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Rohan Maxwell
Canadian Army

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The Role of Military Technical Advisors

Introduction

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—or 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



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 exigencies of humanitarian demining. This difference undeniably exists—in immediate combat. However, even in wartime, follow-on activities are expected to achieve a high standard, and post-conflict clearance is 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 disingenuous 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 Standards (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,¹ and that military-style training is applicable to the training of humanitarian deminers.² It has also been acknowledged that military personnel can successfully form and train teams of deminers,³ even though many of these trainers lack “live” experience⁴ and even though some countries forbid their personnel from conducting actual demining while working as trainers.⁵ Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that military personnel can effectively teach specific technical tasks such as demining and explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) techniques, although they are not adept at tasks such as mine risk education (MRE), where there is no clear military equivalent.⁶

Since there is an acknowledged need for qualified and experienced instructors,⁷ it appears that there is a valid role for suitable military TAs at this level so long as the tasks coincide with their skills. As with any other job, the key word is “suitability.” Technical skills and knowledge are not sufficient: military TAs, like civilian TAs, must 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.⁸ 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.⁹

It has been suggested that the receiving agency should play a decisive role in the selection process,¹⁰ but this is unlikely to occur under the most typical scenario, where 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 to, rather than hired by, the receiving agencies. This means that the suitability of an arriving military TA will be, to a limited extent, the luck of the draw. This is definitely not the preferred staffing solution; however, my own limited experience working with and within international organizations—and more relevantly the judgement of those with more experience—suggests that this problem is not necessarily limited to the group under discussion.¹¹

Military TAs have also achieved success in the second category, daily operations. One example is given by the Geneva International Center 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 Cambodia was struggling to rebuild its government and economy. Foreign military TAs appear to have been particularly effective at getting demining teams on the ground.”¹² 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 developmental 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

agencies.¹³ That being said, senior officers in most armed forces have to possess 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 echoes 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 (military) Chief Technical Advisor (CTA) 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 by donors and others, 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.¹⁴ 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 savings to the receiving organization because their salaries are already paid,¹⁵ a more common assessment appears to be that military TAs, person for person, are rather more expensive than civilian staff. The GICHD’s comprehensive study states, “...the incremental costs associated with any foreign duty assignment of personnel from visiting military forces may be at least as high as the full cost of engaging equally well-qualified civilian personnel for the same assignment.”¹⁶ If this were true, then it would clearly be a rational decision on the part of the receiving organizations to eschew the use of military TAs. But is it true?

The authors of the study cite two sources in arriving at this conclusion. The first is a paper by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which correctly points out that military operations are more expensive than civilian ones: a military airlift will cost more than a civilian one, a military medical facility will cost more than a civilian one, and so on. This is undeniable, even though the extra cost is not borne by the receiving agency (a point that is acknowledged in the paper).¹⁷ 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.”¹⁸ 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 TAs.

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 (BiH) or Kosovo. The range given is \$200,000 to \$250,000 (U.S.), and it is essentially calculated by dividing the total annual cost of each force by the number of soldiers involved. 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 BiH or Kosovo. That is, everything from helicopters to armoured vehicles to camps to ammunition to hospitals, for the richest army in the world.¹⁹ Obviously a military TA, operating *sans* artillery, armored vehicles or attack helicopters will be cheaper. The GICHD study takes this into account by lopping

off a third of the incremental cost, thus arriving at a range of \$135,000 to \$165,000 per year.²⁰

This still seems like a hefty sum; as the study notes, it is “as much or more than appropriately qualified, experienced and motivated civilian personnel would cost (including recruitment and administrative support costs) if recruited directly.”²¹ It is true that the receiving agency 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 appeal to a pragmatic mine action manager, who might take the view that if there is to be an incremental cost, it 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 really were 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, pension 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 has to be derived from military allowances, administrative support and transportation costs for deployment, redeployment and home leave. Even if a TA flies home once a month and is an acute administrative challenge, \$12,000 equates to an improbably 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 \$2,500 or thereabouts. Adding more



than a bit for luck would give an annual incremental cost of, say, \$48,000: hardly enough to recruit, pay and administer a civilian TA.

I have belabored this point because I believe it is chimerical. The oft-repeated assertion that military TAs are more expensive is demonstrably incorrect, no matter who is paying. One simply 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 "cultural" 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 victims, or because of a perceived taint due to civil-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 business," with a subtext that the military is only 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 it's the business of anyone who can make an effective contribution to the effort, and that the only "turf" 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 armies 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 their use do not stand up to examination. Military TAs 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

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* Photos c/o the author.

Contact Information:

Rohan Maxwell
Major, Canadian Army
Military Policy Officer
Department of Security Cooperation
OSCE Mission to Bosnia-Herzegovina
Tel: 387-61-133-517
Fax: 387-33-752-354
E-mail: rohanm@oscebih.org