustainment. While U.S. Civil Affairs and NATO CIMIC share situational awareness responsibilities, NATO CIMIC tends to focus more on military-to-military interactions, whereas U.S. Civil Affairs engages more directly with civilian entities. Some advocate for doctrinal convergence between U.S. and NATO approaches to enhance operational effectiveness and deterrence.
- NATO CIMIC operates through key activities like Civil Factor Integration (analysing the civil environment for military decision-making) and Civil-Military Interaction (engagement with non-military actors). This interaction is further broken down into outreach, engagement, consultation, and collaboration. A structured and proactive approach to integrating civilian considerations into military planning is crucial to effective operations.
- Establishing relationships with national and local authorities before crises occur is vital for smoother transitions during operations. Advocates stress the importance of nation-tailored liaison mechanisms in peacetime to create pre-existing frameworks for cooperation, ensuring effective military-civilian engagement when NATO deploys.
- Beyond traditional defence operations, NATO CIMIC and U.S. Civil Affairs play a role in enabling infrastructure and societal resilience to address threats such as deterrence, civil disruptions, and

natural disasters. As understanding between the two disciplines grows, their methods increasingly converge despite differences in terminology and doctrine.

### **Bridging the gap**

- U.S. Civil Affairs doctrine is shaped by lessons from conflicts in unstable regions like Southeast Asia and the Middle East, emphasising tools such as Civil Network Development, engagement, and transitional governance. NATO CIMIC shares similar tools - liaison, outreach, collaboration, and engagement - but is generally less developed in civil-military interaction. Some argue that, doctrinally, NATO CIMIC and U.S. Civil Affairs are not vastly different.
- A key question arises about whether U.S. Civil Affairs and NATO CIMIC should operate the same way across all conflict phases (deterrence, defence, stabilisation) or adapt their roles. In the deterrence phase, national governments, not NATO, bear responsibility for civil-military cooperation. As conflicts evolve, there may be a need for a structured handover of responsibilities between military and civilian authorities. Post-conflict stabilisation is as crucial as combat operations, requiring careful planning and coordination.
- A major gap exists in NATO CIMIC's ability to address transitional governance, particularly when local governments struggle to provide services. Unlike U.S. Civil Affairs, which has a more structured approach to this challenge, NATO CIMIC must further develop its capacity in this area. Additionally, NATO exercises often fail to adequately reflect or train for civil-military interactions, underscoring the need for clearer role definitions and better integration of the civil environment in planning.
- While NATO nations are generally more stable, deliberate planning is necessary to address potential instability within the Alliance. Lessons from operations in Afghanistan and Mali have contributed to developing liaison and coordination networks, but gaps remain in ensuring governance continuity if a nation's civil infrastructure weakens. Strengthening professional assessment, foresight, and alliance-wide preparedness is essential for mitigating destabilising events.

### **Challenges and opportunities for integration**

- While U.S. Civil Affairs and NATO CIMIC operate under separate chains of command, there is a strong need for doctrinal convergence at the headquarters level to enable joint planning. In NATO's multinational force structure, a U.S. commander applying only U.S. Civil Affairs doctrine would face challenges with multinational subordinate units. Common operational frameworks, standardised communication, and shared problem-solving processes are essential for effective collaboration.
- In mature European theatres, where host nations have established civil frameworks, it is crucial to understand operational limitations. U.S. Civil Affairs should not immediately step in to fill humanitarian assistance gaps, as this could undermine local governance, but must remain prepared to act when necessary. The focus should be on joint understanding rather than doctrinal blending, ensuring interoperability within host nation constraints.
- NATO is working to integrate U.S. Civil Affairs into NATO CIMIC doctrinal development to enhance coordination while allowing different approaches under a shared framework. Continued

collaboration is necessary to ensure mutual comprehension and connectivity between the two disciplines. Exercises have demonstrated progress in interoperability across NATO's 32-member structure; however, significant work remains to be done.

- Unlike U.S. Civil Affairs, which has established tactical training programmes, NATO CIMIC lacks a clear equivalent. While NATO stakeholders are developing training tools such as the NATO CIMIC Handbook and tabletop exercises, coordination remains a challenge. Existing tactical-level NATO CIMIC exercises, such as Joint Cooperation, Adaptive Interaction, and the Common Ground Exercise, offer valuable opportunities to refine training and improve integration between U.S. Civil Affairs and NATO CIMIC.

