Protection of Civilians

Project Overview

The NATO Policy for the Protection of Civilians (PoC), adopted at the Warsaw Summit in 2016, acknowledges that NATO has developed a variety of approaches to protect civilians and articulates NATO’s ambition to align the various policies, guidelines, and lessons learned into one policy that can address PoC in NATO operations, missions, and activities.

Allied Command Transformation (ACT) began developing a NATO military PoC concept and tasked JALLC to collect and synthesize lessons generated by NATO, International Organizations, and Non-Governmental Organizations that are related to PoC in selected NATO-led operations and exercises since 1990 in order to support ACT’s efforts related to developing NATO’s PoC Concept.

The project team reviewed relevant documents and conducted interviews from which they were able to identify 347 PoC-related lessons. These lessons included a significant number captured from review of related Non-NATO Entity publications on the topic, as well as those which could be captured from review of NATO-led operations and exercises.

Main Recommendations

PoC as a strategic objective

In order to be realized in theatre, PoC needs to be considered as a strategic objective right from the initiating mandate. The political and strategic decisions adopted at the start of an mission, guide commanders throughout the successive operational phases of the mission, and PoC should therefore be given the appropriate status and be prioritized along with the other strategic objectives.

The correct balance between the need to obtain consent to intervene in a situations and the need to act quickly where human rights violations are taking place, is also critical. Getting this balance right would contribute to enhancing people’s perceptions of how effective and legitimate a given mission is.
NATO’s influence over other actors and their perspectives

Analysis of lessons identified by the project team show that gaining a good understanding of the human environment in which the military are operating requires taking into account other actors’ perspectives, especially those of the civilians affected by a conflict. Civil–Military Interaction is an important factor in developing this understanding and requires engagement and coordination, as well as sharing information with relevant actors. Doing so will enable the different civil and military actors to cultivate mutual trust and operate together in the field, even if their mandates and priorities often differ.

The project team identified three key areas where NATO may be able to contribute to providing a secure and safe environment: providing training—particularly to help in implementing a national policy on mitigating civilian casualties—, providing support to national security forces—particularly with regard to command and control and effectively conducting counter-Improvised Explosive Device operations and disposal—, and curtailing the military use of schools and healthcare facilities by the local government, both to preserve such resources for the local population and to prevent them from being turned into military targets.

Protection of Humanitarian Actors

In carrying out their activities, Humanitarian Actors, such as international aid agencies, rely on local community structures, Host Nation governments, and military actors operating in the area to help them to protect and assist civilians. In particular, they often need the protection of military actors such as NATO to gain access to zones of high-intensity conflict, where the need for humanitarian aid can be greatest.

The project team found that, in providing protection to humanitarian actors, which includes not only their personal safety in the area but also the protection of supplies and lines of communication, military forces must take into account the principles of these actors and strike the right balance in order to preserve and to be seen to preserve their principles of independence and neutrality. There is a risk of association of—or a lack of distinction between—humanitarian actors and military forces, which could be very damaging to the role of such actors.