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The Role of Military Technical Advisors

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In 1989 a multinational contingent of soldiers began to arrive in Pakistan to support a humanitarian mine action program for Afghan refugees. They were, in effect, Technical Advisors (TAs) in the field of humanitarian mine action, and in the years since, military TAs have participated in many other programs. This has not been without its controversial aspects.

For the purposes of this discussion (and acknowledging that some will not fit this description precisely) a military TA is a serving soldier who is attached to a humanitarian mine action program in a training, advisory and mentoring capacity. The military TA differs from visiting military forces in three respects. He or she is not—and should not be—a short-term visitor, but rather is in the TA position for a period of six months to one year. The military TA is not part of a formed military unit, although national contingents within a program are usually under the command of their senior representative for administrative, personnel and disciplinary purposes. Finally, he or she is not armed and may not necessarily wear a uniform.

I must confess a certain bias on my part. I have been a military TA and I am immodest enough to believe that my efforts were not entirely in vain. I have also known and worked with many military TAs, from my own country and from others, and while they were not all well-suited to the task, I believe that most of them did good work. Somewhat inevitably, therefore, I am going to conclude that the use of military TAs is not a bad thing. I have structured this discussion according to what I perceive to be the three main concerns: ability, money and philosophy. Or, more simply, can they do the job, how much do they cost and should they be doing it anyway?

by Rohan Maxwell, Major, Canadian Army

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Ability

Much of the debate revolves around the ability of military TAs to train, advise and mentor indigenous personnel in various positions within the organization. These positions can be grouped into three categories: the training and supervision required for specific mine action tasks, such as finding and destroying mines; the training, logistics, planning, and command and control required for daily operations and strategic planning, including integration with other development activities and resource management.

With respect to the first category, much has been made of the difference between military-style minefield breaching and the intricacies of humanitarian demining. This difference undoubtedly exists—in immediate combat. However, even in wartime, follow-on activities are expected to achieve a high standard, and post-conflict dilemmas are expected to reach what is effectively a humanitarian standard. The same is true of military demining activities in the context of modern peace-support operations. It would be dangerous to suggest that military personnel do not possess the techniques to reach this standard, or the ability to understand and apply the International Mine Action Standard (IMAS).

Experienced mine action workers have stated that military and humanitarian demining do not differ at the point where the deminer and the ground come together, and that military-style training is applicable to the training of humanitarian deminers. It has also been acknowledged that military personnel can successfully form and train teams of deminers, even though there are differences in experience and some countries forbid their personnel to conduct actual demining while working as trainers. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that military personnel can effectively teach specific technical tasks such as demining and explosives ordnance disposal (EOD) techniques, although they are not adept at tasks such as mine risk education (MRE), where there is no clear military equivalent.

Since there is an acknowledged need for qualified and experienced instructors, it appears that there is a valid role for suitable military TAs, like civilian TAs, to be of a high caliber, able to transmit their skills and knowledge effectively in a given cultural, environmental and organizational context, and remain in place long enough to be of real value. Ideally these requirements would be incorporated into the selection process used by the providing country, but there is no guarantee that this will be the case.

It has been suggested that the receiving agency should play a decisive role in the selection process, and that this is unlikely to occur under the most typical scenario, when the receiving agency asks for assistance and nations respond by sending the military TAs of their choice. The military personnel management system of the supplying country dominates this process, and it will continue to do so while military TAs are seconded, rather than hired, by the receiving agency.

This means that the suitability of an arriving military TA will be, to a limited extent, the lack of the draw. This is definitely not the preferred staffing solution; however, any own limited experience working with and within international organizations—and more relevantly the judgments of those with more experience—suggests that this problem is not necessarily limited to the group under discussion.

Military TAs have also achieved success in the second category, daily operations. One example is given by the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) in The Role of the Military in Mine Action: "...military TAs provided an invaluable injection of expertise at a time when Camboda was struggling to rebuild its government and economy. Foreign military TA's appear to have been particularly effective at getting demining teams on the ground." This makes sense, since deploying and sustaining large numbers of persons to work on difficult tasks, under demanding conditions, is fundamental to military operations. Given the personnel and material resources (however scarce those might be) and specific tasks within an assigned area of operations, military TAs can perform effectively at this level.

In contrast, most observers appear to believe that the military has little if any role in the third category: strategic planning, resource management and integration with the wider development effort. This too makes sense as sustainable development is not a core military skill, or is not likely to become one. As the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has noted, military personnel can assist in this category, up to a point, but in the long term, the requisite training and assistance should be provided by more appropriate organizations.

That being said, senior officers in most armed forces have the necessary strategic planning and resource management skills if they are to carry out their military duties with reasonable proficiency. This is perhaps most notable in Western military establishments, where the language used in many documents and meetings reflects that found in civilian organizations, and where M.B.A. studies have assumed a status formerly reserved only for advanced military training courses.