### **Adapting U.S. Civil Affairs, adopting NATO CIMIC in the context of a Large-scale Combat Operation in Europe**

- NATO forces must integrate within host nation frameworks, respecting national sovereignty while identifying when intervention is necessary. Unlike other theatres where U.S. Civil Affairs teams engage tactically, NATO's doctrinal framework in Europe requires a different approach focused on analysing the operational environment and ensuring civilian considerations inform command decision-making.
- U.S. Civil Affairs and NATO CIMIC have limited roles in direct combat but play a crucial role in rear areas. Their primary functions include monitoring civilian resiliencies, identifying shortfalls, and mitigating instability that could impact military operations. The "deep rear fight" involves assessing threats to civilian infrastructure and governance before they disrupt military efforts, with the ultimate goal of transitioning back to civilian governance as quickly as possible.
- Effective civil-military cooperation depends on pre-established liaison structures built before conflicts arise. Since key civilian information sources do not report within military structures, strong and lasting relationships must be developed over time to ensure continuity across personnel rotations and organisational shifts. NATO's convergence efforts are essential for ensuring interoperability before a crisis occurs.
- European host nations retain full sovereignty and responsibility for their civilian environments during large-scale combat operations (LSCO), requiring NATO forces to operate within national legal frameworks. Each country's role - whether as a host, transit, or troop-contributing nation - affects its civil-military coordination processes. NATO's doctrinal approach cannot be imposed on national defence plans; instead, adaptation and integration are necessary to ensure effective cooperation across different national structures.

### **Has the CCOE's recent publishing of its new NATO CIMIC handbook led to enhanced interoperability with U.S. Civil Affairs?**

- The NATO CIMIC Handbook serves as a practical translation of doctrinal principles into actionable guidance but is not a replacement for doctrine. Feedback suggests that combining NATO CIMIC core activities with cross-cutting topics like human security and resilience enhances its usability.
- The NATO CIMIC handbook includes a chapter on U.S. Civil Affairs written by a U.S. Civil Affairs expert, marking an important step in aligning NATO CIMIC and U.S. Civil Affairs perspectives.

However, questions remain on whether U.S. Civil Affairs is sufficiently integrated into NATO CIMIC doctrine, prompting suggestions to review foundational documents for better alignment.

- Many participants support incorporating real-world examples into the handbook. Proposals include vignettes of past U.S. Civil Affairs and NATO CIMIC operations - both successful and unsuccessful - to highlight similarities, differences, and best practices. Leveraging the U.S. Civil Affairs lessons-learned database could further enhance NATO CIMIC understanding and interoperability.
- Some argue that expanding the handbook's operational chapter, rather than creating a separate U.S. Civil Affairs handbook, would better serve NATO CIMIC practitioners. Tactical-level examples, such as how a tank platoon commander could handle civilian interactions in combat, could make the handbook more practical for field use.
- While the NATO CIMIC handbook is a step forward, there is recognition that NATO CIMIC doctrine may still require refinement to fully incorporate and align with U.S. Civil Affairs requirements. A review of foundational documents could ensure that U.S. Civil Affairs considerations are adequately reflected in NATO's doctrinal framework.

#### **Has the increased participation of U.S. Civil Affairs and NATO CIMIC, working together in NATO exercises, improved their interoperability with each other?**

- Exercises are effective in educating U.S. forces on NATO CIMIC principles, emphasizing the necessity of working with host nations, and fostering relationship-building with NATO counterparts. Tactical-level exercises such as Joint Cooperation, Adaptive Direction, and Common Ground provide valuable civil-military interaction opportunities.
- Many exercises struggle to replicate the complexity of the civilian environment due to a lack of realistic role players, inadequate scenario planning, and resource constraints. Higher-level command post exercises tend to simplify civil considerations to avoid complexity, reducing NATO CIMIC effectiveness. Tactical-level participants, particularly reservists, often lack the stimulation needed to test real-world readiness.
- Traditional NATO CIMIC approaches have focused on NGOs and humanitarian actors, but exercises must now integrate real-world non-military actors, including government agencies, the private sector, and infrastructure stakeholders. This shift is necessary to better reflect the operational environment NATO forces will face in article 4 or 5 situations.
- Enhancing exercise realism requires better scenario scripting that introduces realistic civil dilemmas rather than overly scripted scenarios. The Joint Cooperation Exercise in Nienburg is cited as a good example of integrating non-military actors at the tactical level. Additionally, the use of computer-simulated civil environments, potentially powered by AI, could enhance the depth and realism of exercises.
- Progress has been made through exercises such as Royal Leader 25 and NATO Rapid Deployable Corps training in Türkiye, but the civil components remain underdeveloped. To ensure NATO CIMIC effectiveness, NATO exercises must evolve to include more comprehensive and realistic representations of civilian environments.

## **NATO CIMIC and U.S. Civil Affairs in Exercise Scripting and Training Input. How do you look at this kind of aspect?**

- U.S. Civil Affairs personnel, especially reservists, face several difficulties in exercises, including late involvement that limits their ability to influence planning. U.S. reservists often have civilian careers, making long-term participation challenging. Additionally, short-term deployments hinder their familiarity with local European contexts, which affects their effectiveness in exercises.
- To help reservists integrate more quickly, leveraging institutional knowledge repositories like the CCOE is recommended. Exercises provide valuable exposure, foster relationship-building, and improve interoperability with NATO. Structured pre-exercise preparation could further enhance reservists' effectiveness when joining on short notice.
- In exercises, it's crucial to integrate civilian entities such as fire, emergency medical service (EMS), water, and infrastructure managers, as civil disruptions - like cyberattacks and infrastructure damage - can have strategic consequences and affect alliances. Including these stakeholders ensures exercises reflect real-world complexities, preventing unintended geopolitical consequences and highlighting the impact of hybrid threats on civilian populations.
- Civilian actors should be involved not only in planning but also in training and execution. Academic phases of exercises should educate military personnel on NATO CIMIC and the civil environment's strategic significance. Currently, military officers often focus on kinetic effects, overlooking the civil implications of operations. There is a need for more emphasis on teaching the military community about the civil environment's impact on overall operations.

## **Hybrid Threats**

- NATO CIMIC plays a crucial role in addressing hybrid threats by focusing on enhancing baseline resilience, which is vital for national stability. Rather than controlling civil spheres, NATO CIMIC monitors them and provides threat indicators, such as cyberattacks or infrastructure disruptions. Its role includes empowering civilian stakeholders by sharing information to help mitigate these threats. Ongoing examples of hybrid warfare, such as service disruptions and cyberattacks, demonstrate the relevance of NATO CIMIC in these contexts.
- Hybrid warfare introduces challenges beyond traditional military domains, including cyber and space, complicating the synchronisation of military and non-military activities. NATO has a clear strategy for military domains but lacks a coordinated framework for non-military actions in hybrid warfare contexts. Greater civil-military integration is needed across all domains to handle these evolving threats effectively.
- Current exercises and tactical level-problem solving are ahead of NATO CIMIC doctrine in simulating hybrid effects on the battlefield, but there is insufficient doctrinal guidance for U.S. Civil Affairs and NATO CIMIC regarding their roles in hybrid warfare. While daily operations are improving, a shared and refined doctrinal framework for hybrid threats is still missing, hindering effective adaptation. Real-world lessons from Europe and the U.S. should be incorporated into doctrine and response mechanisms to address these emerging challenges.

- There is a need to move beyond the traditional red (enemy) and blue (friendly) constructs to better capture the complexity of hybrid threats because hybrid threats often deliberately work in grey zones with limited attributability to or plausible deniability by the adversary. A shift in focus is recommended to understand the civil effects of hybrid warfare, particularly how it influences civilian infrastructure and governance functions.
- Understanding civil-military integration is essential throughout all phases of conflict, including peacetime, crisis, and full conflict. Hybrid threats require ongoing civil-military cooperation and responsiveness, not just during periods of formal conflict.
- Different nations may already have strategies in place to counter hybrid threats, and understanding these nation-specific approaches is critical. There is a need for more cross-nation dialogue and greater authority at international levels to address hybrid threats effectively. Current mechanisms for coordination and interaction between nations remain underdeveloped and need improvement to enhance collective defence capabilities.