A 1997 interview with the Institute of Conflict Team Consultant (ICT) of the Cambodian Mine Action Center (CMAC) appeared to show a sound grasp of mine action realities. He discussed the need to build a sustainable demining program with local buy-in, the desirability of a long-term approach to training and the importance of "weaving together the various parts of the program" by applying business principles. He also spoke of capacity building and of the requirement for a comprehensive national survey and an associated database in order to support long-range planning. The ability of military personnel to adapt to the exigencies of mine action does of course depend on the individuals concerned, but the option of using them should not be dismissed out of hand.

Money

Although some believe that military personnel represent a net saving to the receiving organization because their salaries are already paid, a more common assessment appears to be that military TAs, person for person, are actually more expensive than civilian staff. The GICHD's comparative study states, "...the incremental costs associated with any foreign duty assignment of personnel from utilizing military TAs have been as high as at the full cost of engaging equally well-qualified civilian personnel for the same assignment." If this were true, then it would clearly be a rational decision on the part of the receiving organization to eschew the use of military TAs. But it isn't true.

The authors of the study cite two sources in arriving at this conclusion, the first is a report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which correctly points out that military operations are more expensive than civilian ones; a military TAs life is longer than a civilian one, and is similarly paid. As others have noted, it is true that "Military units cost more for a given operation than the equivalent carried out by a civil organization." However, we are discussing individuals, and it is a bit of a stretch to compare something like the airlift of relief supplies into Somalia with the deployment of individual military TA's.

The second source is an American analysis that seeks to quantify the incremental cost of deploying an individual soldier on peace support operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina (B/H) or Kosovo. The range given is $200,000 to $250,000 per month, and it is essentially calculated by dividing the total annual cost of each force by the number of soldiers. The incremental cost per soldier, therefore, includes his or her share of the operating costs of everything used by or in support of American forces stationed in B/H or Kosovo. That is, everything from helicopters to armored vehicles to camps to ammunition to hospitals, for the richest army in the world. Obviously a a military TAs, operating using artillery, armored vehicles or attack helicopters will be cheaper. The GICHD study takes this into account by hopping the off a third of the incremental cost, thus arriving at a range of $15,000 to $16,500 per month. This still seems like a hefty sum, but the study notes, it is "as much or more than equally qualified, experienced and motivated civilian personnel would cost (including recruitment and administrative support costs) if recruited directly." It is true that the receiving organization would bear the entire cost of a civilian TA, while most of the cost of a military TA would be borne by the supplying nation. This might imply a pragmatic mine action manager might conclude that the cost of a military TA would be better borne by a large government rather than a relatively small mine action program. Still, the price seems inordinately high, irrespective of who is actually paying. If it were really that high, governments would be better advised to conserve their military personnel for other purposes and send the money thus saved to mine action programs for civilian staff.

The trouble is that the math does not work out. The lower end of the proposed range translates to about $12,000 per month in incremental costs, and it is difficult to arrive at that sum without reaching levels of generosity not normally associated with the military. Salary, medical and dental coverage, insurance, pensions contributions and so on are not incremental costs. Neither are living allowances or local operating costs such as vehicles, drivers and interpreters, because they would be the same for any TA, whether military or civilian. This means that the entire incremental cost of deploying TAs is equal to the cost of military administration, administrative support and transportation costs for deployment, redeployment and home leave. Even if a TA flies home once a month and is an ace administrator, more than $12,000 equates to an impossibly high monthly allowance. Some militaries are quite generous, but even so it would be difficult to arrive at a monthly incremental cost in excess of $5,500 or thereabouts. Adding more
than a bit for luck would give an annual incremental cost of $48,000. Hurrying enough to deploy, pay and administrate a civilian TA.

I have beheld this point because I believe it is climatic. The oft-repeated assertion that military TAs are more expensive is demonstrably incorrect. The TA is paying. Only the TA cannot extrapolate from the per capita incremental cost of a full-scale military operation, or even per capita incremental cost of "borrowing" soldiers from visiting military forces, to the incremental cost of deploying an unarmed military TA with no logistics, communications or infrastructure support beyond that which would also be provided to a civilian TA. While debates over the relative quality of military and civilian TAs cannot be conclusively settled because both groups are comprised of individuals whose abilities vary widely, cost is a quantitative issue that can be eliminated from the debate altogether.

Philosophy

If we accept that the question of ability is at least still open and that the question of money has been addressed, we are left with philosophical arguments. This aspect of the debate is a relatively faint echo of the ongoing controversy over the role of military forces in humanitarian operations, and of the oft-exaggerated "cost" differences between military and civilian personnel. A key element of this wider controversy—the ability of military personnel to carry out humanitarian tasks—has already been addressed in this article.

Another concern is related to security. This argument suggests that humanitarian workers may be endangered because belligerents won't be able to distinguish between military and civilian personnel who are engaged in similar work, or because humanitarian workers may become targets by virtue of association with the military. However, attacks on humanitarian workers (such as those that have taken place in Afghanistan) are not carried out because of confusion over the military or civilian status of the victim, but because of a perceived threat to civilian-military cooperation; they are carried out because the attackers wish to drive away humanitarian workers.

The last philosophical argument can be summarized as "it isn't their job to clear landmines. If the military is not interested in humanitarian mine action because they are looking for gainful employment in order to justify their existence. In response to the first point, I would suggest that the business of anyone who can make an effective contribution to the effort, and that the only "suit" we should be concerned about is that concealing the mines. As for the second point, the armies that normally provide TAs seem to be busy enough these days. Furthermore, in the smaller armies, military TAs are drawn from a numerically small pool, and those arms are often less than anxious to send scarce officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) off to do work that they feel is not the military's business."

Conclusion

Although relative quality is difficult to assess, the average ability of military TAs is on par with the rest of the humanitarian mine action community and the financial and philosophical arguments against them don't stand. But is there another use for military TAs? They are a useful and usable resource, and since it would be startling indeed to hear a mine action manager complain of a surfeit of resources, I must conclude—as promised—that humanitarian mine action benefits from the use of military TAs.

Endnotes
6. Ibid, p. 8, 13, 60.
10. Ibid, p. 20.
* Photos by the author.

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by Captain Vincent Muylkens, Belgium—Defense Staff Operations & Training EOD

Use of EOD EXPERTS in EOD

For many years, a large debate over the use of military experts in humanitarian demining has existed. Some individuals are against military demining arguing the military performs different techniques and holds different priorities from humanitarian demining. Others are favourable towards military demining, as they are the majority of demining centres. The Belgian military has been active in demining since World War I (WWI). Still today, explosive remnants from WWII and World War II (WWII) remain a daily concern in the life of Belgians. The Military, mine clearing facilities, have been cleared for many years, yet everyday military experts still dispose of UXO or abandoned explosive ordnance (AXO). It is important to understand this process does not take place during a military operation. Rather it is placed within the framework of helping the population, a type of humanitarian demining.

History

The explosive ordnance disposal EOD service was created immediately after WWI. This service was active throughout Belgium, initially as a detachment to each Provincial Recovery Service. In 1922, many landmines were disposed of, giving the impression it would only take a few months to complete the project. Unfortunately, it became clear the UXO problem was far from over. In an effort to tackle this issue, the Ordnance Disposal Service was created on October 1, 1923.

After WWII, numerous Belgian military units were directed to dispose of the obstacles and mines laid in both world wars. These units were sent throughout Belgium. On August 16, 1941, the EOD service was restructured, after the capture personnel were freed, to dispose of all explosive devices and preserve any devices of military importance. Bomb disposal teams quickly formed in towns that suffered from bombing during the wars and in places where old minefields, ammunition dumps or explosive charges were discovered. The EOD service activities continually extended the tasks entrusted to it by staying in constant contact with several resistance groups and with allies. Through this constant interaction, EOD was able to inform national of possible manufacturing errors in firing systems and of likely causes of non-explosive bombs. The bomb disposal experts also recovered exploded device and passed on the remaining explosive fillers to resistance groups for sabotage purposes.

On October 16, 1944, the Explosive Ordnance and Obstacle Disposal Service was created as an official addition to the EOD service and Belgian Armed Forces. In the first year, 300 men worked under this service. The Explosive Ordnance Disposal Service was created on December 1, 1945, to unite all existing bomb disposal units under one single command.

Between 1944 and 1948, the EOD service structure changed constantly as Belgium search for an ideal organization and due to the Bomb Disposal Unit constantly decorating inside. Likewise, after WWII, the authorities believed an EOD service was no longer necessary. The abolition of this service was again imminent. However, on July 4, 1947, a different decision was made: reduce its strength to 42 men. Fortunately this decision was never brought to execution, and by the end of 1948, the EOD service consisted of 350 men. The Explosive Ordnance and Obstacle Disposal Service held a temporary unit status until May 3, 1958, when it became an organization of the basic Armed Forces. Between 1949 and 1955, the EOD service saw many changes, essentially as a result of the reorganization of the Armed Forces. At the end of 1955, the EOD service had decreased to 115 combat positions.

In October 1971, the army determined the EOD service would no longer be an independent unit. However, the early 1970s consisted of international terrorism, which meant a need for Belgian specialists capable of disposing by hand or manual, after bombs, car bombs, etc. Furthermore, the number of left-over munitions from the two world wars exceeded the previous estimates. Each year, the EOD service received 3,000-4,000 requests to dispose of devices of all kinds. Less than three years after its dissolution the EOD service was again created on August 1, 1974.